ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

Spain - Best of Birding 2024

May 4th - 18th, 2024 (15 days)

Bluethroat by Stephan Lorenz

Trip report compiled by Tour Leader: Stephan Lorenz

Tour Summary

Spain remains the most fascinating and productive birding destination in Western Europe and as usual, during this tour, we visited a wide variety of habitats and enjoyed the country's prolific birdlife, comfortable hotels, dramatic landscapes, and delicious cuisine. We traveled in an arch the entire length and width of Spain, starting in Sevilla and finishing in Barcelona. We visited the shores of the Atlantic and ended up on the beaches of the Mediterranean. In between, we visited Donana National Park, Monfragüe National Park, the Gredos Mountains, the mighty Pyrenees, and the varied habitats around Lleida. The top bird as voted by participants was the Bluethroat and we enjoyed a spectacular male perched atop a shrub right in front of us at the higher elevations in the Gredos Mountains. Second place was tied among the colorful Eurasian Bullfinch, of which a male showed exceptionally well on the road, the last-minute Red-footed Falcon that was worth the detour, and the stunning Bearded Reedlings also came in second. Third place went to the Little Bustard, rightly so as we watched a displaying male for a long time in the scope. Honorable mentions went to White-throated Dipper, Ring Ouzel, White-winged Snowfinch, European Stonechat, Egyptian Vulture, European Bee-eater, Great Bustard, Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush, Citril Finch, Iberian Green Woodpecker, Collared Pratincole, Little Ringed Plover, Spanish Eagle, Eurasian Goshawk, White-headed Duck, and Red-backed Shrike. Overall we recorded 239 species plus a couple of mammals, the most outstanding being the Iberian Lynx and Least Weasel.

Collared Pratincole by Stephan Lorenz

Tour in Detail

We met after breakfast in the hotel lobby and set out from Sevilla towards the Rio Guadaira. The first stops along the river and one or two bridges proved very productive and we tallied several species of waterfowl including the scarce Ferruginous Duck. We also enjoyed the antics of a flock of Collared Pratincoles that called and fluttered above the fields nearby and we steadily added various species of shorebirds and wading birds to the list. With some concerted effort, we all had excellent views of a Western Olivaceous Warbler before studying a small colony of Lesser Kestrels in the scope. We took a break for a picnic lunch at Parque de la Corchuela (which would be the theme for the coming two weeks) and then added some species among the stone pines here, especially admiring the colorful European Bee-eaters. We finished the day at Brazo del Este where Marbled Duck and a shy Savi's Warbler were the highlights. We then checked into our comfortable hotel along the Costa Ballena just south of Donana National Park.

White-headed Duck by Stephan Lorenz

After a full breakfast, we drove a short distance to the port of Chipiona where we could closely observe the only breeding colony of Little Swifts in Europe. The birds offered great views as they swooped by in tandem or singles and visited the nest site. Good numbers of the larger Pallid Swifts were also nearby. We then headed to a coastal site and scanned the mudflats at Playa de Montijo. Shorebirds were the main feature and Eurasian Oystercatcher, Whimbrel, and Bar-tailed Godwit were noteworthy plus a

good number of gulls and terns We then entered the national park and birded a series of ponds and lagoons that were full of birdlife and extremely productive, several White-headed Ducks and a flock of Slender-billed Gulls were particularly welcome. At the Salinas de Bonanza, we had closer studies of many of the shorebirds we had seen earlier but especially enjoyed the close views of Kentish Plovers. After a picnic lunch in a small village, we headed toward the Lagunas de Camino Colorado where White-headed Ducks were especially confiding and we had excellent views of the often vocal but secretive Cetti's Warbler. Up to three Little Bitterns here, one of which showed very well, were truly memorable. We finished the day birding a mixture of reservoirs and arid plains, adding Mediterranean Short-toed Lark and Spectacled Warbler to the lengthy list for the day. We then started the search for the range-restricted Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin around the scrubby areas and the gardens of Campiña de Trebujena. It took a concerted effort, but at the third location, we finally found a cooperative bird that showed very well. We celebrated with a delicious dinner at our welcoming lodge. After dinner, some of us headed out for a bit of owling and found a Tawny Owl and heard Red-necked Nightjars.

Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin by Stephan Lorenz

We spent the entire day in Donana National Park, exploring various hotspots in this beautiful region. Here we did some pleasant walks through pine forests and stretches of ancient deciduous woodlands. We also explored smaller wetlands and open grasslands. The weather was perfect and we recorded more than 60 species for the day. Some highlights included European Turtle-Dove, a cooperative Eurasian Wryneck, Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers at a nest, the charismatic Iberian Magpie, and Iberian

Chiffchaff. The latter showed very well, singing its distinctive song right over our heads. The night outing was rewarded with more views of a Tawny Owl and a Red-necked Nightjar in flight, but best of all was a close sighting of an Iberian Lynx, one of the rarest mammals in Europe.

