

IBERIAN LYNX & BIRDS OF SOUTHERN SPAIN TOUR REPORT 2023

8 - 14 January 2023

by Diedert Koppenol

Our third Iberian Lynx & Birds of Southern Spain tour was a greatly successful tour and provided a great break in the dreary winter many birders experience in north-western Europe. Spain is always lovely to visit, with its kind people, wonderful food and great infrastructure, and Andujar is a highlight of the country with amazing wildlife on offer. Not always the case, but a mammal was the main focus for this tour and we had amazing views of a family of four, one mother and three cubs, on our first day there! We could enjoy them throughout the afternoon, even hunting Red-legged Partridges at close range from us. The supporting cast of birds here is also phenomenal, with displaying Spanish Imperial Eagles, plenty of Cinerous and Griffon Vultures and Ravens overhead, Dartford's and Sardinian Warblers singing in the scrubs and Iberian Magpies and Iberian Green Woodpeckers foraging in the dehesa. In total, we recorded 107 bird species, since we also made visits along our route from Madrid to Sierra de Andujar to the steppes and wetlands at Ciudad Real. This resulted in great views of large flocks of Great and Little Bustard, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Calandra Larks, several nice Iberian Grey Shrikes, while we saw large numbers of waterfowl at the wetland reserves, including White-headed Ducks, but also several Marbled Teals, Western Swamphens scurrying about and enjoyed plenty Little Grebes showing closely. We ended the tour on a high note in the pine forests near Madrid, where we not only saw a smart flock of Red Crossbills, several European Crested Tits and a nice flock of 49 Citril Finches!

We began the tour at Madrid Airport, from where we quickly made our way south. En route, we already had our first encounters with the Spanish avifauna, with several Red Kites and Common Buzzards flying overhead and plenty of Spotless Starlings on the electricity wires along the road. Our first stop would be the Lagunar de Alcazar, a wetland holding interesting waterfowl. As soon as we put the scopes out, we had great views of several groups of White-headed Ducks drifting about asleep and many Northern Shovelers, Gadwall, Mallards, Common Pochards and Eurasian Teals feeding along the reedbed shores, with also three Marbled Teal present. Furthermore, many Little Grebes and Eurasian Coots were present on the lakes, about 110 Greater Flamingo, several Black-necked Grebes and among the reeds we found three Western Swamphen. Western Marsh Harriers were controlling the skies and once in a while the reeds would drain with Eurasian Coots and ducks fleeing from the hunting harriers. In the surrounding area, we found several Black Redstarts and two shy Zitting Cisticola's. After we had a short lunch break, we made our way towards Castilla La Mancha. Even though it was drizzling quite a bit, we encountered our first Long-tailed Tits of the local race *irbii*, quite ashy-looking, and our first group of Iberian Magpies on our way to the top. Once we arrived at the castle, we quickly found a pair of Black Wheatears here, which showed nicely. Two Thekla's Larks were present as well, several European Stonechats,

Common Blackbirds and European Robins. The weather wasn't great for pictures and light was fading so we went onwards to Sierra de Andújar where we would spend the next few days looking for our main target Iberian Lynx. Just before we reached our rural hotel, two bright eyes next to the road shined brightly in the headlights. After an emergency break, we saw it was a cat with great looks for European Wildcat: big tail, grey face, black rings on the tail, etc. We couldn't get a good view of its back, however and it wasn't really afraid of our presence, so it might well be a very good-looking house cat or hybrid...

