

# Seville and the Alentejo

David Bradnum, Shaun Harvey & Howard Vaughan – June 2019

## Overview and Logistics

This was a short, low-cost birding break to Spain and Portugal. We had two aims: to see a handful of late-arriving spring migrants – White-rumped Swift, Western Olivaceous Warbler and Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin – and to enjoy as many as possible of the local specialities on the Castro Verde plains and the Rio Guadiana valley.

- We flew Easyjet from Gatwick to Seville. This cost c. £140 return each, booked just over a month in advance of the trip.
- We hired a car from Europcar, via Easyjet. This turned out to be a Skoda Octavia diesel for a bargain £65. Collection and drop-off were both relatively quick and fuss-free.
- We stayed in an [Airbnb rental](#) in the tiny Portuguese village of [Bens](#), east of Mertola, for three nights. This was very convenient for the White-rumped Swift site and also another bargain, coming in at a total of just £130 for three nights! The traditional cottage was very comfortable and peaceful, with Iberian Magpies outside during the day and Red-necked Nightjar calling (once, at least!) during the night.
- We self-catered throughout, contributing to an overall cost of around £270 per person for the entire trip.
- The weather was generally good, with plenty of sunshine and peak temperature around 32°C (probably a little lower than might be expected). Day three was unusually overcast and even a little rainy around lunchtime – though this was actually helpful in that we could keep birding through the warmest part of the day!
- Ahead of the trip, we used the [Finding Birds in Southern Portugal](#) Gosney site guide to identify the best sites, and then topped this up with more recent info from [eBird](#). We contributed all our sightings back to eBird (under DB's account) for the benefit of conservationists and other birders.

## Photos

An extended version of this trip report with many more, and larger, photos can be found on Howard's blog. See the following links:

- <http://blueeyedbirding.blogspot.com/2019/07/iberia-day-1-16th-june-2019.html>
- <http://blueeyedbirding.blogspot.com/2019/07/iberia-day-two-17th-june-2019.html>
- <http://blueeyedbirding.blogspot.com/2019/07/iberian-day-three-18th-june-2019.html>
- <http://blueeyedbirding.blogspot.com/2019/07/iberia-day-four-19th-june-2019.html>

## Day One: Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> June

We caught an early flight out of Gatwick on a dull Sunday morning and arrived under three hours later in a sunny **Seville**. Birding was under way before Shaun, David and I had even reached the hire car with **Pallid Swifts** flying around us at head height and squeezing into tiny gaps in the conduit under the concrete roof of the car park. **House Martins** and **House Sparrows** were similarly occupied with nesting here. A glance up and a lone **Glossy Ibis** randomly flew over and **Spotless Starlings** were moving about.

And so, out of town and on the road with **White Storks**, **Raven**, **Iberian Grey shrikes**, **Black Kites** and **Magpies** quickly added to the list before our first stop at **Laguna la Mejorada** where **Western Olivaceous Warbler** was our quarry.

After finding the right track we soon picked up **Fan-tailed** and **Sardinian Warblers** from the car while **Whiskered Terns** hawked over the small cultivated plots with **Black Kites** for company. **Crested Larks** scurried along the road in front and there were **four hirundines** and two **Swifts** to keep an eye on.



A song to the left enforced a stop and our first bonus was found singing from a fence line – a male **Bushchat**. This was a target species for the trip but there are by no means easy and so to stumble on one was great news. He let us get out and watch before darting off across a field into an olive grove. So much richer than the grey brown backed Lesvos birds that I had seen in May and to my ear the song sounded different with notes not as separated and lacking the whistle that I am familiar with.. This one had a few tail feathers missing but we did not mind.

It was only a few yards to the spot we had been given for the **Olis** around an old quarry and one was immediately audible before we pulled over and soon superb views were being had of this heavier, chunkier set version of their Eastern counterparts. The bird actually felt more like a subdued Icterine Warbler to me and behaved in a more typically clumsy ‘fall of the branch’ kind of way. The bill felt bigger and broader and the bird more deeply coloured. They were calling continuously and even this sounded louder and harsher than EOW while the song was not as cyclical and had more grating notes

Feeling very pleased with our efforts we ambled on and ended up with **11 WOWs** including dependent youngsters. **Greenfinches** wheezed and two **Common Waxbills** popped up before zipping away.

The pit itself was full of resting and probably nesting herons with **Cattle Egrets** in a big heap and **Littles** and **Great Whites** dotted amongst them while several **Spoonbills**, **Glossy Ibis** and **Black-winged Stilts** fed along the margins. With them was a single **Sacred Ibis** which although presumably from the remnants of the French population was still a good find and resulted in a description having to be done for the Spanish committee as there are not many records.

More **Whiskered Terns** were perched up on a submerged tree and both **Lesser Black-backed** and **Yellow-legged Gulls** were present. Little Ringed Plovers were calling and every now and then a **Collared Pratincole** would gracefully fly through.



