

## Tour Report

# Spain: Secret Wilderness of Extremadura

22 – 29 September 2018

Black-bellied sandgrouse



Little owl



Spanish imperial eagle



Bustard



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Tour Leader: John Muddeman with 5 participants

The landlocked region of Extremadura in western Spain is huge, formed by the country's two largest provinces. Almost exactly twice the size of Wales, it supports one of the lowest human population densities in western Europe and maintains a fine variety of habitats including large areas of agristeppe (agricultural treeless plains formed from the ancient removal of forest cover) and the famous *dehesa* (agricultural wood pasture). Both of these habitats are internationally renowned for their specialist bird communities, including, for example, great and little bustards and black-bellied and pin-tailed sandgrouse in the former, and a wider variety of species, including breeding raptors such as Spanish imperial eagle and cinereous vulture, in the latter. While autumn may not be the best time to visit for most of the summer visitors, it is still a fine time to come for some 'late summer' sun and to search for most of the resident species, as well as a smattering of migrants still passing through.

### **Day 1: Fly to Madrid & transfer to Trujillo**

**Saturday 22 September 2018**

*Weather: very hot & sunny, with a max. 37°C en route.*

*Today we transferred from Madrid to our guesthouse deep in the Extremaduran plains. We had lunch en route in the province of Toledo, and checked the huge Valdecañas reservoir.*

Meeting shortly after midday at Madrid airport, it was already getting warm, giving us a taste of what was to come – exceptionally hot weather almost throughout the tour. Once we'd gone through the formalities for the hire car, we were off, and plumped for a late lunch in a roadside service station (but with good Spanish food) once away from Madrid's grasp!

A good variety of typical local birds were visible as we continued westwards, including western cattle egret, a perched short-toed eagle, a western marsh harrier quartering low over some fields and a couple of common buzzards on posts. Our first proper stop – at a pool near the motorway – held a fine variety of species, including black-winged stilts, little ringed plovers, common and numerous green sandpipers, black-headed and a single lesser black-backed gull, two chasing common kingfishers, a few flighty Iberian magpies and several western yellow wagtails. Not a bad start at all!

Though remarkably empty, the huge Valdecañas reservoir also chipped in to our rapidly increasing bird list. A fly-by Eurasian hoopoe, and a migrant European pied flycatcher in some small trees beside the vehicle, were nice additions; however, it was too hot and the water too far away to be worth exploring further just here. But in a nearby weedy area alongside a track, a fine single tawny pipit and whinchat, a couple of European stonechats and several northern wheatears gave us our first views, and illustrating how migration was definitely underway. A couple of griffon vultures circled overhead too, as more western yellow wagtails fed around the feet of a small group of cows.

With time running on we headed down to our accommodation, arriving not long before dusk, and noting en route a good number of Moorish geckos – present for the rest of the week – already out on the walls of the porch as we met our hosts, Francisco and Pilar.

### **Day 2: Explore Extremadura**

**Sunday 23 September 2018**

*Weather: very hot & sunny; min. 22°C; max. 37°C.*

*A local day on the agristeppe and river valleys of the plains, comprising a drive along the Monroy road, with periodic stops en route, going for a later lunch at the Talavan reservoir and another smaller reservoir en route back.*

A small peregrine passed over as we left our accommodation, with a couple of Eurasian hoopoes and the first of a few Southern grey shrikes and common stonechats for the day on the fences just around the

entrance! A few more birds along the road included passing Iberian magpies and even a few Spanish sparrows near where a large colony is occupied in spring.

The first proper stop was at a small rise overlooking large areas of arable fields and grazed pseudosteppe – a good example of the agristeppe predominating here in Extremadura. Just as many birds are often first heard as seen here, with feisty northern wheatears almost immediately visible, chasing each other around in territorial battles on their migrating grounds (seemingly ridiculous in terms of the vast areas apparently available for them!). A few calandra larks ‘twizzled’ in the background, while a few corn buntings sat closer on fences for us to enjoy. A bubbling call then suddenly made us turn, as a couple of black-bellied sandgrouse flew over the back of an adjacent field before dropping out of sight. Another group came over later, heading to a drinking pool some way off, while a final two flew past giving slightly closer views and showed off their black bellies. Calls of a large flock of birds off in the distance led us to see a significant flock of pin-tailed sandgrouse in flight, though these all too quickly dropped down into dead ground on a valley side some way off. Finishing off this rich patch, a gorgeous little owl sat quietly in the shade of an old stone corral, almost perfectly mimicking its surroundings.

