

WILD SPAIN

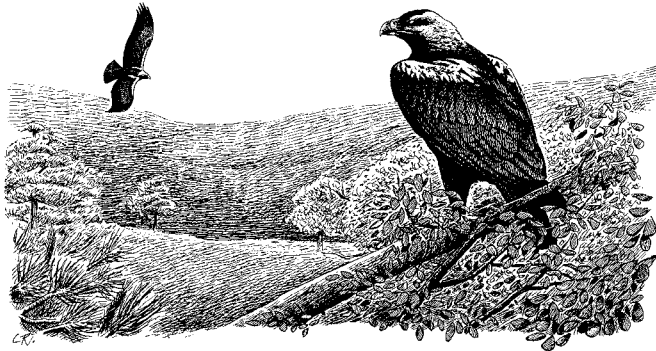
Extremadura & The Pyrenees

Sunday 1st May – Thursday 12th May 2011 (12 days)

Leaders: Simon Harrap and assistant

Group Size Limit: 12

Tour Category: Easy for the most part, occasionally Moderate



Spanish or Spanish Imperial Eagles (Craig Robson)

Extremadura is a classic European birding destination, with a series of exciting specialities and many other interesting birds, as well as a wealth of wild flowers, splendid scenery and some beautiful, largely unspoiled towns that are redolent of 'Old Spain'. Extremadura, the wildest, least developed and poorest region of Spain, borders on Portugal. A hard climate, with extreme temperatures both in winter and summer, and a poor soil, has until very recently kept agricultural development at a low ebb and the farming population impoverished.

It was from Extremadura that men like Hernando Cortés and Francisco Pizarro set out to make their fortune, or die in the attempt, in a far-off New World that must then have seemed as distant as the moon. When the Conquistadors finally returned to the towns and villages of their birth, covered in blood, glory and gold, they built sumptuous palaces and endowed churches and monasteries with riches, a legacy which is still visible today in the historic and attractive old buildings that are a feature of the region.

This indeed is a part

of Spain far from the Mediterranean coast with its concrete beach resorts, an area where the proud, traditional Spanish way of life continues with only limited outside influences.

Nowadays the lonely plains and hills of Extremadura, surely deserving of the epithet 'Wild Spain', provide a last great refuge for some of Europe's most spectacular birds. In recent years its wide open expanses have become famous for their remarkable populations of both Great and Little Bustards, species which have declined drastically over most of their range and which are now very hard to find elsewhere in Western Europe. The arid plains are not just superb for bustards, but also provide a home for Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Stone-curlews and numerous larks.

This is also undoubtedly the best place in Western Europe for raptors, and the density is truly impressive. The star attraction is of course the Spanish Eagle, formerly treated as a subspecies of the Imperial Eagle, but now usually considered as a full species in its own right. Globally threatened, the

Spanish Eagle is, for all intents and purposes, endemic to Spain, where the population is slowly recovering from near-extinction in the 1960s and 1970s. All the other eagles found in Western Europe occur here as well and vultures are still quite common; in particular we can expect to see good numbers of the huge Eurasian Black Vulture. In addition, small numbers of Black-shouldered Kites have colonized the region.

As well as bustards, sandgrouse and raptors, Extremadura holds a number of other specialities including Red-necked Nightjar, Thekla Lark, Black Wheatear and the delightful Iberian Azure-winged Magpie (a species now recognized as specifically distinct from its cousins in northeast Asia). As well as these specialities, Extremadura supports a great wealth of more widespread European species, including prehistoric-looking Black Storks and colourful Great Spotted Cuckoos, European Bee-eaters, European Rollers and Eurasian Golden Orioles.

Moving a little to the northeast, we will explore the attractive Sierra de Gredos in search of the endemic Iberian (or Sharpe's) Green Woodpecker, the white-spotted form of the Bluethroat, Western Bonelli's Warbler and Citril Finch.

Next we will visit

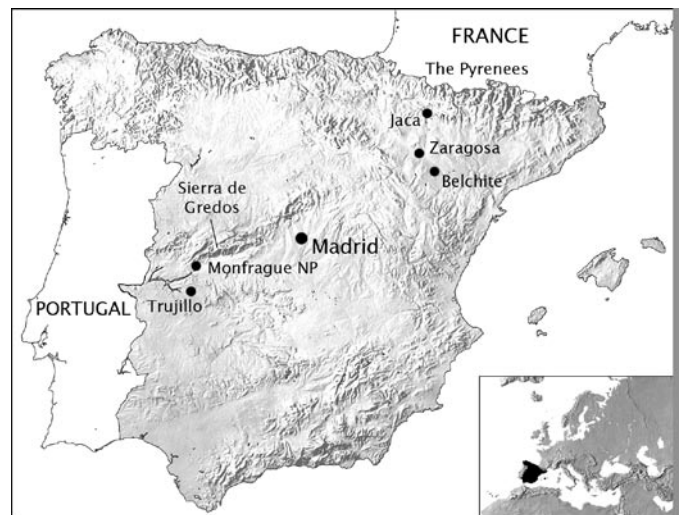
another area of steppes near Zaragoza. Here, in the eerie pre-dawn light, we will listen for the song of Dupont's Lark and afterwards track down this mysterious lark.