A sandy **Short-toed Lark** chirped behind us and amazingly a second **Bushchat** appeared and showed incredibly well but like all encounters, they seldom stay still and it was soon on the move again. Once again the colour of the upperparts was quite striking. A couple of **Lesser Emperors** zoomed around and four male **Banded Groundlings** with their striking wings quartered mere inches from the dusty path. We left with the sound of many **Turtle Doves** purring all around us and **Bee-eaters** up above.

It did not take too long to get out into open farmland and eventually the rice paddies, sunflower fields and rows of young cotton plants of Brazo del Este and we spent the next few hours working our way up and down the dusty, public service roads that provide access for farmers and birders alike.

It was superb with the avifauna dependent on the development of the rice in each paddy. Some were covered in **Glossy Ibis** and **Stilts** with a smattering of **Redshank** and **Black-tailed Godwits** while other had groups of tuber loving **Purple Gallinules** looking like the mega moorhens they are.

**Whiskered Terns** were breeding in the reeded areas of the oxbow lakes that the road we were on bisected and **Collared Pratincoles** hawked with the terns and hirundines over the more mature fields. **Lapwings**, **Ruff** and **Avocet** were added to the wader list and **Purple Herons** were liberally scattered about with plenty of **Grey Herons**, **Cattle** and **Little Egrets** and the odd **Spoonbill**, a single **Squacco** and about 100 **Greater Flamingos**.



**Night Herons** popped up every now and then and were even seen perching on the telegraph wires with **Whiskered Terns**! The main flood management gates we passed had seven **Night Herons** standing around on the walls and railing although how they were seeing anything in the rushing waters I am not sure but it did allow us to get very close without disturbing their concentration.

**Black Kites** and **Marsh Harriers** cruised about along with **Kestrels** and a dashing **Hobby** that had a go at a **Black-winged Stilt**. The reed and willow fringed channels not only hid **Gallinules** but **Fan-tailed**, **Reed** and **Western Ollis** while one of the oxbows had five reeling **Savi's** and three **Great Reeds** while male **Iberian Yellow Wagtails** with their rasping accents displayed from the a variety of vantage points.

These reeds also held colonies of nesting **Black-headed Weavers**; our second naturalised passerine of the day. We mostly encountered olive-yellow females who seemed to like foraging in the thistles alongside the tracks but a few gaudy oriole-yellow and black males were seen and heard but rarely perched up long for a shot. Their nests were a tight ball of woven reed quite low down in their chosen patch and there were several fresh green ones amongst those that had already turned a golden brown.

**Short-toed Larks** scurried ahead and at one of our first stops we were lucky enough to see three **Lesser Short-toeds** on the track as well which was a bonus.

With time pushing on and a good two hours to our Airbnb in Portugal we hit the road. Lunch had still not occurred and being a Sunday, everything in Spain was shut so a diversion was needed and after we at least managed to pick up some crisps and cold water from a tiny petrol station along with our first **Iberian Magpies**, we veered west along the coast and into **Portugal** where we aimed for Lidl's in **Castro Marim** where we stocked up on provisions that included the joyousness of a Portuguese Tart actually in Portugal...

**Little** and **Sandwich Terns** were added as we queued to get back to the bridge into Spain before driving north and re-crossing the **Rio Guadiana** at **Pomarao** to our cottage in the tiny narrow streeted village of **Bens** just a few miles over the border.

We decamped and cracked open a beer or two and put the dinner on with sound of **Iberian Magpies** wheezing in the gardens and flying around in chattering groups on shining blue wings. This was my new bird for the trip and undoubtedly the easiest to see. I have just never been to the right part of Spain before and never to Portugal at all.

**Short-toed** and **Crested Larks** sung up above and **Iberian Shrikes** in pairs looked for a late evening snack and as the light slowly turned to gold flocks of **Spotless Starlings** drifted over to roost along with our first **Carriion Crows** and **Stone Curlews** could be heard above the sound of crickets mournfully calling from the fields.

Sleep came easy...



## Day Two: Monday 17<sup>th</sup> June

Up with the larks – yep I could hear the **Cresteds** from inside and we soon got our ourselves together, had breakfast, watched the **Iberian Magpies** and made lunch before hitting the road. Not that we got very far as no sooner had we turned onto the 'main' road than I picked up **Calandra Larks** from the car near **Santana de Cambas**. We pulled over and had a scan around, seeing a couple of these paddle winged beasts over the dry steppe with **Iberian Shrikes** watching from the wires and our first **Western Black-eared Wheatear** hopping around. The weird bubbling calls of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** drifted from several directions and we soon picked up a couple in flight and with a track heading that way just a few yards up the road it would have been rude not to go for a look.

Unfortunately they saw us before we saw them and they rapidly vacated the area but did leave us with three probing **Hoopoes**, a pair of **Mistle Thrush** and a family of **Woodchats**. More black underwinged **Calandras** circled the parched grassland and a **Short-toed Lark** pitched up on the path just in front, it certainly looked like an area that deserved more of our limited time.