We continued watching as we proceeded, with a few more southern grey shrikes, and migrants including a couple of whinchats, two spotted flycatchers and also a late juvenile woodchat shrike of particular note. A well marked mallow skipper was a good find on the verge, with the first of a few common swallowtails for the week also noticed here. The still common crested lark was noticeable here too, which is present widely in the more open fields and plains.

Stopping by a bridge over the Río Almonte, we immediately noticed a few birds around, including a flock of red-legged partridges which spooked and dashed off downstream, and as we got out a mixed flock of Eurasian crag martins, common house martins and red-rumped swallows fed over the slope opposite, the former then coming down to the end of the bridge itself. The valley also acts as a natural corridor, particularly for raptors, and it was a treat when, in addition to a few griffon vultures, an adult Egyptian vulture circled up, keeping sufficient distance between it and an adult golden eagle also circling below it!

Although rather hot at our next stop, the panorama from a hide where we ate lunch gave a partial view of some exposed mud, with a good flock of northern lapwings, moderate numbers of little ringed plovers and grey herons, plus a few black-winged stilts visible. As we were finishing, an elegant juvenile black stork circled over before dropping down round the corner, and all the smaller birds suddenly flushed, apparently without reason, until a dark morph booted eagle was noted dropping in overhead! A short drive afterwards to look for the displaced birds gave us further views of the black stork, plus gadwall, a northern shoveler, Eurasian teal, a well grown family of great crested grebes, a couple of little egrets, and a range of waders. With single dunlin and common redshank, a few common snipe and at least ten common greenshank present, these rapidly boosted our lists even further, while a second black stork circled over as we left.

Despite the intense heat, we detoured off, not too long after commencing the return journey, driving down to and right across the middle of a small reservoir. On a track, of course! The huge number of dragonflies adorning the bushes beside the track were very impressive, with red-veined darters and violet dropwings in abundance, and ‘day glow’ adult male scarlet darters living up to their name!

Apart from a few more common greenshanks and green sandpipers, showing that good migration of these species was underway, very little else was present on the reservoir, and our attention switched to a couple of migrant spotted and two European pied flycatchers which were present in the bushes, though only the former showed well when sitting on a fence. We finally called it quits and headed back to the accommodation for a good rest (and the odd drink) before dinner.

*Weather: very hot & sunny, with min. 18.5°C & max. 37°C.*

*Other steppe areas and associated habitats to the south towards the Guadiana Depression, Campo Lugar area including agristeppe and pools, the Alcollarín reservoir and finishing in the (roasting!) Palazuelo rice fields.*

With the forecast continuing the same, we opted for earlier starts, with a 7am breakfast. Leaving around sunrise an hour later was great, meaning we journeyed in much fresher conditions (it was 'half' the temperature of the day before) and were quite soon out on the roadside in another vast swathe of agristeppe. Local knowledge often goes a long way, and indeed, just off to one side was a small group of fantastic great bustards stalking, albeit in very relaxed manner, through the gently waving grasses. Scanning in the opposite direction revealed a distant flock of birds feeding in a rather overgrazed field, though these sadly turned out to be Egyptian geese! A strong feral population is increasing rapidly in the region, helped by the numerous large reservoirs and even livestock drinking pools available across this otherwise rather dry landscape. A flock of eight Eurasian spoonbills flying in a low line as they dropped and approached a nearby reservoir were just as unexpected, but very welcome! Another flock of birds in passing were eight black-bellied sandgrouse, the first of 15 we saw in total during the morning. Another spot further up produced a remarkable observation as a huge adult female peregrine dropped onto the back of a western cattle egret in flight, bringing it to the ground, but when the local common ravens quickly waded in, the egret escaped and the peregrine was left to contemplate its lost meal as it sat and preened on a pile of rocks!

