

Central Spain, 13-17 May, 1999, Ian Reid and Steve Young



I first suggested the idea of a long weekend in Spain to old university mate and fellow birder Steve Young in early March. Although at that stage I had no particular knowledge of good sites or even a comprehensive check-list of species, it seemed like a good opportunity given that I would be in Madrid later that month for work. I had begun with a vague plan of driving all the way to Coto Donana, but a little research suggested that I was better off visiting Monfrague Natural Park in Extremadura, which turned out to be only two hours' drive from Madrid, and less than an hour from colleague Pablo Bustos' new place just west of Caceres. A little more reading of trip reports and I had compiled a handy list of sites and likely and possible species.

Steve was initially very keen, but ultimately decided that he would rather save the holiday and money for another occasion, perhaps aiming for the "optimal" time of mid-May. I filed this away, but really expected little would come of it.

After a week's work in Madrid in late March, I had some time off and drove to Extremadura for two and a half days, during which I collected such goodies as Black Vulture, Black-shouldered Kite, Eurasian Eagle Owl, Great and Little Bustard, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, and a handful of other species that would have been lifers for Steve (Azure-winged Magpie, Griffon Vulture, Spotless Starling, ...). He was thoroughly gripped by my tale, perhaps regretting that he had chosen not to come, and I enjoyed his twisted frustrated reaction each time I casually slipped in another potential lifer into the conversation.

"It's a shame you missed Calandra Lark"

"Did I say I missed it? No - I had cracking views - fabulous little bird!"

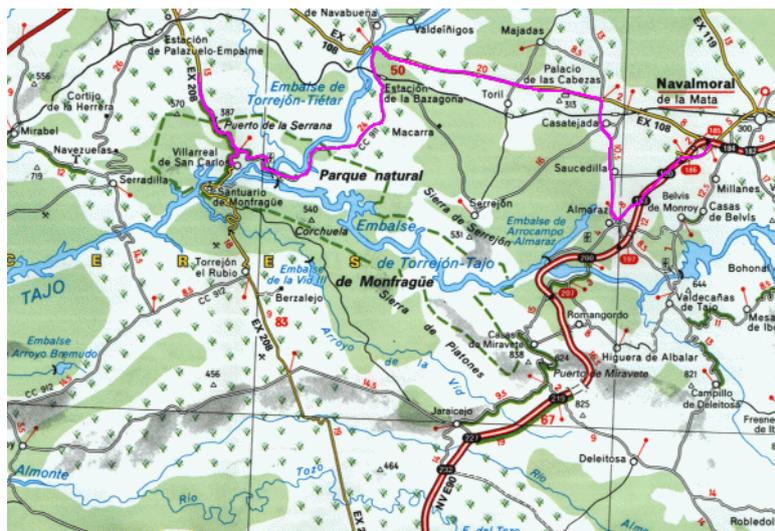
"UArrrrg!!"

Although this was perversely amusing, birding alone had been disappointing for the fact that there was no one else to share the experience with. I was also aware that I had dipped on a lot of stuff - including my number one target, the biggy of the region, Spanish Imperial Eagle and other crackers such as Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and Black Wheatear - through having only one pair of relatively inexperienced eyes. This certainly cost me in terms of raptor identification.

Birding with someone else would greatly increase the chances of finding these and other goodies, so I was really pleased (and slightly surprised given my earlier scepticism) that Steve's appetite was sufficiently whet by my report that we "gened up" some more on the area (see references below) and set a definite plan in motion for a mid-May trip.



Thursday 13th May



A very early rise in Oxford was necessary in order to get our 8am flight, and then after nearly three quarters of an hour's wait for our luggage at Madrid airport, we located the hire car company and collected our car. The Citroen Saxo 1.0L that we had booked (National/Atesa) for a very reasonable 22 quid per day was unavailable and we were

upgraded to a 1.6i Seat Cordoba, with much more room, air-conditioning, and a bit more poke! - our first stroke of luck in a streak that lasted most of the trip. We drove immediately around the M40 (feeling rather at home with this particular road number) and to the N5 south-west towards Extremadura, along the way Steve having his first tick, **Spotless Starling** - these were a common sight throughout. We had also noted **House Sparrow**, **White Stork**, **Black Kite** and **Cattle Egret** by the time we pulled off the N5 at Navalmoral at about 2.30 (just under two hours from Madrid) for a beer and some food.