Our main quarry for the day was **White-rumped Swift** in, well, a quarry. **Achada da Gama** is a disused sulphur and iron mine in **Mina de Sao Domingos** and from Google Maps you can see the desparate scars across the landscape that this once busy mine exacted on the countryside. It closed in 1965 and has largely been left to revert back to nature but there has been no clearance of old buildings or the back filling of the run off pools that now glow with all the brown, red, orange and yellow colours of the minerals that were extracted here.



Given that it has been closed for over fifty years there is still a dearth of vegetation across most of the site with stands of non-native round the edges and a few cistus clumps here and there.

Unlike back home where the whole site would be seriously out of bounds, cleared, filled in, levelled, replanted, beautified before the public may be allowed back in; here there is a well marked track, new multi lingual interp boards and almost no prohibitive fencing in sight. To us H&S mad Brits this was all just a little disturbing but oddly refreshing.

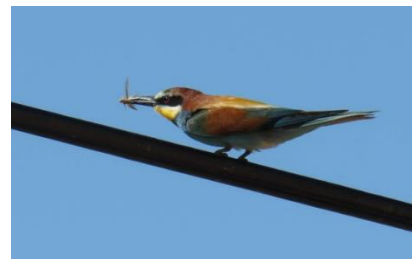
Without the old crumbling concrete buildings there would be no 'caves' and no nesting sites for **Crag** and **House Martins**, both **Barn** and the all important **Red-rumped Swallows** whose derelict nests the tiny population of **White-rumped Swifts** use as their own.

We picked up the Swifts surprisingly quickly as they fed over a Eucalyptus ridge with various hirundines and eventually they dropped down to say hello and zoomed in about of the ruins and convenient old culvert tunnel which allowed us the chance to actually look down on them with the rust red background of the slag heaps. The shape was quite subtle – perhaps more torpedo like and the forked tail was certainly more pronounced but only on a braking turn and the white throat was very prominent. Even the fine white tips to the secondaries could be seen at such close range and suitable angle.

A mad old guy in a gyrocopter thingy was buzzing around and made several ridiculously low passes at eye level with us over the main swift spot seemingly just to give us a wave!

To get this target species so readily was a most pleasing. I had only seen one briefly before on La Janda and it was new for the lads. There was plenty else to see here and not only with the various hirundines hawking around us. **Western Black-eared Wheatears** sang and flicked like snowballs across the slag and **Turtle Doves** purred all around with **Iberian Magpies** a constant presence. **Golden Orioles** were incredible vocal and a strange call that none of us had heard before was tracked down to two fledged juveniles begging for food from their parents and at one stage we had three adult males bouncing around the same trees with females cat calling further back and this allowed me to indulge in some communicating of my own...

**Bee-eaters** sallied from the wires and **Iberian Green Woodpeckers** yaffled in high pitched voices and we were lucky enough to see one too and **Great Spot** and **Jay** joined the list with **Blue Rock Thrush**, **White Wagtail**, **Wood** and **Thekla's Larks** and **Western Subalpine Warbler**.



I am sure you could spend all day wandering the area but with a tight schedule we moved on towards some proper Steppe habitat passing literally dozens of **White Stork** nests on telegraph poles on the way out of the village, each with at least two almost fledged youngsters.

We stopped not far up the road to take some pictures of fortified **Mertola** and added a calling **Rock Bunting** in the process.

Our first **Griffons** were encountered just up the road at **Alcaria Ruiva** with a **Short-toed Eagle** in the same thermal and a **Dartford Warbler** churred in the scrub.

David was taking us to a hill top with a chapel that afforded amazing all round views and this took us along a straight road where workmen were busy strimming any verge vegetation, we presumed to create an extra firebreak to go with the ploughed margins within each fence line. **Bee-eaters** lined



the way and a random glance out of the window revealed a pale blob on a wire some way off. I called it as Kite and we hastily pulled over to find a pair of **Black Winged** beauties drifting between poles and engaging in some nuptials too.

Once on the wing they are effortless and hold their pointy wings in a proper full on 'V' and simply glide where their turns take them. Another tricky to find species under the belt with a bonus singing **Quail** and **Hoopoe** to go with them.

Lunch was then taken atop **Ermida de Nossa Senhora de Aracelis** where the white chapel glowed in the harsh light and the breeze drifted through the scented eucalypts. David was right to say the views were good with a patchwork of golden fields, harvested and otherwise interspersed with regimented Olive groves and dotted stately Cork Oaks.



**Swallows** were nesting in the out building and **Sardinian Warblers** churred while down below another **Black Winged Kite** glided through and **Griffons** soared above. **Golden Orioles** sang around us and two **Quails** had an invisible sing off before we retraced our steps to **Monte Salto** and followed an intriguingly good set of signs depicting a fine Great Bustard. As it turned out **Monte Vale** was a new accommodation residence but the track to the house was not a waste of time as **Short-toed Larks** sang all around and unbelievably a **Quail** barrelled across the path on cigar body and surprisingly long wings. As we drove out we noticed a plume of grass fire smoke off in the distance to the east.