Working our way slowly along the road, and carefully so as to avoid the remarkable amount of school run vehicles passing along it, we added a few more birds, from western marsh harriers, northern wheatears and whinchats (again), to a few 'twisling' calandra larks and 'whee-oo-ing' crested larks in flight and, best of all, stopping for a fine male common stonechat, and a pair of roosting Eurasian stone-curlews which materialised 'from nowhere' just underneath.

Some small pools nearby were surprisingly quiet for birds, but a couple of Eurasian hoopoes, another European pied flycatcher or two, a brief western yellow wagtail and a few little egrets and ducks kept us busy. Another juvenile woodchat shrike was a good find in a very thistly field. We finally called it a day at this site and headed off for a well-earned drinks break.

Next stop was the large Alcollarín reservoir, though a quick stop was again called for en route when we spotted a couple of close red kites. Once stopped though, we noted at least seven, plus a western marsh harrier or two and a couple of griffon vultures. A high passing juvenile Spanish imperial eagle managed to evade being seen by the group, however!

Hundreds of Eurasian house martins were resting on and flying around the dam wall as we approached, while most of the birds on the other side on the water were little grebes. Well over 50 were present, and while this number was a surprise to most of the group, counts of over 1,000 have been made here in the past. A couple more Thekla's larks were seen as we drove along the access track, while near one 'tail' the first of three great egrets at the site was noted. We later saw this closer, but still not close enough to read the code on a large yellow colour ring it bore on one leg, which was a pity. A couple of cinereous vultures passed over with griffons, a single Eurasian sparrowhawk was noted and common buzzard too, highlighting the diversity of raptors in the region.

The receding water had left small areas of mud available for passing waders, and with a bit of effort we finally walked down a short way in the heat to get views of the best looking spot. Indeed, three Temminck's along with four little stints and at least one common ringed plover (amongst the little ringeds) were good sightings. A smaller, upper reservoir was rather quieter, but a common kingfisher sped as we arrived and some 'cagebird tweets' from bulrushes nearby, as we took our first look, were from a little group of common waxbills. The highlight was undoubtedly when we all spotted the head of a large male dog otter as it surfaced a few times while fishing before disappearing off into a side channel, complete with a large fish



in its mouth.

Lunch in the shade of some large western holm oaks was a treat, while an adult male lesser kestrel circling overhead was impossible for some to make out from the clear blue sky.

We finished with a visit down to the (now) extensive areas of rice fields near Palazuelo. A large flock of white storks circling off to one side was our first observation of the species, even though they were quite common amongst the paddies. With the harvest only just beginning, it was surprisingly tricky to find other birds, but eventually, by looking at where the few harvesters were (and associated tractors and trailers), we found a series of three adjacent pools which not only had been harvested, but also 'ploughed' in, leaving sloppy, wet and slightly furrowed mud behind. This was covered in birds, with abundant western cattle egret, black-headed and lesser black-backed gulls, plus plentiful grey heron, common snipe and black-winged stilt and a few ruff on the lower, plus smaller waders on the upper, pools. Two late sand martins also passed over, our only ones of the trip. After quickly noting common redshank and common greenshank as well, it was just so hot though, that after a quick look we beat a retreat and headed back to the guesthouse for a well-earned rest, leaving the site for an earlier and cooler exploration later in the week.

#### **Day 4: Explore Extremadura**

**Tuesday 25 September 2018**

*Weather: hot and sunny, with minimum 16°C en route and a max. 35.5°C*

*Our destination today was Monfragüe, though we paused en route too at the (dry) Río Almonte. We visited the castle first, then the Salto del Gitano, Villareal de San Carlos, had lunch at La Malavuelta, before heading to Portilla del Tiétar and returning via the Fuente del Francés.*

Driving out from our accommodation, we saw a number of the typical – and now familiar – birds of the immediate scrubby surroundings, including southern grey shrikes, Eurasian hoopoes, northern wheatears and single European stonechat, plus the huge group of Spanish sparrows up the road near the first farm.