From Zaragoza we will head north once more until we reach the small town of Jaca, nestled in the foothills of the western Pyrenees. This is the Aragon of old, where the numerous ancient fortified villages, castles, monasteries and churches tell of a turbulent past. Here, amidst some of the most magnificent scenery in Europe, we will search for the impressive Lammergeier, Alpine Accentor, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, the interesting Iberian Chiffchaff, Alpine Chough, White-winged Snowfinch and the colourful Wallcreeper.

Birdquest has operated tours to Spain since 1983.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins in the late morning at Madrid, from where we will drive westwards to Trujillo in Extremadura for a four nights stay, arriving in time for some initial exploration. En route the roadside wires provide perches for Southern Grey Shrikes (split from Great Grey), Woodchat Shrikes and Spotless Starlings, and splashes of tropical colour are provided by newly-arrived European Bee-eaters and European Rollers.



*Little Bustard (Nik Borrow)*

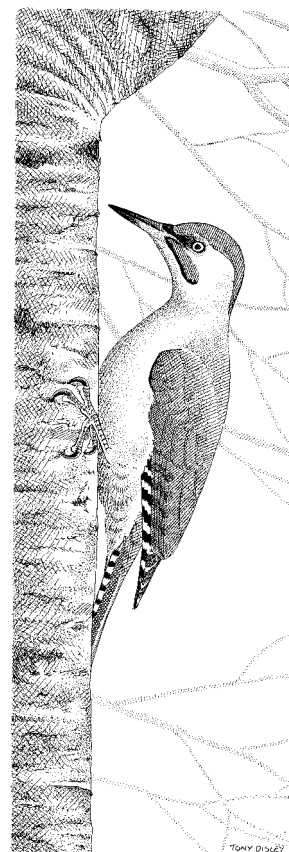
Days 2-4 From our base near Trujillo we will undertake a variety of excursions in order to enjoy the bird-rich plains and hills of Extremadura. As well as visiting areas close to Trujillo, we will travel north to Monfragüe National Park, a superb hilly area that is a Mecca for raptors. At this time of year Extremadura is at its very best, with wildflowers growing in a profusion almost unknown elsewhere in western Europe, forming a mosaic of blues, violets, whites and yellows across almost every field and pasture, newly arrived summer visitors in full song, and a profusion of raptors. Two of our prime targets will be Great and Little Bustards, which can usually be found with little difficulty. Indeed, Little Bustards sometimes seem to be everywhere amongst the green young cereal crops, the males ruffling up their throat feathers, enhancing the black and white patterning, or jumping up into the air in display. Bachelor parties of huge Great Bustards stride across the plains, dwarfing other birds, while individual males may be encountered as they display to admiring females that have barely half their bulk. As well as the bustards, both Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse breed in the area, although their preferred areas tend to vary from one year to the next. Often heard well before

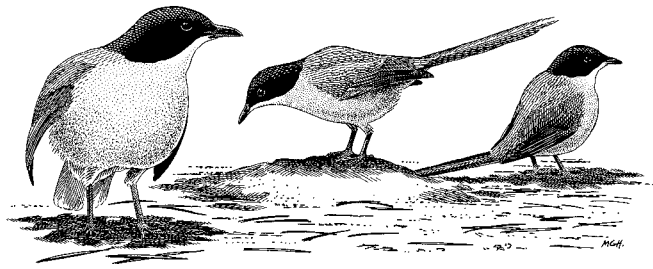
they are seen, both species have distinctive calls that they frequently utter as they fly to and from their favourite drinking spots each morning. Stone-curlews give their mournful calls at dawn, dusk, and even during the night, and we may well see these strange, bug-eyed waders stalking stealthily through the spring flowers. Other birds of the plains include Tawny Pipits, Crested, Greater Short-toed and Calandra Larks, Western Black-eared Wheatears and even Western Cattle Egrets that here breed far from water, pursuing the traditional black bulls through the pastures. White Storks are abundant, and the courting birds can be watched bill-clattering on nests placed on buildings, trees or telegraph poles only a few metres above the roadways. Around the various small wetlands we should find the secretive Little Bittern, Purple Heron, Purple Swamp-hen, Collared Pratincole, Black-winged Stilt, and perhaps Gull-billed, Black and Whiskered Terns, and Zitting Cisticola. Cetti's Warblers give their sudden explosive song from nearby thickets, and we may well see this mahogany-coloured warbler creeping amongst the vegetation. Huge Great Reed Warblers clamber amongst the reed stems, all the while croaking and gurgling, while Savi's Warbler give their far-carrying reeling songs from the cover of the reedbeds.