The **Kites** were back on their wires as we made our way back to the main road and we did not have far to go till we turned off at another great carved sign, this one showing a **Roller**. It seems that **Monte de Aparica** is a hot spot for this declining species and every other concrete telegraph pole had a Starling sized box attached to it. There appeared to be no one home as we trundled down further, only to glance back and see a pair conduct a nest changeover so we snuck back up the road while they were not visible and watched from a safe distance and over the next ten minutes we had some lovely flight views as they went after large flying insects.

The haze was terrible by now and the fire we had seen earlier was now really getting going and we watch as it hurtled across the frazzled landscape covering what we judged to be several miles in just eight minutes to end up on the vegetated ridge just below where we had had lunch. The speed was terrifying and the flames could be seen licking up into the sky and through the billowing smoke. Thank the gods both large and small that we were not still enjoying a lunch with that roiling towards us. Two helicopters with dangling water buckets and the yellow fire plane were throwing water at the blaze and amazingly they had got it under control with 90 minutes.



Beyond the farm buildings on our track was a small reservoir that we thought we could get too but were halted in the farm but at least three more **Rollers** using the light fittings as look outs. They showed so well and it was just wonderful to sit and watch them hawking for insects on those Royal blue wings.

It was now very hot but this did not stop me investigating the odonata around the lake and I found **Lesser Emperor, Black-tailed Skimmer, Broad Scarlet, Violet Dropwing** and a new one for me – a **Black Percher**. **Small Red-eyed** and **Common Blue Damsels** were also seen. The shore line was littered with the claws of Red Signal Crayfish which is what the **Glossy Ibises** seems to be tackling. A **Kingfisher** dashed through the trees and our first **Spanish Sparrows** were seen with the numerous **House Sparrows**. **Red-winged Grasshoppers** flicked up ahead of me as I walked along the edge.

On again and a stop at the **Acude de Entradas** – (Acude meaning dam). Hundreds of **Cattle Egrets** were feeding below the low concrete wall but soon moved up on top to see what we did. They were not very impressed when we got out and headed to join their brethren on the ponded up other side.

We reckoned that about 400 were present along with at least nine **Spoonbill**, three **Ibis**, two **Grey Heron**, **Little Egret** and a few waders with **Black-winged Stilts**, **Little Ringed Plovers** and five **Collared Pratincoles** present. **Coots** and **Little Grebes** bobbed around and the whole lot were flushed periodically by **Common Buzzard** and **Booted Eagle** and a female **Montagu's Harrier** and **Short-toed Eagle** made it a good raptor stop too.

I checked out the dam overflow margins and found countless **Iberian Marsh Froglets** and several dragonfly species including **Red-veined Darters** and **Broad Scarlets**, **Emperor**, **Black-tailed Skimmer**, my first **Long Skimmer** and **Iberian Blue-tailed Damselfly**. **Blue-winged Grasshoppers** tried to hide in the fallen leaves – but failed.

It was time to head west again, our furthest point for the day, to the old railway station at **Casevel**. It is known for its **Lesser Kestrel** and **Roller** colony that utilise the old derelict buildings. A researcher was present upon our arrival and was in fact the only person we saw during the whole trip with bins. He kindly asked if we could not approach closer and view from the track. Apparently birders regularly drive into the complex for better views but we were more than content with watching at least forty Lesser Kestrels whizz in and out of their nests and dally with the thermals around us. They were very vocal and agile and it was certainly an educational experience. A single Roller was seen perched up.

Up above us there was big push of **Swifts** with **Common**, **Pallid** and our first **Alpines** zooming through on a feeding mission and the drive back out added a fine male **Montagu's Harrier**, **Booted Eagle**, a dozen **Black Kites** and a spiral of 60 more **Lesser Kestrels**. Given the Kites and the presence of both **Raven** and **Carrion Crow** I suspect that there was a tip somewhere out of sight.

It was quite a drive back to **Bens** but we passed where the grass fire had started right alongside the main road, undoubtedly from a flicked fag end. It had spread so quick that there were plants that still had green leaves on three foot off the ground and nothing below. **White Storks** were striding through the ashes and **Iberian Magpies** were also out searching for crispy critters.

Back at **Bens** we were greeted by ever skittish **Iberian Mags** and a male **Golden Oriole** flashed through momentarily spooking the noisy **Fan-tailed Warblers** in the field opposite.

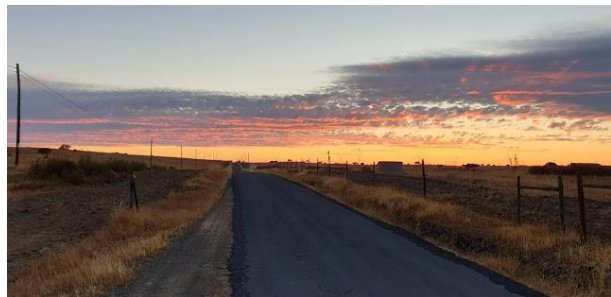
Time for dinner and then back out to **Santana de Cambas** (where we first saw Sandgrouse) for a circuit across the Steppe and then through rocky heath and farmland in a circle that took us through **Alves** before looping back through **Picoitos** and **Salgueiros** and home.