We pressed on though, knowing that it was going to get hot again, stopping beside the Río Almonte; many of the rivers in the lowlands of Extremadura, such as this one, are temporary, drying out in large part during the summer. The wildlife is adapted to this, either migrating upstream during the wet winter and spring periods (such as fish), or moving out and aestivating during the summer and autumn dry period (e.g. reptiles and amphibians). With just one pool upstream from where we stood on the roadside, it didn't seem that much would be present, but a number of birds which are either resident or migrant breeders were present. Six northern lapwings looked a little out of place down amongst the stones beside the water, but we speculated that they were, perhaps, tired migrants which had dropped in for a drink and rest. A common sandpiper dashing about the rough rocky shore was more expected. A fine grey wagtail dropped down onto the dry riverbed below at one point, while a 'shreeping' rock sparrow bounced over, though quickly headed off into the dehesa.

With little else moving, we headed north again, driving part of the way up to Monfragüe Castle. Large numbers of Eurasian crag martins and red-rumped swallows flitted back and forth overhead, with the first griffon vultures passing over drawing comments of surprise from several members. To then discover that several were sat silently on the crags just above us was a further surprise, especially considering how difficult they were to find. Calling hawfinches passed over on a number of occasions, but were typically fast; only one or two stopped briefly in the trees, allowing us to try to see them perched. A couple of black redstarts and also two blue rock thrushes chasing across the crags also presented their difficulties, this being good (or not?!) neck exercise for most. We slowly walked up to the castle, most climbing up inside the old watch tower to gain 360-degree views over the impressive surroundings, enjoying the constant trickle of passing griffon vultures cruising along the ridge in the process. The main goal here was the scarce white-rumped swift, and sure enough, with persistence, we were finally rewarded with repeat sightings of up to four together as they sped around amongst the feeding martins and swallows. A small group of red deer nearly on top of the ridge opposite formed the bulk of those we saw during the day, even though we heard

ruttings stags intermittently almost throughout.

We finally called time here, dropping back down and moving round to the famous Salto del Gitano viewpoint. Griffon vultures passing low in front and low overhead made a terrific start, but were far from all that we saw. A high-flying black stork circled, almost together, with a pale morph booted eagle downstream; a few cinereous vultures were cruising the peak and, after a good wait, the local peregrine pair put in a short flying display. Just round the corner we enjoyed standing in the shade watching some of the smaller birds too. A stunning male black redstart fed below us amongst the rocks and, while looking for this, we latched onto a smart male rock bunting too, both giving wonderful prolonged views. A few blue rock thrushes added to the diversity, with calling Eurasian blue tit, short-toed treecreeper and common chaffinches heard as well.

Time had really run on though, so we headed for Villareal and, after a relaxing comfort break and drink, continued through the park to look for somewhere pleasant for lunch. One viewpoint was lacking sufficient shade, but nearby under the cover of some pines, a shaded wooden picnic table clearly had our name written on it and made a perfect stop. Picnics mean being out and so seeing things, and this spot was no exception. A couple of European crested tits were probably the highlight, but a male Sardinian warbler, a small flock of long-tailed tits, a furtive willow warbler and a calling great spotted woodpecker were all noted as well.

After advancing further again, this time to get supplies of cold water, we headed for another important viewpoint, despite intense heat. The griffons provided the bulk of the fun, but a Eurasian jay was noted as it flapped across the river and a fine male red deer stag was watched in the scope as it lay, bellowing, in the deep shade of an oak.

It was time to return. We watched, along with a few other people, a natural spring in the shade under species-rich Mediterranean scrub and woodland. A near-constant procession of small birds were coming down to drink, including great tits, Eurasian blue tits, long-tailed tits, European robins, blackcaps, common blackbirds and, as the main 'prize', a small number of hawfinches. With both adults and juveniles of the latter it was a great opportunity to look at the variation in plumage they display, even if the best little group was flushed by a red deer hind which came in to drink as well.

With temperatures well into the 30s again, we headed back to our accommodation for a relaxing late afternoon again.