Where the plains meet the hills, the hand of man has, over the centuries, created a unique, park-like habitat, the 'dehesa'. Cork and evergreen oaks cover a gently undulating landscape, aromatic with the scent of a myriad herbs and coloured by the dusty blue blooms of the French lavender that line the roadsides. This lightly wooded country is home to a very different set of birds from that of the plains. Eurasian Hoopoes flick off through the trees, displaying their remarkably piebald wings, only to land and erect their equally zebra-striped crest. Gorgeous Eurasian Golden Orioles flit, elusively, through the dappled shade of the canopy, and Short-toed Treecreepers hug the rugged bark of the cork oaks, every once in a while giving their explosive songs. European Serins tinkle from the tree tops, Western Orphean Warblers sing away from inside the cover and Hawfinches, as elusive as ever, give their 'ticking' calls from the canopy. Wood Larks are common, and their haunting, yodelling song is one of the characteristic sounds of the dehesa, and is surely one of the most beautiful bird songs of all. The star bird of the dehesa must be, however, the Iberian Azure-winged Magpie (now split from the East Asian population, which has a white-tipped tail; it is now known that they have been isolated from each other for a huge period of time). Noisy parties can be found playing 'follow my leader' through the trees and they even nest in the gardens of our accommodation. In attendance are Great Spotted Cuckoos, which parasitize this gaudy corvid, as well as the more familiar Eurasian Magpie. Amongst the cork oaks we should also come across flocks of Spanish Sparrows, a surprisingly localized species in the country celebrated in its English name. Moving higher,

scrubby hillsides hold Red-legged Partridges, while Dartford, Subalpine and Sardinian Warblers skulk in the scrub, which also holds Girl Buntings. The gently rolling hills are interspersed with steep rocky valleys and gorges, beloved of Blue Rock Thrushes, Rock Sparrows with their strange nasal calls and Rock Buntings, while Red-billed Choughs can be found around some of the most precipitous crags and ruins. Two special birds of the hill country are Thekla Lark, which is found in lightly-wooded areas (a very different habitat from that of the extremely similar Crested Lark), and the smart but sombre Black Wheatear (so large it is almost thrush-like), which favours rocky ravines. Also, in Monfragüe and other hilly areas, prehistoric looking Black Storks still nest along the river gorges.

Overhead, we may well see Alpine Swifts, Eurasian Crag

*Iberian Green Woodpecker (Tony Disley)*



Iberian Azure-winged Magpies (Michael Hodgson)

Martins (displaying their distinctive white tail spots as they bank and turn) and Red-rumped Swallows. Indeed, our eyes will never be far from the skies because the area holds a great wealth of raptors, amongst which the star attraction is the Spanish (or Spanish Imperial) Eagle. Small numbers breed in Monfragüe National Park, an extensive area of craggy forested hills, with other pairs scattered across the region, and we will make a special effort to see this highly endangered eagle. We have a good chance of finding them quartering the hillsides, or even sitting, massive, dark and menacing, on their large tree nests. All the other eagles found in Western Europe occur here as well and we should see Short-toed and Booted Eagles, and also have a good chance of finding the rather scarce and localized Bonelli's Eagle. Vultures too are still common (quite unlike the situation in the rest of Europe) and, as well as good numbers of Eurasian Griffon Vultures and a few Egyptian Vultures, we should see the uncommon Eurasian Black Vulture soaring over its prime habitat (almost 150 pairs breed in the region). If we are especially fortunate, we may even find numbers of vultures attending a carcass. The vultures leave their roosts in the morning and methodically quarter the landscape at great height. They watch the ground, but also other vultures, and when one spots a carcass it is the