The breeze had dropped and the light was magnificent. **Calandras** and **Crested Larks** sang and the **Sandgrouse** could be heard bubbling and soon got up for the first of several fly rounds. As we entered the more rock areas the **Crested Larks** became replaced by **Thekla's** and these predominated until we hit habitation again. **Iberian** and **Woodchats Shrikes** were out hunting late and **Hoopoes** sang above the sound of sheep bells.

As the light dropped further **Little Owls** and **Stone Curlews** began to call and several **Rabbits** and our first **Red-legged Partridge** were seen. I was delighted to find an **Iberian Hare** lolloping along with periodic stops to check out its surroundings. We found three in the end and what a superb beast they are with richly ginger brown fur and silky white underparts dividing the top from bottom much like a huge Yellow-necked Mouse! The front legs were brown but appeared stuck on as the white front and belly went over the top of the leg and not under it.

We were not far from rejoining the main road when I asked David if we could stop so that I could take a sunset shot up the road behind. I got out and could hear a strange cackling and immediately told the lads that I thought I had a juvenile **Great Spotted Cuckoo** but had not heard one before. A few seconds later I found it begging for food from its two **Eurasian Magpie** parents on the top of a dead tree. Cue, scope out and some great views. There was sound all around with **Corn Buntings** 'plipping' through on their way to roost; **Stone Curlews** circulating and eerily calling; vocal **Little Owls** setting up evening lookout from the wires and even the deep base 'hoooo' of a distant **Eagle Owl**.

It was just gone nine and the light was fading and I called Sparrowhawk low and left only to realise that I was actually looking at a **Red-necked Nightjar**.



What happened over the next half hour was simply magical with a minimum of six of these long winged, long tailed Nightjars hawking around us with flashing wings spots, noisy wing claps and occasional deep 'pruk' type calls. Two males sang a duet for ten seconds but that was it. Suddenly the activity just stopped and our moment was passed...

You really do get to see how good your bins really are in low light and between us we covered the three major optics players and we were all very happy with the colour, clarity and sharpness.

We returned the short way to Bens in disbelief at such a memorable encounter and finished off the rest of the red wine with smiles all round.

### Day Three: Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> June

A dawnish rise with **Hoopoes** adding to the breakfast entourage of **Iberian Magpies**, **Spotless Starlings**, **Bee-eaters** and **Fan-tailed Warblers** before heading back west to the proper Steppe that we did not get to visit yesterday. It was grey and actually quite cool but this meant that visibility was much improved and our chances of finding Bustards and the like was all the better for it.



Our route took us back through **Mertola** where several **Lesser Kestrels** were perched on the wires by the old bridge and a male **Hawfinch** flew up from a town centre car park as we drove past calling loudly as it did so.

A brief stop to look at tree very fine buck **Fallow Deer** added three **Woodlarks** to the day list.



It took about an hour to reach our Steppe start point at **Figuerinha** and enter the very different rolling grassland landscape with interspersed wild patches of cistus maquis and not five minutes to come across our first **Great Bustards** with three of these imposing beasts sedately walking along the interface between the different vegetation.

**Spanish Sparrows** predominated with a huge colony in the Eucalyptus grove at the end and **Larks** were ever present with **Crested**, **Thekla** and **Short-toed** singing around us with a few scattered **Calandras**. However, large flocks of the latter were already gathering and I suspect that the three groups we saw totalled over 300 birds.

The next few hours were spent driving slowly between here and the private gate to the national park area at Guerreiro with regular stops to either watch **Great Bustards** from the car or have a good scan round and by the time we called it a morning we had seen at least 26 of these mega gamebirds along with 24 **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** as they speedily flew around in tight little groups.

A male and two female **Montagu's Harriers** quartered the dusty grassland with **Buzzards**, **Kestrels**, **Lesser Kestrels**, **Short-toed**, **Booted** and even an adult **Golden Eagle** over the plains with a few **Griffons** for loose company.

**Iberian** and **Woodchat Shrikes** dotted wires and three **Black-eared Wheatears** were seen while **Golden Orioles**, **Quail** and **Red-legged Partridge** were encountered.

And all of this was experienced in splendid isolation; we did not see one other person, or hear one car or plane. There was no wind and just the sound of comingled Lark song, chattering Sparrows and bubbling Sandgrouse and the flat light and coolness made it even more pleasurable.

A few spots in the air suggested that we move on and a random pull over to check a ridge for **vultures** rewarded us handsomely with a monstrous **Black** lazily cruising amongst the **Griffs**. Twenty-four of the latter gradually appeared and headed off presumably after all receiving a group WhatsApp message about a carcass somewhere yonder.

Suddenly I picked up two plummeting big **Aquila** eagles diving in unison down through the Vultures. We presumed Golden but when they hammered into another raptor on the ground near the base of a solitary tree, they banked and revealed a mass of shimmering white on the forewings! We had only gone and found a pair of **Spanish Imperials**!