#### **Day 5: Explore Extremadura**

**Wednesday 26 September 2018**

*Weather: hot and sunny, with min. 20.5°C and a max. 34°C. Afternoon storms just to the north made it windier and a little cloudier than before*

*Another agristeppe day starting near Trujillo and moving on to take a better look at the Palazuelo and Madrigalejo rice fields, passing the Embalse de Sierra Brava before returning early to our accommodation. A late afternoon excursion to enjoy the old town of Trujillo.*

With the temperature holding up a little more than hoped overnight, it was good to start early again out on the open agristeppe. The first, provisionally very short, stop to take a first scan of the area turned into a much longer one than expected due to the sheer numbers of small birds around. Thekla's and crested larks, common stonechats, whinchats, southern grey shrike, Iberian magpies, corn buntings and, perhaps most unusual of all, a small flock of little bustards distantly in flight heading south, passing in front of the walled town of Trujillo as they did so, all kicked off a great start to the day. Small flocks of spanish sparrows were moving around the dehesa beside the road, finally providing us with good views.

A nearby track was rich too, even if we had to wait for some of its denizens to appear from the apparently lifeless fields. Two great bustards walked serenely through the grasses, another flying powerfully across

later just before we left, though 'bubbling' black-bellied sandgrouse were first picked up on their distinctive call, before a few different flocks were noted in flight moving around the area. A good wait ensued while we tried to hear (and so locate) the local pin-tailed sandgrouse, though these were one of the last birds we saw at the site – a good group flying in and having the courtesy to stop ahead of us on the upslope of a large arable field. Moving forward to get a little closer also revealed another treat though, with a flock of 18 little bustards scattered across another field beside us. With two groups of pin-tailed sandgrouse flying around trying to come down to the water in a large livestock drinking pool as we watched, it make for an excellent finale to our stop here.

We next headed down to the palazuelo rice fields in order to 'beat the heat'. A dark morph booted eagle was a good raptor to spot when we could take our eyes off the numerous gulls and waders in the paddies. Indeed, after finding a shady spot under some of the very few tall trees present in the area it was worth taking the time to make some counts. 140 black-winged stilts, seven common ringed plover, 25+ little ringed plover, a notable 22 Kentish plover, almost 50 ruff, small numbers of dunlin, little stint, green sandpiper, common redshank, 12 wood sandpiper, three spotted redshank and 11 common greenshank would make a decent haul anywhere, but especially so here in Extremadura, deep in the southern Spanish meseta! Four Eurasian tree sparrows also made a good complement as they perched in view in a small fig.

Naturally, such variety took time to look through and time was running on, so we headed for a comfort stop in a local village before continuing and working our way through more rice fields near Madrigalejo. It took a little while to find an adequate shaded spot for lunch, but we chose the end of a track near a road with a few tall trees and with space on the edge of an irrigation channel to sit. This was an 'anywhere will do' spot, but since we had watched a very, very late common swift shear down beside us as it tried to drink from a big irrigation canal shortly before we arrived, then watched both three barn swallows and a juvenile western osprey go past separately on active migration, it worked out rather well.

Mid-afternoon, when it's hot, is never the best time to look for wildlife, but the drive through yet more rice fields and past a very large (and almost barren) reservoir, illustrated just how intensively agricultural appropriate land can be here, and returning early towards our accommodation for a break required two stops were for large raptors. First, a fine 'chessboard' immature spanish imperial eagle circled up – shadowed by a red kite – before dropping away and, fortunately, down onto a visible patch of grassy steppe. Despite the distance, with the telescope it could be seen perched on a small pile of stones for a few moments before taking off and coming much closer towards us and then circling higher and higher until eventually disappearing. Secondly, another short roadside stop was required to enjoy a fine short-toed eagle perched on a nearby pylon, this giving us better views than one we'd seen from the moving vehicle earlier on in the day when we couldn't pull over!

With thick cloud *just* to the north threatening rain, associated strong winds were noticeable and helped keep the temperature down somewhat. It also meant that a walk later in the afternoon around old Trujillo was an even more enjoyable experience. One party member also managed to spot a lone pallid swift over the square, hawking amongst the numerous Eurasian crag and common house martins!

