

EXTREMADURA TRIP REPORT 28TH MAY TO 7TH JUNE 2001, Ian Kinley

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General Comments

The weather in the first week was exceptionally hot for the time of year, reportedly up to 44C (38C in the shade) but with birding light from about 06.45 to 21.45, it was perfectly possible to fit an afternoon siesta and/or meal into a ten hour birding day.

Virtually no-one spoke any English. Some basic Spanish and a phrase book would be useful; for example, it would have saved us from the shock of being served swordfish when we thought we'd ordered beef!

We found everything in Monfrague very easy to see and could easily have left the area after three or four days, though we had pre-booked seven nights at Torrejon and, in any case, did not fancy travelling any great distance to a new location. Other birders would doubtless have done it differently. Almaraz would have provided a suitable base to explore all the sites we visited, entering Monfrague from the other end of the park, though Torrejon undoubtedly had more character.

There were many highlights: excellent views of Spanish Imperial Eagles; stunning display from Bonelli's Eagles; Black Storks, Black Wheatear and three species of vulture amid the superb scenery of Monfrague; three species of kite; both bustards and both sandgrouse on the plains and, of course, White-rumped Swift but, arguably, the pick of the bunch were the Eagle Owls at Portilla del Tietar - the magnificent spectacle of one of these huge birds silhouetted atop a rocky outcrop at dusk will live long in the memory. The only birds we missed that we could (should?) have seen in the areas we visited were Pallid Swift, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Tawny Pipit and Chough, though we spoke to no-one who'd seen any of these while we were there.

Travel

We flew from Liverpool to Madrid with EasyJet (£70 return, booked over the internet, very efficient and virtually hassle-free), picking up a hired Citroen Xsara from National Atesa at Madrid airport (£210, booked over the internet with Carjet and again very smooth and efficient). The Madrid motorway network, though a little daunting at first, flowed better than most UK urban ring roads and the NV/E90 motorway was excellent with light traffic and no tolls, the maximum permissible speed of 120 km per hour being easily sustainable over long distances. Service stations were plentiful most of which seemed to have associated accommodation of a surprisingly high standard and reasonable prices. One recommendation regarding driving in Spain at this time of year is that air-conditioning is absolutely essential and must be part of the hire car specification.

Accommodation

Hotel Estacion at Talavera - one night; 3000 ptas per person per night; no air conditioning; very hot; lots of traffic noise and not recommended - its only saving grace was being 200m from a calling Scops Owl!

Apartment attached to the Hotel Carvajal at Torrejon el Rubio - seven nights; 9000 ptas per night (big enough for 3-4 people) booked over the Internet; air conditioned; nice people, big on atmosphere, very comfortable and ideally situated for birding in Monfrague.

Portugal 2 at Almaraz - two nights; (6000 ptas per twin room per night). If a single room had been available, this would have been 3000 ptas per night, but as this was not the case, we had to pay for under-occupancy of the second room. Though functional, modern, spotlessly clean, fully air-conditioned and ideally situated for getting to any of the nearby sites via the nearby NV/E90, this hotel lacked the character and rural charm which greatly enhanced our enjoyment of our stay at Torrejon el Rubio.

As with car-hire, air-conditioning in hotel rooms is an absolute must for this time of year.

Sites Visited

Embalse de Azutan.

Track north of CM4101, starting 3km west of Calera y Chozas.

Monfrague (especially the Castillo, Penafalcon, Miradors at Tajadilla and Bascula and Portilla del Tietar).

Plains between Santa Marta de Magasca and N521 (Caceres to Trujillo), with minor road heading east from CC912 between 8 and 9 km north of Caceres particularly productive.

Lakes at Almaraz.

Area around Cabanas del Castillo near headwaters of Rio Almonte.

Oropesa area.

Details and directions to all the sites can be found in Gosney's *Finding Birds in Northern Spain* and/or *A Birdwatching Guide to Extremadura* by John Muddeman. We used the Michelin map no.444 Central Spain.

Species List

The figures in brackets represent the number of days each species was recorded (e.g. 4/11 means that a species was seen on four days during our 11 day trip) and gives a crude indication of how easy each species was to see, bearing in mind that that we did virtually no birding on Day 1 and just a few hours on the morning of Day 11. More details are given of the rarer or more interesting species.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (1/11)

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* (4/11)

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* (3/11)

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* - Single males seen at Almaraz on 5/6 & 7/6. (2/11)

Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* - Several seen flying over Talavera at dusk on 28/5; present in good numbers at Embalse de Azutan and Almaraz. (5/11)