Over the next hour we enjoyed superb views and this territorial pair cruised the ridge line and did battle with passing and perched Griffons. They always returned to near the tree and landed in it on three occasions; one on top and one going deep inside so it looks like we had stumbled on a nest site too.



This species is still a very rare breeder in Portugal with just a handful of pairs at the moment and was not even really on our radar for this short trip.

**Alvares** was our next destination and nestling amongst the olive groves was a rapidly drying lagoon that was home to about ten pairs of nesting **Collared Pratincoles**. They were tottering around the muddy margins and we found several nests further up the dried mud where they blended in incredibly well. Every now and then one would return from a hunting foray and the wickering from them as they met filled the air to be joined by the angry kiking of the **Black-winged Stilts** also nesting here. They never need an excuse for a barney and both tiny and well grown young were present. **Little Ringed Plover** and **Little Grebe** families were also seen and a male Montagu's Harrier floated over the trees. Eight **Fan Tailed Warblers** erupted from the dried plants bordering the lagoon and a single **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** flew straight through. I was really hoping it would come down for a drink.

Late lunch was taken back at the bridge in **Mertola** where the rain became temporarily persistent and the Lesser Kestrels refused to play but it was still a good spot for lunch and despite the traffic we still saw seven **Hawfinch**, **Crag Martin**, two **Golden Orioles** and a male **Blue Rock Thrush** whilst munching.

Some real coffee was required so we moved to the other side of the bridge and parked where we saw the Hawfinch in the morning and ambled into this fortified town. A suitable little cafe overlooking the river was found and Espresso and another Portuguese tart was consumed while heaps of **House Martins** swirled in and out of their multi-generational nest condos. A **Grey Wagtail** sang as he bounced over the wall and down to the Guadiana below.

Souvenir shopping and then veering off again towards **Moinho de Canais** several miles up river. I am still trying to work out where we turned off the main road to get there but at the village of **Corte Pequena** there was a helpful sign to get you on the next dirt track to lead us down to Moinho de Canais.

David had seen a pair of **Golden Eagles** here earlier in the spring and although the adults were awol we were lucky enough to see a very well grown youngster in the eerie, sitting on his haunches and showing off a set of enormous yellow feet.

Three stag **Red Deer** were seen resting under a **Cork Oak** and **Iberian Magpies** were all around while up above in the now blue sky **Pallid Swifts** Down in the valley bottom we parked up at the end of the track opposite a small weir and enjoyed an hour poking around the shoreline with occasional glances up for the adult eagles. Four **Common Sandpipers** teetered on the rocks – apparently they do breed this far south – and a **Green Sandpiper** flew up and out of the valley. **Kingfishers** zoomed around and both **Grey** and **White Wagtails** were catching insects around the margins while **Grey Herons** kept an eye on us and waited for us to leave.



This habitat was so unlike any we had been in so far and the birds could all have been from a Scottish river up until the point that a **Rock Bunting** hopped into view! It was good to get some better views of this species and I think that it was my first for about ten years.

There were no dragonflies at all which was disappointing but I did eventually find a large damselfly that was identified by Roy when I got home as a **White Featherleg (*Platycnemis latipes*)**. The only

butterflies that settled turned out to be a **Common Blue** and **Brown Argus** (as usual) but I did find a superb **Hemipenthes sp.** which is a seriously funky fly.

There were even a few flowering plants – something that had been in short supply so far and I am still trying to work out what some of them are but will give it my best shot! I am usually able to sort things out with my copy of Gey-Wilson and Blamey but it has been more problematical this time for some reason!

With one last look at the Eaglet we wended our way back up to **Corte Pequena** where three **Golden Orioles** and several **Iberian Magpies** greeted us in the same garden fig tree where they were tucking onto some succulent figgyness. The views of the Orioles were some of the best I have ever had.



We popped back into **Mertola** to pick up something for dinner and marvelled at their local wildlife sculptures on the roundabout before heading back to **Bens** for a pasta meatball dinner.

The beers were put on hold as there was still plenty of daylight to play with so we hopped back in the car and went back to **Achada da Gama** for **White Rumped Swift** seconds. The birdlife was almost the same but the light was even better and we were able to position ourselves to be on eye level with the birds as they approached the tunnel which gave Shaun (rather than me) the best opportunity to merrily pap away. The ensuing results were superb.



The **Red-rumped Swallows** and **Crag Martins** were using the same slope to hunt from, drifting in lazy circles and occasionally resting up and casting long shadows.

**Black-eared Wheatears** fizzed but remained aloof and the **Bee-eaters** were again hunting around the main building near the entrance where **White Storks** clattered on their nests with young begging for a last evening meal.

We were keen to get back to **Salgueiros** and the site of our **Red-necked Nightjar** glory from yesterday and we had almost made it to the turning when a juvenile **Great Spotted Cuckoo** flew noisily across the road. It circled the car and landed frustratingly straight into the light and we subsequently watched it with its sibling following around their beleaguered Magpie parents.