Almaraz Marsh (Emablse de Arrocampo)

Our plan from Navalmoral was to head towards Monfrag^{ue} via the marshes on the road between Almaraz and Saucedilla mentioned in the [trip report](#) by J. van der Woude. The site was easily located and consisted of a causeway running through an area of open water surrounded by reeds, within spitting distance of the local nuclear power plant. What is it with these excellent wetlands near nuclear power facilities - Minsmere, Dungeness, Almaraz...? Perhaps it has something to do with the hymn "All things bright and beautiful": *...each little bird that sings: He made their glowing colours...!*

We pulled the car off the road at the southern edge of the causeway for a recce and almost immediately Steve picked up a **Marsh Harrier** which we watched operating over the reeds on the East side of the road. A single **Cormorant** was swimming about in the vicinity and soon after a **Purple Heron** glided in, the first of several seen here. This was a promising start, but the strong blustery wind and lack of a decent (safe!) vantage point - cars and trucks were not frequent, but did bomb along the road at some speed - meant that the birding conditions were not ideal. Also at this southern end a family of **Great Tits** was active, and we heard a **Great Reed Warbler** close to the road, but it was keeping low, out of the wind, and out of sight; brief, unsatisfactory glimpses were obtained as it shot off across the road, and returned a short while later.

Although neither Steve nor I "needed" either Crekla Lark (as we christened the hard-to-



separate pair of Crested and Thekla), we came on this trip armed with info from HBI and the new Collins Bird Guide and determined to ensure definitive ID of both species. We decided that the "local" birds were Crested and Steve went off in search of a photo of one while I scanned the far edges of the reed-beds hoping for Little Bittern - but without luck. Meanwhile, although unsuccessful

in his quest for a **Crested Lark** photo, Steve did manage to get a couple of pics of **Black Kite**, the first of hundreds of these birds seen.

With only three full days of birding, plus this afternoon and Monday morning, it was necessary to adopt a somewhat tick-and-rush approach. However on several occasions during the trip we found that a little patience in sticking around at a site often reaped dividends. Despite the unpromising conditions here, our patience was eventually handsomely rewarded. With the help of the wind dropping slightly, we gradually located most of the birds we had hoped to see. We finally got good views of a Great Reed at the northern edge of the causeway, along with **Fan-tailed** and **Cetti's Warblers**, and while Steve was trying to photograph the Great Reed, which obligingly sat up high, singing, some movement down in the reeds attracted my attention. We both quickly focused in on the large bright red bill and frontal plate and glossy purple plumage of a **Purple Swamphen**, well out of the breeding range reported in most books, but consistent with van der Woude's trip report from last year.

Crossing the road to the north-western edge of the causeway where there was a more open area picnic-come-car-parking area, we both exclaimed at once as a gorgeous male **Little Bittern** burst from the reeds a few metres in front of us and flew away across the road to settle near where we had been moments earlier. We had two or three sightings of Little Bittern over the next 45 minutes, probably the same bird shuttling back and forth across the road.

Here, also, we saw our first **Bee-eaters** of the trip; about half a dozen were hawking from the electricity wires nearby, along with a couple of **Southern Grey Shrike**. Despite the wind, we both thought that we could hear occasional snatches of a *locustella* sp. reeling. It was possible that a lone fisherman might have been the culprit until we saw his reel stationary while simultaneously hearing the song, and after some time we became reasonably satisfied that it was a **Savi's Warbler**. We searched extensively but ultimately fruitlessly, although a pair of **Reed Warblers** was heard and then seen briefly.

While scanning the most likely direction for the Savi's, the Little Bittern landed in the vicinity and Steve had scoped views of the cracker. Sadly it had slunk down low by the time I got my scope sorted, however I was able to get good views of two more Purple Gallinule which were discovered in the same little patch, stalking through the reeds and eventually out into the open.