## **Day 6: Explore Extremadura**

**Thursday 27 September 2018**

*Weather: quite hot and sunny, with a minimum 18.5°C and maximum of 32.5°. A windy start and end to the day, with very light cloud p.m.*

*Embalse de Arrocampo, Tagus Bridge, Valdecañas Dam for lunch, and return through Monfragüe.*

The combination of sunny and windy conditions are about the worst possible for visiting wetlands with dense fringing vegetation, but it just had to be this morning and the forecast looked okay. Arriving not long after sun up, it was breezier than hoped, but almost the very first bird we spotted after arriving was a gorgeous black-winged kite perched on a roadside pylon. This then flew down onto a lower fence post, affording excellent views in the scope, showing us that it was busy eating a vole or other small 'victim'. A few passing western jackdaws were the first for most of the group.

We worked our way around a few different spots of the reservoir, with ducks – including a few northern shoveler and an unexpectedly early northern pintail – put up in flight by a hunting western marsh harrier. A small group of flighty common waxbills dropped into some bulrushes in front to feed for those lucky enough to have a gap through the vegetation to see one or two of them. A western osprey perched atop a distant pylon, while a tight flock of Eurasian teal sprang up from the depths of the bulrush beds at another. Perhaps because of a few fishermen disturbing the site, it was still rather quiet, but we managed views of a few more of the special birds, including a fine squacco heron, two great egrets in flight, a fine 'V' of seven Eurasian spoonbills passing over for a few of us who drove, rather than walked, part of the route, a flight view of purple swamphen and two brief late migrant barn swallows. Small birds were hard to spot given the moving vegetation, though a couple of dainty willow warblers fed at close range in the now leafless wild fennel. Several little bitterns and a squealing water rail were heard, but refused to show.

A drinks and comfort break was well earned. A long dark mammal scampering across the road and seen for a brief moment as we left the site was an Egyptian mongoose, rather than an otter. We made an exploratory trip immediately after the break to check out a site for an interesting bird. It was hot under the sun as we walked down a short section of old road, but with persistence we were all able to see at least some of the large group of alpine swifts which has colonised the expansion joints under a huge bridge. A fine Eurasian sparrowhawk passing low overhead was a bonus.

We quite quickly moved on again though, to a shady and very quiet roadside in a nearby narrow valley, and this formed a suitable lunch spot for our picnic. With a constant movement of raptors passing over, these mainly being griffon vultures, it kept us alert throughout, though the small birds here weren't at all lacking either. An exquisite firecrest flicked through a nearby western holm oak, a European pied flycatcher fed close beside us in the scrub for a minute or two and hawfinches squeaked and also 'ticked' as they passed rapidly over, the latter inviting confusion with the calling European robin nearby.

A raised viewpoint nearby afforded us views over the impressive Valdecañas dam, though very few birds were on offer, so we decided to detour back via Monfragüe, though concentrated on the main viewpoint opposite Peñafalcón. Here we finished off the day with an extended look in order to contemplate the enormous and amazing number of griffon vultures present, wheeling, often low down, overhead and indeed almost everywhere else around. Passing red-rumped swallows and Eurasian crag martins, plus a couple of flighty male blue rock thrushes, kept the photographers busy, but just watching hundreds of these enormous raptors cruising round was a truly memorable sight and a fitting end to the day.

## **Day 7: Explore Extremadura**

**Friday 28 September 2018**

*Weather: quite hot and sunny, with minimum 17°C and a maximum of 33°C.*

*A good walk through Dehesa to the Embalse del Tozo, followed by lunch with views near Cabañas del Castillo and a return across the Belén Plain.*

Following calls from a few of the group for a little more walking, we headed straight towards a small river and reservoir deep in the dehesa to walk during the coolest part of the day. This was terrific, though it was surprising just how hot the sun felt at times, even before we started the walk back. A fine red-legged partridge as we left the guesthouse was our best sighting of the week of this surprisingly colourful bird.

A few small birds kicked off the interest, including corn buntings, crested larks and common stonechats, while the fluting song of the first of several singing woodlarks could be heard floating over the trees. Lots of dragonflies were present along the little river, though we looked at these more on the return, with a couple of green sandpipers rising up noisily before heading off downstream. A red fox rushing off from thicker cover near the river was a good spot, and repeated the experience on our return several hours later.

The reservoir itself was rather low, but had attracted a fine range of species, despite low numbers of most.