The next morning, we were out and about at sunrise. We had four full days here, in theory, to find the cat we were looking for. Along the road up to the viewpoint for the lynx, we made several stops to enjoy the great birds this area has to offer. Needless to say, on our first drive, we made plenty of stops! On the fields we had several Iberian and Eurasian Magpies chattering about, Red-legged Partridges foraging quite close to the car, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk dashing through the oaks on the hunt, a Eurasian Hoopoe looking for worms in the soil and a lot of Mistle Thrushes hopping about. A highlight was two Short-toed Treecreepers showing well and gliding among the cork oaks. When we arrived at La Plancha, the place to be, our hopes instantly sank to a low level: mist everywhere in the valley! However, we proceeded and set up camp in one of the viewpoint hides. Several hours of waiting were brightened by the presence of Dartford and Sardinian Warblers who were singing and foraging in the shrubbery along the ridges of the valley, but luckily the sun appeared and scared away the mist. Now the game was on and we started scanning every nook and cranny of the valley. As soon as it started heating up, Griffon Vultures started roaming the sky and we found several Cinereous Vultures among them as well. A weird call made us turn around and soon we saw a Spanish Imperial Eagle soaring right above our heads, giving a great show. However, the lynx would not show and there was little to no movement in the valley below. Thus, we decided to head further up the road towards the reservoir dam, which holds the Jandula river at bay. Normally the large hydro-electric dam attracts quite a few Crag Martins which winter here, but none were present and we were told that they had all left the previous day. We did see our first Blue Rock Thrush of the tour here, several Spanish Ibex and plenty of Black Redstarts. A single phone call changed our entire day as we were informed four (!) Iberian Lynx were in view along the road. A bit faster than normally we drove back to the viewpoint and soon had our eyes on a mother Iberian Lynx with her three cubs! What a start of our stay here! We enjoyed great views of them, even hunting Red-legged Partridges very close by.

The following day, we decided to visit the Jandula river downstream, on the other side of the reservoir dam. This lower part of the river is lush and holds many wintering birds. This is also an excellent place for Eurasian Otter. A small bridge spans across the river and offers a great viewpoint for scanning the waters for any movement. No otter to be seen when we arrived there, so we birded the area and found a fine Rock Sparrow, several Grey Wagtails flying up and down the river, Common Kingfishers feeding on the fish-rich waters and most interesting were the large numbers of Common Chiffchaff picking insects from the water surface while three Cetti's Warblers were singing their heart out. A Wryneck was foraging in some shrubs uphill but moved on too fast for the rest of the group to connect with it as well. After a two hour wait, some splashing in the water was noticed. It turned out to be the hoped-for Eurasian Otter, which was hunting right below our feet! It showed incredibly well, munching down several fish while we observed it.

After this show, we decided to drive back to the lynx area and see if we could find us another pair of felines. It turned out to be relatively quiet, but another visit to the reservoir dam resulted in nice views of a resting Eurasian Eagle-Owl! On this high note, we returned back to camp. After

dark, several Tawny Owls could be heard calling, but proved frustratingly difficult to see. After another lovely Spanish breakfast, we went out a bit further today. We decided to spend the day exploring the plains south of Ciudad Real as we had already seen our main target so well! We arrived relatively late in the morning (09:30) but it turned out to be a perfect timing as the mist on the steppes was just disappearing. It didn't take long before we located a big group of majestic Great Bustards on the vast grasslands here. Getting very close was quite impossible, as they were a bit skittish. It seemed to us that their genes still tell them to watch out for hunters. While watching the bustards, it didn't take too long before we heard the first calls of sandgrouse! Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were most common in the skies and this turned out to be the same on the ground. Smaller flocks of Black-bellied Sandgrouse were seen throughout the day, but the main highlight was a large group of 150+ Little Bustards and 100+ Pin-tailed Sandgrouse quietly relaxing and feeding in a large kale field. A bit further down from this group we encountered a large flock of 150+ Calandra Larks as well, which was an incredible sight to behold. Marsh Harriers and Red Kites patrolled the plains and flocks of Northern Lapwings, Golden Plovers, Spotless Starlings, White Wagtails, Spanish Sparrows and various finches fed on the open ground. After this successful morning, it died down a bit, with several Iberian Grey Shrikes to entertain us. We decided to return to Andujar and see if we could reach it before sunset. This turned out to be a good move since we found two Iberian Hares resting in an olive tree plantation, which ended up being the only sighting of this species for the tour.