Other birds noted here were **White Stork**, **Grey Heron** and **Moorhen**

The road to Monfrague



We left the marsh at about 5.30 and headed up to the EX108 and then left just before the Rio Tietar onto the CC911 which leads into Monfrague from the north-east. Along the way we had our first **Azure-winged Magpies**, which were common from here on. We also saw many **Bee-eaters**, our first **Woodlarks** and **Woodchat Shrikes** and several flocks of **Serin** (a tick for me). At one point we stopped at a bridge over a little stream and were delighted to hear three **Nightingales** singing, and

even obtained brief views of one. We also had our first of several cuckoos here. As I took a slash off the bridge (thinking of the joke about Vivian Richards and Joel Garner: "Water's cold, eh Joel?", "Mmm, deep too!") I saw the blue streak of a Kingfisher as it shot underneath me and off upstream.



We stopped again just after entering the park and Steve heard (and briefly saw) a **Hawfinch** - a species which was sadly to elude me all trip :-(. From here we could see the top of the cliff face at Mirador de Portadilla Tietar, and scoped our first **Griffon Vultures**, also a common sight henceforth.

Mirador de Portadilla Tietar

MdPT is a well known Eagle Owl site - I had seen an adult on consecutive evenings here in March - and while the Embalse de Arrocampo had provided excellent birding (including four lifers for me), the incredibly impressive Eurasian Eagle Owl was our only major "target" bird for this first day. We had arrived in plenty of time before sunset and chatted for a while with a couple of other British birders, similarly staking it out for Eagle Owl. With almost an hour before sunset we decided there was sufficient time to drive to the campsite, pitch our tent, and be back before the best of the action - if there was to be any!

The campsite is located on the road north to Plasencia and our drive there took a good 20 minutes along the winding roads, often bordered by frightening drops down into the Rio

Tajo gorge. It turned out to be clean and quiet, and home to many **Azure-winged Magpies**, which Steve attempted to photograph as I (orally) inflated my air-matress. This accomplished (and the resulting light-headedness banished), we returned to MdPT to find that the British birders had been joined by another English couple and some Germans but had not seen any activity as yet.



Our small group of ten or so now scanned the cliff face for the next 30 minutes until a flurry of excited chatter in German behind me indicated that someone had located our quarry. We scanned with renewed enthusiasm in the general direction but could not see what they were looking at, and for a terrible minute it crossed both of our minds that they weren't going to share the gen with us. But the thin, wizened old chap who had found it, then generously went around setting first the English couple's, and then my scope on to it. Even so I had to look hard, but eventually picked up on what looked for all the world to me like a shaggy, grey, haystack with eyes ("Cousin It!") - an **Eagle Owl** chick. Steve pointed out a second just to the right on the same ledge and we watched these curious creatures with amazement for several minutes. As they became more active and stretched their impressive almost fully fledged wings, the overall downy look that had struck me initially, disappeared. Soon they were both making short flights, following each other along the cliff face.

After about 45 minutes with it becoming increasingly dark we realised we would not see an adult tonight; only a very minor disappointment. However before the light had completely gone, one of the English birders picked up the silhouette of a **nightjar sp.** to the right of the cliff face. Two or three flew in and out of view on stiff wings, living up to their field-guide description as paper gliders.

As we drove away, a few hundred metres down the road, Steve stopped and pointed to something on the road. I grabbed my bins and located what he was looking at but found it impossible through the layers of dust and flattened insects on the windscreen to turn the blurry blob into anything. However as Steve edged the car forward for a better view we were amazed to see another nightjar fly up through the headlights and away. Although excited by this find, I could not escape a sinking feeling that this may have been Red-necked (reputedly prevalent in the park) and we had just missed our best chance of seeing it.

Amazingly, however, another appeared in the headlights after just a few hundred more metres. Steve jumped out to approach on foot and avoid the reflections caused by looking through the windscreen. I moved over to the driver's seat, and as he beckoned me

on, I moved slowly forward keeping it in the headlights as it pecked away at insects on the road, its retina reflected back brilliantly in the high-beam. This time we had enough time to study it closely. However despite this opportunity our conclusion that night (and in an older version of this report) of European Nightjar was in retrospect almost certainly wrong.