signal for every vulture for miles around to descend. Large numbers can thus arrive with astonishing speed and strip a carcass clean in a matter of minutes. A strict pecking order is observed, with the great Eurasian Black Vulture being the dominant species and often the first to tear through the tough hide with its huge, sharply edged bill. After their grisly feast, the birds may be so gorged as to be almost unable to fly, and it is thus sometimes possible to obtain exceptional views of them on the ground. Both Black and Red Kites are frequently sighted throughout the region and Montagu's Harriers sail above the cornfields, while Lesser Kestrels (an endangered species, thanks to modern agriculture) nest in old buildings in the towns of Caceres and Trujillo. Over 100 can sometimes be seen wheeling over Trujillo, joined by Pallid Swifts. Eurasian Hobby and Peregrine may also be seen, but best of all, small numbers of dainty Black-winged Kites can be found in the more open areas of cork oaks, mixed with agriculture. Hovering like kestrels, and dipping to the ground to pick up small prey items, they can be elusive at times, and can require a bit of searching out.

At dusk we may see the barrel-shaped Eurasian Eagle Owl as it emerges from its daytime seclusion in the dark recesses of an isolated crag before heading off to hunt

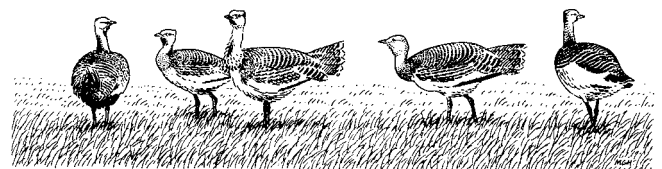
across the wild countryside of this remote corner of Spain. More likely, however, will be the sight of one or two nearly fledged youngsters at the nest site. We may also encounter European Scops Owl and will make a special effort to search out Red-necked Nightjar, which nests only in the Iberian peninsula and in adjacent Northwest Africa. After hearing the latter's strange, knocking song, we may see a male's white wing spots flash as it wing-claps overhead or watch one drift, ghost-like, over the cork oaks.

Other species likely to be encountered during our stay in the area include Little and Great Crested Grebes, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Gadwall, Mallard, Western Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard, Common Kestrel, Common Moorhen, Eurasian Coot, Little Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Common Wood Pigeon, Eurasian Collared Dove, European Turtle Dove, Common Cuckoo, Little Owl, Common Swift, Common Kingfisher, Sand Martin, Barn Swallow, Common House Martin, White Wagtail, Winter Wren, Common Nightingale, Common Stonechat, Whinchat, Common Blackbird, Mistle Thrush, European Reed Warbler, Blackcap, Long-tailed, Blue and Great Tits, Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Jay, Western Jackdaw, Common Raven, Common Chaffinch, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch, Common Linnet and Corn Bunting.

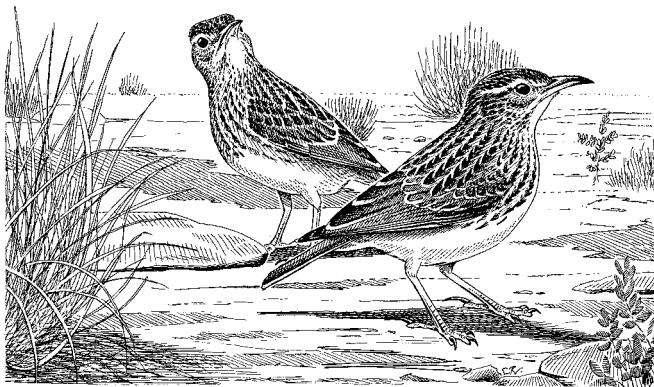
Day 5 After spending much of the day in the Trujillo

region we will drive into the Sierra de Gredos for a two nights stay.

Day 6 The Sierra de Gredos supports a wealth of breeding species, and we will be concentrating on some of the birds that breed at higher altitudes and are consequently absent from the low-lying plains of Extremadura. The big attractions here are the endemic Iberian (or Sharpe's) Green Woodpecker, which is now split from European Green, and the unobtrusive Citril Finch, a montane speciality that is endemic to Western Europe. In the pine forests that cloak the slopes below the snow-capped peaks we should find Western Bonelli's Warbler (renamed following the splitting off of the eastern form *orientalis*, known as Balkan or Eastern Bonelli's Warbler) giving its rattling song from high in the canopy. Firecrests should also be in evidence, their high-pitched song hard to distinguish at times from that of the more familiar Goldcrest. A little gem, with its beautiful bronze 'shoulders', the Firecrest is surely one of the most attractive of European birds. Other species in the area include Great Spotted Woodpecker, Grey Wagtail, Dunnock, White-throated Dipper, European Robin, Common Whitethroat, Goldcrest, European Pied Flycatcher (the local form now sometimes split as Iberian Pied Flycatcher), the perky Crested Tit with its slurred trilling calls, Coat Tit, Carrion Crow, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Eurasian Siskin and Common Crossbill. Moving to higher