For our last full day in the area, we decided to go back to La Lancha and just soak in the place and its wildlife, trying to get even better views of several target species such as Iberian Green Woodpecker and be on standby if there were any Lynxes to be seen again. We had heard from others that yesterday late afternoon a Lynx was spotted near a carcass of a Red Deer, so chances were quite high that the Lynx would still be around to feed. This turned out to be the case and while we were enjoying two showy Iberian Green Woodpeckers, a large amount of Mistle Thrushes and Iberian Magpies feeding in the morning sun and a flock of Eurasian Tree Sparrows close to the road, we received a message that the family of Lynxes was now feeding on the carcass. On we went! Another morning with great views, where all members of the family filled their bellies with what turned out to be Fallow Deer. This feast was followed by burying the carcass and then a lot of sleeping. A lot of sleeping.. So, we decided to give the dam another visit and went for a second of Eurasian Eagle-Owl. In the afternoon, the Lynxes decided to wake up and started to move throughout the area again. Suddenly, one Lynx appeared right behind us and crossed the road at very close distance. Today was a nice crown on our lynx watching and we returned back to the hotel. At night, we visited the lower parts of the river again and had a beautiful encounter with the Eurasian Otter again, which was hunting at night. We could nicely follow it in our flashlight and in the thermal camera, which gave us a unique view of a warm Otter eating a cold fish. The Tawny Owls still proved too stubborn and would only sit in top of the densely-leaved trees and not allowing for any views. Two Foxes were busy raiding a garbage bin and quickly scurried away when we drove past on our way back.

We had enjoyed our stay in Andújar a lot, but after one last wonderful breakfast, we returned to Ciudad Real again. First, we decided to give Castilla La Mancha another visit to get better photos of the Black Wheatears. We ended up finding three, we gave great views, while a flock of 6 Hawfinches was also present, along with some nice Rock Buntings, singing Blue Rock Thrushes and a 2-cy Spanish Imperial Eagle flew past. Onwards for another visit to the steppes resulted in more great views of the sandgrouse species, with a large group of 50+ Pin-tailed Sandgrouse foraging close to the road and a surprise visit from four Egyptian Mongoose, which we hadn't expected to see during broad daylight. In the afternoon, we decided to see if we could add some

more waterfowl and passerines to the list and visited Laguna de Navaseca. Even though we had to avoid some roadblocks due to a cycling race, we reached the laguna just before sunset. Wildfowl numbers were impressive, and amongst the large numbers of Northern Shovelers, Eurasian Teals, Greylag Geese, Mallards and Common Pochards, we found a few special species, including several White-headed Ducks, several Black-necked Grebes and a few Black-winged Stilts with some Greater Flamingos filtering in the background. After the sun set completely, we headed for our comfortable hotel to escape the sudden cold that had caught us off guard. A great last dinner in a typical Spanish restaurant followed.

The last day of our journey was largely a travel day as we made our way back from Ciudad Real to Madrid. However, we weren't fully done yet. We made our way towards Cuenca Alta del Manzanares, northwest of Madrid. Our first target was Citril Finch and we learned from recent news that a large flock should be somewhere in the area. After we had scanned the clear blue skies for anything flying, we went into some pine forest to find a lifer for one of the participants: Firecrest. Two males were singing about and showed very well, crest and all! Up the hill we went, leaving this patch of forest and walking through a small village. At the edge of the village and near another patch of pine trees, a large barren field was full of thistles and other weeds and shrubbery. It didn't take long before the whole flock of 49 Citril Finches flew in and started feeding on the seeds. The forest behind us held several beautiful European Crested Tits and also Coal Tits, while two Northern Ravens flew past. Driving further up, we made several stops along the way to listen for any passing crossbills. After a while, a nice flock of Red Crossbills was feeding on several pinecones and showed very well. That was also the end of our birding for this trip. Spain certainly provided for us this short tour and content with all our sightings, we headed for the airport.

BIRD OF THE TRIP

1st: Iberian Lynx

2nd: Great Bustard

3rd: Pin-tailed Sandgrouse / Eurasian Otter

4th: Black Wheatear

5th: Citril Finch

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED

BIRDS

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*

Gadwall *Mareca strepera*

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

White-headed Duck ♦ *Oxyura leucocephala* Large flocks of 30+ individuals at the lagune Alcazar

Marbled Duck *Marmaronetta angustirostris* 3 at Lagunar de Alcazar

Red-legged Partridge ♦ *Alectoris rufa* Very common across Andujar.