Mirador de Bascula

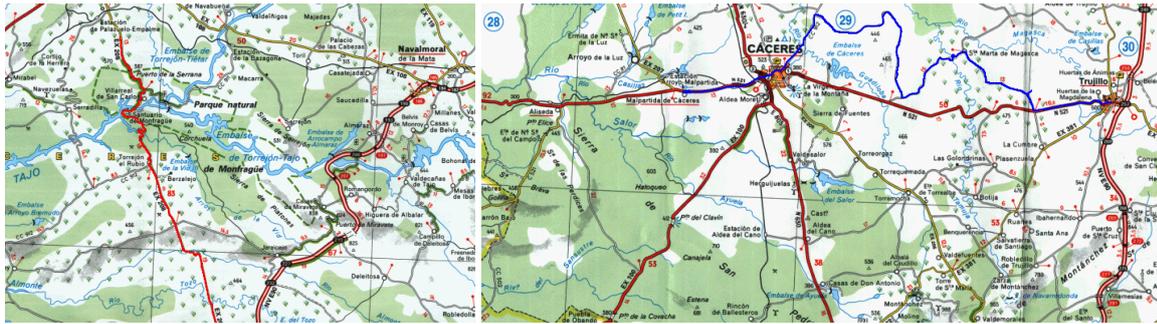
The road back to the campsite took us past Mirador de Bascula, famed as *the* lookout in Monfrague to a regular Spanish Imperial Eagle nest site. I had not seen any evidence of this on my March trip, and sadly, information I obtained from John Muddeman (a Brit based in Madrid who runs bird tours to Extremadura) suggested that this year the nest is not in use. By the time we passed MdB, it was completely dark, but one other species reported here (Gosney, p30) was Red-necked Nightjar. It could possibly be worth listening for, so we decided to stop for a few minutes just in case.

Initially all was silent. However in preparation for the trip, I had spent a couple of hours in the Alexander Library in the Zoology Dept with Roche's 2 CD set of European bird-song, recording songs I wanted to learn onto a laptop computer. I had transferred the digital recordings of one or two - including Red-necked Nightjar - to tape, and now, as an experiment we decided it would be interesting to see what effect playing my tape of it would have 🗣️. Since neither of us had ever used tapes before, nor did we even know if there would be a bird within earshot, we had no idea what to expect.

We opened the car door, turned up the volume, and ran the tape through for a few bursts. Incredibly, through the still night, our crackling, slightly distorted recording was answered with wing-clapping. We ran the tape through for another burst, and this time, after more clapping we heard the slightly electronic answering song of a **Red-necked Nightjar**. Despite this success I was rather surprised when Steve suggested we grab a torch and go looking for it. As it continued to call in short bursts unprompted, I rather skeptically followed Steve across the road and over a low fence towards the sound. He swung the torch around for a few minutes, apparently more in bizarre hope than with any real plan or expectation, until, as we were on the verge of abandoning the search, he caught the flash of a brilliantly reflected retina. Alerting me, he somehow managed to follow it with the beam, simultaneously viewing with bins for about 10 seconds. Almost immediately I was able to lock on as well, catching it sweeping up and over swift-like, its eye reflecting back brightly, before its agile hawking for insects escaped the torch beam.

Elated we walked back to the car and on to a celebratory beer in a little bar in Villarreal de San Carlos, then to another at the campsite. This was accompanied by some stale bread and foul smelling Jamon, the best the restaurant could do at 11pm - and just about the only downside to an otherwise fantastic day.

Friday 14th May



With the Spanish Imperial Eagle nest site at Mirador de Bascula apparently not in use for the first time in about 10 years, we had decided before we came that our best chance for *the* main target of the trip was in the Sierra de San Pedro south of Caceres where I had obtained cracking views and photos of Black Vulture in March. Some English birders we met at Almaraz Marsh had expressed surprise that we hoped to find one in such a short time. They had indeed seen several in that area, but while *walking* for several days in the mountains. They were of the opinion that we would be extremely lucky to connect with one in the time we had available.

However while waiting for Eagle Owl at MdPT, we had been chatting with other English birders who had given us some gen on an alternative site for SIE south of Monfrague. They had seen one flying about there mid-morning Thursday. Our plan for today was thus formed: check out this site and hopefully get SIE on the list, back to Monfrague for the middle of the day, then make our way down to Pablo's place in Malpartida de Caceres.