Cattle Egret *Bulbulcus ibis* - Locally numerous. (7/11)
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* - 20+ at Almaraz. (2/11)
Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* (9/11)
Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* - Present in good numbers at Embalse de Azutan and Almaraz. (4/11)
Black Stork *Ciconia nigra* - Easily seen in Monfrague with two occupied nests at Portilla del Tietar; three unoccupied nests at Penafalcon (though birds still often present) and other sightings including six in the air together at Mirador de Tajadillo. Also seen near Torrejon el Rubio and near Santa Marta de Magasca. (6/11)
White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* - Common outside Monfrague. (10/11)
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* (7/11)
Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* - 1 at Almaraz on 7/6. (1/11)
Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus caeruleus* - 1 over open ground just beyond the bridge at north end of Embalse de Azutan on 29/5. This site is about 10km west of Alcaudete de la Jara on the CM4160. Not seen at any of the recommended sites we visited e.g. Monroy and Oropesa. (1/11)
Black Kite *Milvus migrans* - Very common. (10/11)
Red Kite *Milvus milvus* - Present in small numbers but widespread. (9/11)
Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* - Seen in small numbers, especially in Monfrague, including an occupied nest visible from Mirador de Tajadillo. (6/11)
Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* - Very common. Several nesting colonies in Monfrague. Birds seen on two carcasses on the plains. (9/11)
Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus* - Common in Monfrague and on plains. Sightings included nest with young visible from Mirador de Bascula; 5 on a lamb (killed by one of them) joined by 7 Griffons near Santa Marta on 31/5; 3 at a sheep carcass (plus 18 Griffons) on 3/6. (9/11)
Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* - Seen in small numbers. Most notably, five together at Portilla del Tietar, where there was a nest with young. (7/11)
Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* - Several present at Embalse de Azutan and Almaraz. (4/11)
Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* - Quite common on the plains. (4/11)
Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (9/11)
Spanish Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca adalberti* - Easily seen from Mirador de Bascula, where an adult was frequently in the air above the ridge, though usually a bit distant. We were also informed about a nest with young on a pylon between Torrejon el Rubio and Caceres. Both adults were in attendance here on our two visits, giving particularly good views on the morning of 2/6. (5/11)
Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* - 1 seen from Mirador de Tajadillo on 1/6. (1/11)
Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus* - Quite common. (9/11)
Bonelli's Eagle *Hieraetus fasciatus* - 1 near Castillo de Monfrague on 30/5; superb views of displaying pair near Cabanas del Castillo on 5/6. (2/11)
Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* - Common outside Monfrague. (5/11)
Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (5/11)
Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa* (6/11)
Quail *Coturnix coturnix* - Birds were very quiet. 1 heard near Monroy on 31/5. (1/11)
Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* (1/11)
Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* - Heard at Embalse de Azutan and Almaraz. (4/11)
Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* (4/11)
Purple Gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio porphyrio* - 3 or 4 at Embalse de Azutan and 6+ at Almaraz. Mostly heard but several seen. (4/11)
Coot *Fulica atra* (5/11)
Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* - Virtually no calling, making location of birds difficult. 1 on plains near Santa Marta on 31/5; 3 seen + 2 heard in same area on 3/6. (2/11)

Great Bustard *Otis tarda* - 7 from track north of CM4101 (starting 3km west of Calera y Chozas) on 29/5; 1 flew over Mirador de Bascula on 30/5; 6 (2+2+2) on plains near Santa Marta on 31/5; 10 (in groups of up to 3) on plains near Santa Marta on 3/6 (4/11)

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* - 2 by track north of CM4101 on 29/5; 4 on small pool near there on 6/6. (2/11)

Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus* - Small numbers on the plains around Santa Marta and several from the track north of the CM4101. (3/11)

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* - 1 a few km west of Torrejon on 31/5 and 1 south of Santa Marta at bridge over Rio Magasca on 3/6. (2/11)

Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* (1/11)

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* - 2 at Almaraz were the only gulls of the trip (1/11)

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* - 2 flew down Embalse de Azutan on 29/5 (1/11)

Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis* - 3 seen on ground + 2 heard near Santa Marta on 31/5; 10 (inc 2 just heard) in same area on 3/6; 4 in flight from track north of CM4101 on 6/6. (3/11)

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata* - 2 flew over road near Santa Marta on 31/5; 3 seen + 2 heard near Santa Marta on 3/6. (2/11)

Feral Pigeon *Columba livia* (11/11)

Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* (10/11)

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (9/11)

Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* (7/11)

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* (8/11)

Scops Owl *Otus scops* - 1 calling from small park in centre of Talavera from 22.10 on 28/5. (1/11)

Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* - At Portilla del Tietar, 1 seen in flight across crag in early afternoon of 30/5; in evening of 30/5, 1 showed well on crag from 21.35 until dark, with it and another calling; on 3/6, calling began at 21.40 but nothing seen until virtually dark when one flew off down the river and the other glided across river and over our heads. (2/11)

Little Owl *Athene noctua* (3/11)

Red-necked Nightjar *Caprimulgus ruficollis* - Stunning views of 5 in car headlights on 30/5 as birds sat in road at point blank range between Portilla del Tietar and Villareal, also several heard calling. On 3/6 just one seen in the same fashion (probably because another vehicle was in front of us) though it was calling two metres in front of our car. No need for the unethical tape-luring tactics advocated in some trip reports! (2/11)