Great Bustards (Michael Hodgson)



Dupont's Larks (Craig Robson)

altitudes Northern Wheatears will scold us cheekily from boulders and other prominent perches and Black Redstarts flash orange as they dart amongst the rocks. On the more open slopes we will search for Bluethroats, here of the 'white-spotted' form (although most have no visible spot at all), in thickets of broom. This small chat has a most attractive song, which has led to it being referred to as the 'silver bell bird' in parts of its range. Water Pipits, at this time of year in summer plumage with a delicate pink blush to the underparts, favour grassy slopes still flushed with spring melt-waters. With luck we will also find Ortolan Bunting, which breeds in the alpine meadows together with Eurasian Skylark and Iberian (or Spanish) Wagtail. We may also encounter Spanish Ibexes, wild goats which leap from rock to rock and traverse scree slopes with an agility and sure-footedness that can leave one breathless.

Day 7 After some final birding in the Sierra de Gredos we will travel to the Zaragoza area for an overnight stay. We should arrive in time for an early

evening session at Belchite.

Day 8 We will make an early start in order to be in position on the steppe-like plains at Belchite for dawn (fortunately, Spain's adherence to the Central European time zone means that this is a relatively painless experience!). Our target in these sandy wastes will be the elusive Dupont's Lark, a species that is confined to Spain and North Africa and one that is notoriously difficult to see as it is usually either hiding in the low vegetation or running rapidly between hiding places. This unusual species usually sings only around dawn and dusk and these are by far the best times to locate it. We will also have an opportunity to see various other larks, mostly familiar from the plains of Extremadura, but with the addition of Lesser Short-toed Lark, and we may also find the ground-hugging Spectacled Warbler. Later in the day we will drive north towards the Pyrenees and the fortified city of Jaca for a four nights stay. This afternoon we will begin our exploration of the Pyrenees.

Days 9-11 While based at

Jaca we will explore the superbly scenic mountains and valleys of the western Pyrenees. The slopes of the foothills have areas of olive groves and stunted oak forests interspersed with expanses of herb-filled, aromatic scrub (maquis). The steep upper slopes of the mountains are cloaked by ancient forests of beech, fir and pine, whilst even higher tower the mighty snow-clad cliffs, ramparts and buttresses of the high Pyrenees. Between the peaks the higher valleys hold alpine meadows that are filling up with wild flowers at this season, whilst in the lower valleys an altogether gentler and more settled landscape can be found. This rich and varied area holds good numbers of raptors, many of which will already be familiar from Extremadura, but we will also have a chance to see the impressive Golden Eagle. Our prime raptor target will, however, be the famous Lammergeier or, as the Spanish say, Quebrantehuesos (meaning 'bone-breaker'). The Pyrenees have long been the stronghold of this magnificent bird in Europe and thanks to vigorous protection they have increased markedly in recent years. We should see several of these charismatic raptors, and perhaps even witness one dropping a large bone from a great height in order to break it open upon the rocks and feast upon the nutritious marrow. Another prime target will be the rather localized Iberian Chiffchaff, now split from Common Chiffchaff and only reliably identifiable when in song, while we also have a second chance for Citril Finch. At higher altitudes we will be searching for the stunning Wallcreeper, a species whose wings flash crimson as it clammers on vertical rock

faces. At this time of year the higher meadows are beginning to be splashed with a rainbow of colours as gentians, anemones, primulas and orchids come into flower and amidst this wonderful scenery we should also encounter Alpine Accentor, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Alpine Chough and White-winged Snowfinch. In the extensive woodlands we will listen for Black Woodpecker, whose piercing 'electronic' calls offer the best means of locating it, and most likely we will see one or two flying unerringly through the closely packed trees, or perhaps attending a nest hole in an ancient gnarled trunk. Amongst the other species we may well encounter in this superb area are Marsh Tit, Eurasian Bullfinch and Yellowhammer. Mammals are generally thin on the ground, but we should see Pyrenean Chamois and perhaps Alpine Marmot.

Day 12 Today we will return to Madrid, where the tour ends in the early afternoon.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotels/guesthouses are of normal Birdquest standard throughout. Road transport is by minibus and roads are good.

Walking: The walking effort is easy almost throughout, but during the Pyrenees extension there are one or two moderate grade hikes.

Climate: Many days at this season are warm, dry and sunny, but it is sometimes cool, wet and overcast, and it can be cold at the highest altitudes.

Bird Photography:

Opportunities are quite good.