With no pressing need for a sparrow-fart rise (and yesterday had been rather long!) we had a leisurely start to the day, and headed south from the campsite. As we crossed the Rio Tajo we stopped on the bridge to admire the view, scan for raptors, and to check out the huge numbers of hirundines and swifts bombing about. Amongst the many **House** and **Crag Martins** we found several **Red-rumped Swallows** and a few fabulous **Alpine Swifts**.

Soon, however, we were on our way, past the impressive Penafalcon rock (to which we returned later in the day), and to the area described to us last night. After one false start we found the track they had mentioned and followed it for a short time, until scanning from the car as we drove along slowly I noticed a large, dark raptor perched a great distance away. Setting up our scopes we observed a huge dark eagle sitting with its back to us. Although the nape was clearly pale, we could not see any distinct white on the shoulders. I was excited nevertheless - surely this had to be **Spanish Imperial** - and I was prepared to tick this view if it came to it. Through the 40x eyepiece I made out what appeared to be a small, indistinct white patch on the left shoulder, but the distance meant that it was impossible to be absolutely sure it was there and not an illusion induced by my eagerness. We decided to drive on a bit since it seemed the track might take us closer for a better view.

A few hundred metres on we stopped again as the track was now apparently taking us further away, and we walked a short distance through the trees to obtain a view through to where we thought it was. We relocated it without difficulty and now had a much clearer view at a range of c. 700m. It made an impressive sight, particularly when it occasionally turned its head in profile and we could now clearly see its powerful bill, straw nape, and a small but distinct white patch on the left shoulder; but nothing like as much white as we had been expecting from our field guides.

We watched for about 20 minutes, then Steve nipped back to the car to get his note book to make a sketch. While he was sketching, I wandered about trying to locate a **Turtle Dove** which was purring from a nearby tree (no joy), but on returning realised that the eagle had left its perch. We frantically scanned and picked it up soaring nearby. We could now see the white on the leading edge of the wing, the straight trailing edge and thin tail. It rose higher until almost directly overhead then stooped at a shallow angle at great speed from right to left across us - perhaps heading in for a kill.

When Steve finished his various sketches we wandered back to the car. A **Woodlark** sang and gave excellent views in flight and from the top of a tree, and Steve tracked down a slightly squeaky call and identified its perpetrator as a juvenile **Rock Sparrow**, a tick for both of us but rather overshadowed by my first *Aquila* ever.

Monfrague

After some bread and jam (purchased this morning at the campsite shop) we drove back to Monfrague and up the track to the Castillo. Perched on the cliff-face behind the castle we scanned the river valley below. Not much was about - after all it was midday now - but we noted **House Martins**, and a pair of **Black Kites** below us, and our first **Blue Rock Thrush** of the trip appeared on a ledge about 20m away.



Rock Thrush, as opposed to its dark cousin (which both of us had seen in Menorca, Steve in 1997, me in 1998) would have been a lifer for both of us, but most of our references were strangely silent about it. On returning to the carpark from the Castillo we met up with some more English birders who were on a trip from Portugal up through Spain, and the subject of Rock Thrush came up. They claimed to have heard one singing by Penafalcon the previous evening, which seemed encouraging, and consistent with our feeling that this was good habitat for it.

They then climbed the steep steps up to the castle, and, rather than shooting off immediately, we set up our scopes looking along the ridge behind the carpark. A **Blue**

Rock Thrush flitted back and forth from view a few times, perhaps the same bird we had seen just on the other side of the ridge. Then another dark bird which didn't quite fit BRT appeared tantalisingly on a boulder about 30m away but disappeared to the far side of a rock before we had enough on it. Perhaps this was a **Black Wheatear**? In trying to get a different viewing angle Steve was gradually drawn further along the ridge and eventually out of sight, while I stayed with the scopes and kept my eyes on the area we had seen it. After 15min another dark passerine zipped across my line of sight and this time I clearly saw the "white-arse". This was enough for a tick - I had been hoping for this little bastard the whole time I was here in March too - but I was willing it out into the open for a better



view. This must have worked, because a few seconds later it zipped back and perched on top the the rock where I had my scope trained! Although I couldn't see where Steve was, I tried discreetly to attract his attention in case he hadn't seen it yet. Having done my best to alert him without disturbing the bird (I didn't know whether it had worked or not) I now observed the male **Black Wheatear** sitting in full view, occasionally moving about, showing off its white rump to good effect. Steve returned having also seen it,

and managed a photo! As he clambered over the last of rocks back to the carpark a pair of **Rock Buntings** flew to within a few metres.