Great Bustard ♦ *Otis tarda* A large group of 75 on our first visit, two smaller groups on our second visit totalling 34 individuals.

Little Bustard ♦ *Tetrax tetrax* One flock of ~150 at Ciudad Real on our first visit, mixed with Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. A smaller flock of 25 on second visit.

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata*

Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis*

Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon) *Columba [livia] livia*

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*

Western Swamphen ♦ *Porphyrio porphyrio* Three at lagune Alcazar.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

Cinereous Vulture ♦ (Monk V) *Aegypius monachus* Quite common at La Plancha road, flying across the valley

Spanish Imperial Eagle ♦ (Spanish E) *Aquila adalberti* Two giving great views from the viewpoint of La Plancha road, displaying and calling above our heads! A 2-cy bird also at Castilla La Mancha.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

Eurasian Eagle-Owl *Bubo bubo* A nice individual chilling along the cliff face at Jandula reservoir dam.

Tawny Owl *Strix aluco* Heard only. Many active individuals at night but none dared come into view.

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* Leader-only. A small population winters in southern Spain.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Iberian Green Woodpecker ♦ *Picus sharpei* Several individuals foraging along the road to La Plancha.

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Iberian Grey Shrike ♦ *Lanius meridionalis* Not too common, but several individuals at the steppes of Ciudad Real.

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Iberian Magpie ♦ *Cyanopica cooki* Very common, seen at all stops, mostly in large(r) family groups.

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*

Western Jackdaw *Coloeus monedula*

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Northern Raven *Corvus corax*

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*

Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus*

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

Great Tit *Parus major*

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Thekla's Lark ♦ *Galerida theklae* Several individuals at Castilla La Mancha.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* Large flock on the steppes of Ciudad Real

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Sardinian Warbler *Curruca melanocephala*

Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* Seen by all but the leader along La Plancha road

Dartford Warbler ♦ *Curruca undata* Relatively common at La Plancha, several singing males well seen

Common Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla* Showy individuals at Cuenca Alta del Manzanares

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Spotless Starling ♦ *Sturnus unicolor* Plenty at the steppes of Ciudad Real and common at La Plancha

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*

European Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

Black Wheatear ♦ *Oenanthe leucura* Three individuals at Castilla La Mancha

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Dunnock *Prunella modularis*

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

White Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] alba*

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* A flock of 6 well seen at Castilla La Mancha

European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris*

Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina*

Red Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Citrel Finch ♦ *Carduelis citrinella* A large flock of 49 at Cuenca Alta del Manzanares

European Serin *Serinus serinus*

Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*

Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* Several at the reservoir dam of the Jandula

Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus* Nice singing male and two females along Jandula river.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

MAMMALS

European Wildcat *Felis silvestris* One of dubious origin along the road entering Sierra de Andujar NP

Iberian Lynx *Lynx pardinus* Highlight of the tour. Two days of observing a family of 4 Lynx (1 female, 3 cubs) eating, sleeping and hunting!

Egyptian Mongoose (introduced) *Herpestes ichneumon* A pack of 4 walking past at broad daylight at the steppes near Ciudad Real

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* Two individuals at a garbage bin at night and one foraging along the Jandula river

Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* One showing incredibly well at the reservoir dam of the Jandula river, at day and at night!

Wild Boar *Sus scrofa* Two individuals along the road to La Plancha viewpoint of dubious origin

Red Deer (Maral) *Cervus elaphus*

Fallow Deer (introduced) *Dama dama*

Spanish Ibex (Spanish Ibex) *Capra pyrenaica* Several in La Plancha and at the reservoir dam.

Mouflon (introduced) *Ovis gmelii* Two males at La Plancha

Wood Mouse *Apodemus sylvaticus*

Iberian Hare (Granada Hare) *Lepus granatensis* Two at daylight at the edge of the NP.

European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*