I could see the trees where we had the single last night and it was conceivable that they were the same family unit. Up the road we settled in for a short wait but would the Nightjars perform once again?

**Corn Buntings** moved through to roost once again but we counted them this time and got to 229 and the **Iberian Shrikes** were still very active and making loads of noise. The **Little Owls** were dotted all about and **Stone Curlews** circled us and then bang on cue at 9:05pm the first **Nightjar** appeared and we were then treated once again to a mesmerising display for the next twenty minutes or so.

Our phones were dragging in more light than our bins or cameras and we found that we could find them further away with our phones and then switch to bins when they came closer. Being prepared this time even meant that I managed a few short video clips.

The **Eagle Owl** started up again and good guessing from David allowed him to pick it out sat on top of the old chimney up on the hill about a mile away. Even from here you could see those ear tufts!

Not quite believing our luck for the second night running we headed back to **Bens** for our delayed post dinner beers.

## Day Four: 19<sup>th</sup> June

It was a pity to be leaving **Bens** so soon but we were soon packed and tidied and heading back towards Seville but still with birding in mind before our late afternoon flight home. The usual assortment of roadside birds were seen as we headed back East into Spain with **Iberian Magpies**, both **Shrikes**, **Black Kites** and **White Storks** along every road.

We were aiming for the town of **Bolullos Par del Condado** and a small church of **Ermita De Nuestra Señora de Las Mercedes** on the outskirts that was reputed to be in the heart of **Bushchat** country. It was seriously hot but our searching was not in vain and three birds were seen including two singing males but they seldom stayed in the open for long and we were all glad of our prolonged views on day one.

**Quail** sang and two **Hoopoes** flopped across the church grounds with **Bee-eaters** and **Ibe Mags** adding more colour.

A male **Montagu's Harrier** actively hunted the adjacent sunflower fields with Swallows in attendance and up above **Short-toed** and **Booted Eagles**, **Buzzard**, **Raven** and **Black Kite** were all seen.



Our time was at a premium so we pushed on to the nearest part of the **Donana** and in fact no sooner had we entered it then we left it again and found ourselves in the **Reserva Natural Concertada Dehesa de Abajo** with a patchwork of paddy fields similar too but nowhere near as birdy as Brazo del Este. The fact that we were in prime Iberian Lynx country was pointed out by the coolest Banksyesque road signs!

There was the usual scattng of **Grey** and **Purple Herons**, **Great White**, **Cattle** and **Little Egrets** and **Glossy Ibis**. **Great Reed** and **Fan-tailed Warblers** sang in the reeds with **Iberian Wagtails** for company and **White Storks** and **Black Kites** were constant companions.

The lagoon at the reserve was superb and deserved hours rather than the 30 minutes we had but in that time we even added a few species to the trip list with 30 **Great Crested Grebes**, a brood of seven

**Red-crested Pochards** and two drake **Shoveler**. **Little Grebes**, **Pochard**, **Mallard** and plenty of **Coot** were present but we could not find a Red-knobbed amongst the closest birds and the rest were too far and too hazy.

There were literally hundreds of **Spoonbills** sieving the waters with a splodge of pink **Flamingos** and a line of perhaps a hundred or so rusty **Black-tailed Godwits**.

**Squaccos** and **Night Herons** were in and out of the vegetated islands and **Western Olivaceous** and **Reed Warblers** sang while around the visitors centre Jackdaw became our last trip tick with dozens in close proximity to the **White Storks** that were nesting at eye level on posts and pine trees.

**Bee-eaters** prukked from the wires and I can't think of a better bird to round up any trip...

Seville airport was painless and we almost left on time for a swift journey back to Blighty after four successful days, jammed with memories.