We now descended the bumpy track from the castle down to Penafalcon where we had excellent views of the huge numbers of **Griffon** which are constantly taking off, landing and soaring about the rock. Below us a thrush was singing, and Steve trekked off in search, hoping for Rock. He was unsuccessful in his quest, and indeed we ended the trip not having seen this species, nor really knowing how widespread or common it is. [Later research has suggested that although occasionally encountered in Monfrague, it is much more prevalent in the higher mountains such as Sierra de Gredos (see my report from June 2000)]



While Steve followed various little foot-tracks through the bush in his vain hunt, I wandered along the road and noted Red-rumped Swallow, more Crag Martins and another Rock Bunting. Scoping what looked like a small cave, I was amazed to see a Black Stork standing next to a nest. A Black Redstart completed the list of good birds here

before our hunger dictated that we make a move to Trujillo for some much needed and well deserved lunch.

Trujillo-Caceres

Lunch in Trujillo at 4pm was late even by Spanish standards, and although nice and relatively cheap, took a while to arrive. I had promised Steve that we could sit out and watch **Lesser Kestrels** hawking around the old town square, but it was actually closer to 5pm when we saw our first, followed by a few more, but no great numbers. While I wandered off to phone Pablo to announce our impending arrival this evening, Steve made a few notes of our exploits to date. Two answering machine messages later I was still unsure if Pablo knew to expect us, but it was time to hit the road again.

Next stop after Trujillo was the pair of tracks just off the road to Santa Marta de Magasca where I had seen Black-bellied Sandgrouse quite easily in March. Stopping at the turnoff we immediately noticed a chunky pale-brown bird drop down into some rocks. I correctly picked this as a **Little Owl**, the first of our trip. Obliging it flew up to a nearby fence-post and regarded us suspiciously with its piercing yellow eyes.

Trundling further down the track we heard a **Little Bustard** making its pathetic little raspberries but could not see it. To our disappointment no sandgrouse were in evidence either, and we drove on along the road towards SMdM, an area I had not explored in March.



Now we had our first of many **Montagu's Harriers**. These were a regular sight on the plains between Trujillo and Caceres, with up to three pairs using a single field. This was also prime Bustard territory, and we stopped and scanned

frequently, soon locating our first **Little Bustard**, on the far edge of a field north of the road. We scanned repeatedly across this one field, and soon located more birds, which had been invisible in the grass, but eventually betrayed by movement. After finding another pair of Little, Steve scanned across and picked up another bird much further right which I quickly locked onto. This one was clearly bigger and I was rather surprised when I announced "Great" to no significant reaction from Steve - this would be a lifer for him, and one of the main (albeit relatively easy) targets of the trip. A few moments later he realised that he was now looking at a **Great Bustard** for the first time and excitedly proclaimed his revelation. Only now did the penny drop that my comment had been an

identification, not an expression of how much I was enjoying seeing another Little Bustard!

A Spanish chap who claimed to own a farm nearby stopped to have a look through our scopes and show his visitor an "Avutarda", and then just as we were about to leave I was attracted to a brightly coloured bird on a fence-post, finding my first ever **Roller**. These were also quite a common sight on roadside posts all along this stretch of road, and we subsequently had cracking views of its beautiful blue and turquoise plumage.



More **Monty's** were the highlight of the next 15km through Santa Marta de Magasca and beyond. One of the larger water holes which we stopped to check out held a few **Mallard** plus a **Black-winged Stilt**, my first in Europe (although I've had many in and around Perth). Also of interest was a pair of **Ravens** trying persistently to get into a nestbox on a pylon inhabited by a **Jackdaw** family who were agitatedly trying their best to scare off the invaders, twice their size.



With the evening drawing on I was becoming a little concerned that we had not managed to contact Pablo yet. We reached what I assumed to be the turnoff to La Encinilla farmhouse and I slowed since here we had to decide here whether to drive straight to Pablo's, or to detour via La Encinilla for an outside chance at sandgrouse. It was just as well I did stop, since had I been travelling at speed, I may well have run over a tortoise which we noticed in the road (and moved to the verge just in case). After a short discussion I caved in to Steve's desire for a bit more birding and we turned off north.