Swift *Apus apus* - All the "Swifts" which gave us good enough views for a positive ID proved to be Common; we failed to ID any Pallids. (10/11)

Alpine Swift *Apus melba* - Small numbers at several sites in Monfrague e.g. the Castillo, Penafalcon, Tajo Bridge and other locations, most notably c50 at bridge over Rio Almonte on 31/5. (6/11)

White-rumped Swift *Apus caffer* - 2 at Castillo de Monfrague on evening of 29/5; 3 over Penafalcon on morning of 1/6; 3 at Castillo on morning of 4/6. (3/11)

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* (4/11)

Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* - Locally common. (10/11)

Roller *Coracias garrulus* - Several seen by track north of CM4101 on 29/5 and 6/6; also seen at a few sites on the plains north of Caceres, most numerous where nestboxes erected on telegraph poles. (4/11)

Hoopoe *Upupa epops* (10/11)

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* (1/11)

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* (2/11)

Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* - Common on the plains. (2/11)

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* - Common on the plains. (2/11)

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* - Common in suitable habitat. (10/11)
Thekla Lark *Galerida theklae* - Common in suitable habitat. (8/11)
Woodlark *Lullula arborea* - Very common in suitable habitat. (6/11)
Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* (2/11)
Crag Martin *Hirundo rupestris* - Common wherever nest sites available. (8/11)
Swallow *Hirundo rustica* (11/11)
Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* - Common. (10/11)
House Martin *Delichon urbica* (11/11)
Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* (4/11)
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba alba* (7/11)
Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* (4/11)
Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* - Common in suitable habitat. (8/11)
Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* - Quite common in Monfrague, especially around Penafalcon. (5/11)
Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* (7/11)
Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* - Seen in small numbers, most reliably in Monfrague by roadside near Villareal de San Carlos. (7/11)
Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucura* - 1 down close to road at Penafalcon on early morning of 1/6. Soon moved up cliff out of sight. (1/11)
Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* - Common in suitable habitat. (7/11)
Blackbird *Turdus merula* (11/11)
Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* (5/11)
Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* (6/11)
Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis* (6/11)
Savis' Warbler *Locustella luscinioides* - 2 singing at Almaraz on morning of 5/6 & 1 singing there on 7/6. (2/11)
Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* (5/11)
Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* - Several at Embalse de Azutan and Almaraz. (4/11)
Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta* 1 at Imperial Eagle site between Torrejon el Rubio and Caceres on 2/6. (1/11)
Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata* - 1 at Portilla del Tietar on 30/5, 1 at Mirador de Bascula on 3/6. (2/11)
Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* - Probably the commonest warbler in Monfrague, present in all suitable habitat. (5/11)
Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* - Widespread in moderate numbers. (8/11)
Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis* - 1 singing at Arroyo de la Vid on 1/6 & 1 there on 2/6. (2/11)
Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* (1/11)
Western Bonelli's Warbler *Phylloscopus bonelli* 1 singing below Castillo on 30/5. (1/11)
Crested Tit *Parus cristatus* - Several by Tajo Bridge. (1/11)
Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus* (7/11)
Great Tit *Parus major* (6/11)
Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* (1/11)
Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla* - 2 below Castillo on 2/6; 1 near Cabanas del Castillo on 5/6. (2/11)
Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus* - 6+ at northern end of Embalse de Azutan on 6/6, with birds also heard at southern end on same day. (1/11)
Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* - Present in small numbers in suitable habitat. Not especially vocal. (6/11)
Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* - Common. (9/11)
Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* - Common. (10/11)
Jay *Garrulus glandarius* (5/11)
Azure-winged Magpie *Cyanopica cyana* - Common in most areas. (10/11)
Magpie *Pica pica* (9/11)

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* (11/11)
Carrion Crow *Corvus corone corone* (11/11)
Raven *Corvus corax* (7/11)
Spotless Starling *Sturnus unicolor* - Common. (11/11)
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* (11/11)
Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* - Locally numerous, with colonies at Arroyo de la Vid and in several Storks' nests (including at Almaraz) and in flocks on plains (9/11)
Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia* - Colonies at a number of sites including near Villareal; Rio Almonte; between Torrejon and Monroy; Rio Magasca and near Oropesa. (6/11)
Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* (7/11)
Serin *Serinus serinus* - Common in suitable habitat. (11/11)
Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* (2/11)
Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* (11/11)
Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* (6/11)
Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* - Several at roadside north of Torrejon el Rubio and coming to drink at freshwater spring by Tajo bridge. (3/11)
Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus* - Small numbers seen and heard at several sites inc Penafalcon. (4/11)
Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* - Easily seen in Monfrague, particularly at Penafalcon and Portilla del Tietar. (5/11)
Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra* 10/11
Red Avadavat *Amandava amandava* - c25 in Tamarisks and bushes on west side of causeway at Almaraz on 7/6. (1/11)