## Trip List

		Peak Count per Site				
	Species Name	16/06	17/06	18/06	19/06	Key Sites
1	Northern Shoveler				2	
2	Mallard	6	8	6		
3	Red-crested Pochard				7	Dehesa de Abajo
4	Common Pochard	2			30	
5	Common Quail		1	1	1	
6	Red-legged Partridge			6		
7	Greater Flamingo	150			100	
8	Little Grebe	4	2	11	5	
9	Great Crested Grebe				30	
10	Rock Dove	X	X	3		
11	Common Woodpigeon	2	1	2		
12	European Turtle Dove	3	2	1		
13	Collared Dove	2	X	1		
14	Black-bellied Sandgrouse		2	24		Guerreiro area
15	Great Bustard			13		Guerreiro area
16	Great Spotted Cuckoo		1	2		nr Salgueros
17	Red-necked Nightjar		6	4		nr Salgueros
18	Alpine Swift		12			
19	Common Swift	2	50	4	X	
20	Pallid Swift	1	10	2	X	
21	White-rumped Swift		8	5		Complexo Mineiro da Mina de São Domingos
22	Common Moorhen	5	5			
23	Eurasian Coot	10	5		X	
24	Western Swampphen	40				Brazo del Este
25	Stone-curlew		4	2		
26	Black-winged Stilt	30	6	6		
27	Pied Avocet	2				
28	Northern Lapwing	15				
29	Little Ringed Plover	3	1	8		
30	Black-tailed Godwit	8			4	
31	Ruff	1				Brazo del Este
32	Common Sandpiper			3		Rio Guadiana, Corte Pequena
33	Green Sandpiper		1	1		
34	Common Redshank	2				
35	Collared Pratincole	10	5	18		
36	Black-headed Gull	3				
37	Yellow-legged Gull	3				
38	Lesser Black-backed Gull	6				
39	Whiskered Tern	200				Brazo del Este
40	Sandwich Tern	X				Castro Marim
41	Little Tern	X				Castro Marim
42	White Stork	10	X	1	X	
43	Grey Heron	2	1	1	X	
44	Purple Heron	5			4	
45	Great White Egret	1			3	
46	Little Egret	40	1		X	
47	Cattle Egret	60	400	X		
48	Squacco Heron	1			2	
49	Black-crowned Night-Heron	10			2	
50	Glossy Ibis	250	13		150	
51	Sacred Ibis	1				Los Palacios y Villafranca--Laguna La Mejorada
52	Eurasian Spoonbill	15	9	6	300	
53	Black-winged Kite		3			Nossa Senhora de Aracelis / Monte Salto
54	Black Vulture			1		Alvares area
55	Griffon Vulture		8	26		
56	Short-toed Eagle		1	2	1	
57	Booted Eagle	1	1		1	
58	Spanish Eagle			2		
59	Golden Eagle			1		
60	Western Marsh Harrier	3				
61	Montagu's Harrier		1	3	1	
62	Black Kite	6	1		50	
63	Common Buzzard		1	1	1	

64	Eurasian Eagle Owl		1	1		nr Salguieros
65	Little Owl		2	3		
66	Eurasian Hoopoe		3	2	2	
67	Common Kingfisher		1	2		
68	European Bee-eater	2	2	1	X	
69	European Roller		5			estação de Casével; Monte de Apariça
70	Great Spotted Woodpecker		2			
71	Eurasian Green Woodpecker		2	1		
72	Lesser Kestrel		26			estação de Casével
73	Common Kestrel	1				
74	Lesser/Common Kestrel			12		
75	Eurasian Hobby	1				
76	Iberian Grey Shrike		3	3		
77	Woodchat Shrike		4	5	3	
78	Eurasian Golden Oriole		6	3		
79	Eurasian Jay		1	1		
80	Iberian Magpie		2	8	X	
81	Common Magpie		1	7	4	
82	Eurasian Jackdaw		6		30	
83	Carrion Crow		2	2		
84	Common Raven			1	1	
85	Greater Short-toed Lark	1	X	1		
86	Calandra Lark		X	X		
87	Lesser Short-toed Lark	2				Brazo del Este
88	Thekla's Lark		2	1		
89	Crested Lark	X	X	1	X	
90	Woodlark					
91	Sand Martin	4		1		
92	Eurasian Crag Martin		2	1		
93	Barn Swallow	6	X	3	X	
94	Red-rumped Swallow	X	6	4		
95	Common House Martin	X	X	60		
96	Eurasian Blue Tit		1			
97	Great Tit		2		1	
98	Cetti's Warbler	1			1	
99	Western Olivaceous Warbler	11			2	Los Palacios y Villafranca--Laguna La Mejorada
100	Eurasian Reed Warbler	1			X	
101	Great Reed Warbler	3			2	
102	Savi's Warbler	5				Brazo del Este
103	Zitting Cisticola	3		8	3	
104	Subalpine Warbler		1			Complexo Mineiro da Mina de São Domingos
105	Sardinian Warbler	1	1	1		
106	Dartford Warbler		2	1		
107	Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin	2			3	Los Palacios y Villafranca--Laguna La Mejorada; Bolullos del Condado area
108	Blue Rock Thrush		2	2		Mertola; Complexo Mineiro da Mina de São Domingos
109	European Stonechat			1		
110	Black-eared Wheatear		3	3		Complexo Mineiro da Mina de São Domingos
111	Mistle Thrush		1			
112	Eurasian Blackbird	2	2	X		
113	Spotless Starling	X	X	7	X	
114	Grey Wagtail			1		Rio Guadiana, Corte Pequena; Mertola
115	Western Yellow Wagtail	30			X	
116	Pied Wagtail/White Wagtail		2	8		
117	Common Chaffinch		1			
118	Hawfinch			7		Mertola
119	European Greenfinch	1		1		
120	Common Linnet	4	X	3	1	
121	European Goldfinch	2	2	2		
122	European Serin	1	1		1	
123	Corn Bunting	2		229		
124	Rock Bunting		1	2		Rio Guadiana, Corte Pequena; Mertola
125	House Sparrow	X	X	1	X	
126	Spanish Sparrow		6	200		
127	Black-headed Weaver	20			1	Brazo del Este
128	Common Waxbill	2				Los Palacios y Villafranca--Laguna La Mejorada