Immediately on our left was a small pond, whose inhabitants were a pair of **Mallard**, and the field also on the left about a few hundred metres on was full to bursting with **Monty's**! About a kilometre on we once again screeched to a halt as a cracking **Black-eared Wheatear** flew across the road and landed on the fence. Having dipped on the little beauty a few times before, Steve was particularly gratified finally to connect with one. In fact we had been surprised not to have had one before now since we had supposed them to be relatively common.

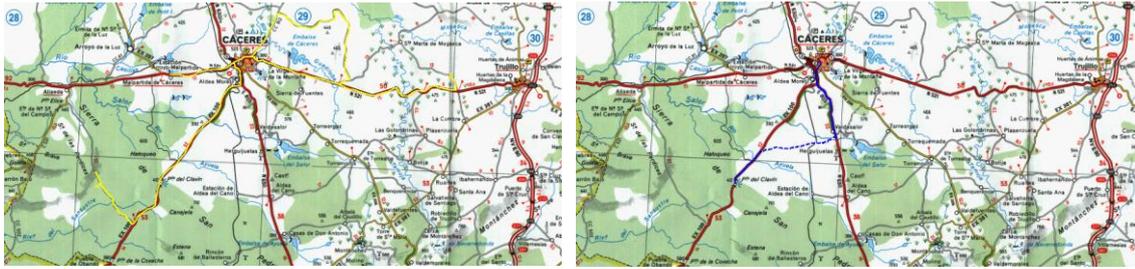
A couple more kilometres on we stopped again, for no memorable reason (later, we noted down this location as being 2.5km south-east of the farm Hocino de Arriba). Steve announced **Little Bustard** on the north-east side of the road and I peered in the same

general direction, but couldn't see anything. Suddenly my attention was caught by two rapid flying "game-birds" about 100m away arriving over the horizon. Bustard Schmustard, the search for that was out the window, and I managed to sputter out "Shit!...**Sandgrouse**" in my excitement. Steve locked on immediately and uttered similar expletives, while we watched the pair fly in an arc towards the road, noting their creamy white unders as they banked. While I was trying to sort out in my mind the significance of this feature Steve beat me to the ID and as they flew over the road we could see their long thin "**Pin-tails**"! We followed them in their arc until they landed out of sight in the long grass of the field *right next to the car*.

This was amazing. I'd now had my two main targets in the one day - SIE and PTS - and feeling sure we would easily pick up Black Vulture and the other less difficult sandgrouse tomorrow, we now had a virtual clean-up in less than a day and a half's birding. Almost before we had time to take a breath, and while our incredible good fortune was still sinking in, I saw another group of sandgrouse, four this time, coming in on a similar trajectory. With the evening sun behind us, I admired their beautiful plumage, shown off to great effect in the perfect light, as they too banked into the same field. Incredible! - but the most amazing part was to come. As we walked along the road about 20m or so, another flock of Pin-tailed burst up from the ground 20m away, making their curious quacking call 🦆, reminding me a bit of the jackdaws on the chimney at home. We counted 18 birds, which circled up but ultimately dropped down into the grass only 100m along the road, and with careful scanning Steve was able to locate the heads of four or five sticking up above the grass. In all, by the time we left we had counted 30+ **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**. If the figures in Rose's book are correct, we had seen as much as 60% of the entire population of PTS in the Caceres-Trujillo plains in this one field, however a more likely explanation is that they are rather more abundant than he suggests. In either case, it is still hard to believe our good fortune that we just happened to stop in this particular spot, looking no different from any other, but unknown to us at the time, full to bursting with one of our "most-wanted" species.

We continued on this road, stopping at La Encinilla farmhouse a few kilometres before the road reaches the CC912, Caceres-Torrejon road. There was nothing of great interest about here, and we drove on to Caceres, eventually arriving at Pablo's place at about 10pm. We found him and Almudhena out in their very big garden looking after their horses and repaired almost immediately to a local bar for a few beers with some of their friends, three rounds for 6 people setting me back only four quid.