Eurasian Spoonbill by Stephan Lorenz

After breakfast, we left our incredible lodge which was set amidst beautiful woodlands and productive habitat. First, we explored some large tracts of wetlands and reservoirs, obtaining more views of the scarce White-headed, Marbled, and Ferruginous Ducks, but the best find here was a single Red-knobbed Coot. A Black-winged Kite hovering on the distant horizon was another welcome addition. In the late morning, we reached the arid hills around the Embalse de los Molinos and dedicated scanning here revealed at least three Spanish Eagles, including two adults and a juvenile. Other raptors included Cinereous Vulture, Eurasian Griffon, Short-toed Snake-Eagle, and Booted Eagle. During lunch, we spotted the first Iberian Green Woodpecker of the tour and had excellent scope views. During the midafternoon, we stopped in the Hornachos area and after patient scanning found a Black Wheatear in the distance and then a second individual much closer for good scope studies of this range-restricted species. Before reaching our comfortable hotel for the night, we stopped in Trujillo and saw an Eurasian Scops-Owl on a day roost. That alone would have been a fine finish for the day, but we set out after dinner to look for nightjars. While the nightjars never showed, we got to watch a massive Eurasian Eagle-Owl in the scope as it called from a prominent perch. What a finish!

Eurasian Scops-Owl by Stephan Lorenz

After a delicious breakfast in our amazing lodge that offered views of Monfragüe National Park, we explored this small but scenic park. The numbers of vultures here were incredible with hundreds of

Eurasian Griffons and many Cinereous Vultures. The rugged mountains and plains here are a raptor paradise and throughout the day we saw Egyptian Vultures, European Honey-buzzards, Booted Eagles, Bonelli's Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Black Kite, and Common Buzzard. On the cliffs, we observed nesting Black Storks, Blue Rock-Thrush, and Rock Bunting. The oak woodlands and thickets held Western Orphean Warblers and Western Subalpine Warblers. A quick detour to the northeast of the park saw us arriving at a wetland where we added a pair of showy Water Rails and many nesting Purple Herons. In the early evening, we rushed to the castle atop the mountain range and quickly located the scarce White-rumped Swift, a recent arrival in Spain. Dinner was delicious that evening back at the hotel and we enjoyed a well-earned rest.

Eurasian Griffon by Stephan Lorenz

The next morning we left early with a picnic breakfast and headed to the grassy plains south of the national park. After some dedicated searching, we eventually found several Great Bustards and a single Little Bustards that offered great studies of its display in the scope. Several raptors, European Rollers, and dozens of Calandra Larks enlivened these plains. We continued to a picnic lunch spot at a reservoir where we had our first views of Eurasian Golden Oriole and added a migrant Whinchat to the list. We then explored a new area of the plains in search of sandgrouse and after carefully scanning the vast area we eventually found both species, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse on the ground for scope views, success! This was followed by a longer drive to the Gredos Mountains and a detour to higher elevations on the way to the hotel netted us wonderful views of a male Bluethroat in full song. This new habitat also added several species that would be common over the next two days. Our lovely hotel

was perfectly situated amidst lush pine forests and had a bird blind attached to the building. Dinner was delicious and we retired to the sound of a Eurasian Scops-Owl calling outside.

Calandra Lark by Stephan Lorenz

During the morning, we spent our time in the Plataforma area of the Gredos Mountains and the weather proved perfect with plenty of bird activity. The morning added Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Red-backed Shrike, Wood Lark, lots of Western Bonelli's Warblers, better views of Western Orphean Warbler, Goldcrest, Citril Finch, and more to our list. After a picnic lunch in the mountains, we staked out a stream area and successfully spotted a White-throated Dipper that showed well for several minutes. We also found a male European Pied Flycatcher after we checked the open pine forest on a second try. Some of us elected to sit in the bird blind back at the hotel, enjoying many close views of a handful of species, but the Iberian Green Woodpecker was especially welcome.

We left the Gredos Mountains after an early breakfast for a longer drive north. We stopped at various places along the way wherever there was bird activity. Near our lunch spot was a small wetland and we picked up Garden Warbler for the list here. It was eBird's Global Big Day and we did our best to add to the list during this transfer day. In the late afternoon, we headed to the plains to look for the difficult Dupont's Lark. It took a concerted effort, but after about two hours everyone had at least some views of the lark. We even managed to get a singing bird in the scope, but it didn't stick around for long.

Iberian Green Woodpecker

In the early morning, we headed to Zudaire where we met with the local guide. He offered an explanation about the scarce Middle Spotted Woodpecker and as he was about to finish one flew right over us, fortunately seen by all since that was the only sign we had of the species during an additional two hours of searching. Other welcome additions here included Song Thrush and Red Crossbill. We

then drove to the Laguna de Pitillas where we had an excellent selection of waterbirds, including Mute Swans and the only Tufted Duck of the trip. We also saw a Great Bittern fly across the reeds in the distance. In the nearby grasslands, we added Tawny Pipit. After arriving at our hotel in the Valle de Hecho, we spent an hour scanning the cliffs for Wallcreepers, but could not find any birds. We had a home-cooked dinner at our lovely and quiet hotel.