On the open water an Egyptian goose, gadwall, Eurasian teal and northern shoveler were all present, along with a couple of little grebes. At least 13 grey herons formed a fine sight, especially when most perched in trees at the back at one point; two little egrets fed in the shallows and a black stork flew low over as well. Black-winged stilts, northern lapwing, plentiful little ringed plover, common snipe, green sandpipers and single spotted redshank and common greenshank again formed a rich suite of waders. Colour in the surroundings was added by a common kingfisher speeding past, a few Eurasian hoopoes flitting through the dehesa plus some European goldfinches feeding on thistles, while other small birds included a few spotted and European pied flycatchers, European robin and long-tailed tits amongst the trees.

As the sun and temperature rose, so did a few raptors, with a couple of cinereous vultures marking the turning point and commencement of our walk back. The migrant hawkers, red-veined and common darters plus violet dropwings as we returned were fun to watch!

We drove on into some nearby mountains for lunch. After a quite hot, but short, walk up through a tiny village, we came out, but into shade, behind a huge rock outcrop to wonderful views over the Sierra de Las Villuercas mountains. With pink merendera flowers sprouting out from the nearly bare ground at our feet and a cooling breeze, and with plenty of rocks and ledges to sit on, it made a superb lunch spot. There were relatively few birds about, but a couple of Alpine and white-rumped swifts were seen amongst the much more numerous martins and red-rumped swallows, and a fine singing contest was provided by two rival blue rock thrushes sitting off to one side in the sun at one point. Sardinian warbler, common blackbird, spotless starlings, black redstart and a few others were also all noted to add diversity, while another fine (and very blue) blue rock thrush sang from a rooftop as we departed.

The drive back across the sun-scorched Belén Plain was, not surprisingly very (very) quiet, though a few whinchats on the fences and northern wheatears in the fields provided a little distraction. Again we returned reasonably early to avoid the worst of the heat and also to give everyone a little extra time for packing.

Not that this was the last of the day's activities though. Immediately following dinner, most of us jumped into the vehicle and went for a night drive. While I had warned that we might see nothing, there was a hope for perhaps a new bird or mammal or two for the trip. And almost immediately we struck gold. There, right in the middle of the road, was a fine red-necked nightjar, which with a careful approach gave us terrific views in the headlights of the van and only flew off when I had to move forward as another vehicle approached from behind. Not only that, but just as we were all watching it, a western hedgehog trundled across the road just a metre or so behind it. A fine double to round off a super day, and though we saw nothing else despite a short drive around afterwards, we were more than satisfied.

## **Day 8: Fly back to the UK**

**Saturday 29 September 2018**

*Weather: quite hot, from 16°C, to 31°C in Madrid*

*A pre-breakfast excursion for local agristeppe birds, followed by a late breakfast. We dropped off two clients in Trujillo then returned to Madrid via lunch in El Pardo Park on the outskirts of the city.*

With two members of the party staying on for a few more days in the region, we decided to take an early morning run out to the nearby agristeppe to see what we could find. This was a great move again, with good numbers of the typical small birds present, including the 'usual' whinchats, common stonechats, feisty northern wheatears, a passing tawny pipit, a little owl (with another back at the guesthouse), 'twisling' calandra and whistling crested larks, plus a good flock of pin-tailed and a couple of black-bellied sandgrouse in flight and even a great bustard not far off.

Bidding our farewells to our hosts, we headed for Trujillo, before starting the journey back to Madrid. After a short comfort stop part way, and noting good numbers of griffon and cinereous vultures en route, we headed to a large park in the outskirts of Madrid. While this was principally to have lunch at a pleasant spot,

the large numbers of people meant no tables were free, though we still found spots to sit on a fence nearby, fortunately without too much bother from the large number of wasps and even the odd hornet that were around. Despite the people and proximity to Madrid, the site is good for Spanish imperial eagle and we weren't disappointed. Indeed, up to six different birds were present, albeit at distance, with adults, subadults and at least one juvenile present, giving good views in the scope. A male lesser spotted woodpecker calling from some trees nearby even had the decency to then fly cross in front just as we were about to leave, bringing the trip to a fine end.

We headed to the airport, where I said my farewells at the end of a terrific early autumn break.