Booted Eagle by Stephan Lorenz

For the morning we left the Valle de Hecho and drove to higher elevations, eventually crossing the Pyrenees and entered France for a bit. Amidst the high-elevation coniferous forest and alpine slopes, we found Yellow-billed Choughs, Ring Ouzel (in France!), Black Redstarts, Water Pipits, a beautiful Eurasian Bullfinch, and very cooperative Citril Finches for lengthy studies. At our lunch spot at a lower elevation, we found Marsh Tit and then walked into some beautiful mature forest where we quickly found the locally scarce Eurasian Treecreeper. It ended up being a very productive day with wonderful mountain views and beautiful, ancient forests. We celebrated our success during another delicious dinner.

After breakfast, we drove to the higher reaches of the Valle de Hecho where we had excellent views of the brightly colored Yellowhammer and another glimpse of a White-throated Dipper. Despite several hours of dedicated scanning on the right cliffs, we could not find a Wallcreeper and it was questionable if the birds were present this year. Before we left the valley, we stopped at lower elevations where we found several Spotted Flycatchers and Common Redstarts. As we left the Pyrenees we stopped among

some arid hills where we soon found Cirl Buntings, one of which showed well in the scope. Yet, we were not finished for the day and detoured to a forested area dominated by mature beech trees where we saw the impressive Black Woodpecker in flight. We then carried on to our hotel for the night.

Spotless Starling by Stephan Lorenz

We set out for a long drive in the morning towards the conifer forest of Ordesa National Park. Our lengthy search for an Eurasian Pygmy-Owl was unsuccessful and some heavy rain interrupted our birding in the middle of the day. Yet, we enjoyed the mountain landscape and had views of many marmots and forest birds. We took a coffee break in a nearby town to avoid the worst of the weather and as we drove back into the mountains a Bearded Vulture at eye level was memorable.

Today we headed to the highest road-accessible elevation in Ordesa National Park. After breakfast, we drove to the small village of Nerin and met the bus to take us into the park. Unfortunately, the weather had other ideas and unseasonal, heavy snowfall prevented us from driving to the highest point. We

stopped a few kilometers short of our destination and some of us decided to hike up a gentle trail to try to reach the target species for the day. The landscape was stunning, but birds were thin on the ground. As we hiked back to the bus, we spotted some small birds flying in the distance and these proved to be a small flock of White-winged Snowfinches, successful at the last minute. We also had good views of a Dartford Warbler and displaying Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush further down. With the weather not improving we drove to the Lleida area where our local guide Jose took us to a nest of an Eurasian Penduline-Tit and an active Long-eared Owl nest with a large nestling. We also had great views of Mistle Thrush and a roosting Red-necked Nightjar. A great finish to a long but adventurous day.

Citril Finch by Stephan Lorenz

The final full day of the tour proved to be one of the most productive as we explored wetlands, plains, woodlands, and a mixture of habitats around Lleida. On our first stop at a wetland that protected a large reedbed, we struck gold with several Bearded Reedlings being very active and sitting atop reed stalks and picking seeds in the early morning light. We also had scope views of a singing Moustached Warbler here. From another lookout over the wetland, we had perched views of an Eurasian Golden Oriole. During a brief break, we watched several European Honey-buzzards that circled quite low above us. We worked our way through a valley that was bordered by short cliffs which held nesting

Eurasian Eagle-Owls and we scoped two adults and some youngsters. Here we also caught up with Stock Doves. At our lunch stop, we scoped an active nest of Eurasian Goshawk and a Black Wheatear sang nearby while the first Western Black-eared Wheatear was seen on a distant rock. After lunch, we carried on to a nearby site where we watched nesting Rock Sparrows and more Western Black-eared Wheatears. Eventually, it was time to drive toward Barcelona, but some last-minute information had us detouring a bit. The extra effort was worth it as we soon found the Red-footed Falcon we were after and the bird showed exceptionally well perched atop a bare tree for lengthy scope views, we even chanced upon another Little Bustard here plus plenty of bee-eaters and rollers. We arrived in Barcelona in time for a final, celebratory dinner and it proved particularly delicious.

Red-necked Nightjar by Stephan Lorenz

After an early breakfast, we headed to the coast nearby and started a productive sea watch from a small jetty. On the beach itself we studied several adult Audouin's Gulls and a Mediterranean Gull joined a mixed flock of terns just offshore, another wanted species for the morning. Cory's Shearwaters were present in good numbers and showed relatively close to the coast, while Balearic Shearwaters were seen further out. A single Northern Gannet was heading west and happily added to the trip list. Afterward, we headed to the nearby Delta del Llobregat where we enjoyed close studies of several familiar species from the bird blind. We then headed back to the hotel where the tour concluded at midday.

Trip List (239 species): https://ebird.org/tripreport/230443

Audouin's Gull by Stephan Lorenz

Yellowhammer by Stephan Lorenz

Iberian Lynx by Stephan Lorenz

Least Weasel by Stephan Lorenz