Saturday 15th May



Caceres-Trujillo Plains



The Caceres-Trujillo plains

Our original plan was to rise early and check out the plains of the Rio Salor where I had encountered both Bustards, Stone Curlew, Calandra Lark and Black-shouldered Kite in March. However as we headed from Pablo's to Caceres it became clear (understandably) that the main target for Steve this morning was Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Hence we drove back to the road to La Encinilla which, the dearth of birds there yesterday notwithstanding, was reported in Gosney's guide to be about the best area for both sandgrouse. Despite numerous stops, much scanning and checking out of likely water



holes, we had no luck on this front. A **Little Bustard** was calling as we arrived at La Encinilla and stopped to scan. Eventually we located it a considerable distance off, its little farty noise travelling remarkably far. A little way along the road we also had excellent views of **Great**: after Steve noticed three or four together, we watched for several minutes and eventually counted 12 birds, mostly young males, but one or two showing the whiskers and stronger rusty neck of mature males. It was also here that we had our first **Great Spotted Cuckoos**; a pair was perched on the fence by the side of the road. Our best views and photos of **Little Bustard** were obtained down a side track in this

region, where a single male proved surprisingly bold.

Low on petrol, I began to worry that we would end up stranded in the middle of nowhere. With this occupying my thoughts I didn't enjoy the next 20km or so, but ultimately we just made it to a petrol station on the way back to Caceres where we could refuel and regroup.

Our next stop was back towards Trujillo to the sandy farm tracks visited yesterday. At least we had first-hand knowledge (i.e. mine!) that Black-bellied could be found there. The friendly **Little Owl** of yesterday was there to greet us again as we arrived at about 10am. We stopped at the fork in the tracks, and almost immediately heard the characteristic quacking of PTS in flight. A flock of four flew over and settled in the middle of the large field between the tracks. A hundred metres along the right-hand track we scanned to locate them. This proved impossible as long as they were on the deck, but a short while later they were up again and we followed as they circled for a good few minutes before flying off over the back of the field. Ironically, our overriding emotion at seeing this cracker again was slight disappointment - "why couldn't it have been BBS?".

As it turned out we needn't have been disappointed: a few minutes later, a distinctive bursting, bubbling flight call came from our right 🗺️. As the flock of six approached us along the track their chunkier overall appearance and, of course, black bellies confirmed the ID and Steve even had time to snap off a couple of pics - the last before his camera died in the arse - before they too flew away over the far side of the field, being joined by another en route.



We decided to wander down the left fork that we had not explored yet, hoping perhaps to bump into the sandgrouse again, since they had flown in that direction. Two more **Pin-tailed** (in flight) and a lone **Great Bustard** were the highlights and since it was now about 11am we decided to make tracks to the Sierra de San Pedro for some raptor watching.

Sierra de San Pedro

We stopped for a decidedly mediocre burger at the services where we had filled before, and then set off south the 20km to the Sierra. I had obtained excellent views of a Black Vulture here in March, along the minor road leading to Aliseda, and Europe's largest bird (wingspan up to nearly 3m) was the only major local specialty that Steve needed to tick for a "clean sweep" of his targets.

Incredibly, as we slowed to turn right onto this road, we both caught sight of a very big, black raptor, gliding close by, low and descending. We immediately parked and as we scanned south of the road the awe-inspiring silhouette of this huge raptor appeared over the trees. Its white head and feet, and all dark plumage were clearly visible, and the flight profile was much squarer and majestic than Griffon, lacking its commoner relative's pressed forward wings and hunched profile, and its tail was more wedge-shaped. It was soon joined by another two and ultimately we counted five **Black**, three **Griffon**, and a single **Egyptian**, presumably all departing from a snack nearby. At one point a **Black Kite** shared their thermal allowing a direct comparison of size, and showing how impressively huge these birds really are. As most of them drifted off east over the main road, two decided to check us out, gliding almost directly over to within 40-50m, allowing excellent close-range views and photos.



While watching these we were alerted to the presence of a **Rock Sparrow** by a thin slightly metallic call which was familiar from yesterday's SIE stakeout. We obtained good scoped views of an adult, even noting the small yellow throat patch which Jonssen suggests is rarely visible.

With all our Extremaduran targets now in the bag, the "pressure" was now off and we could enjoy the next few hours raptor watching. We drove about 10km along the road, then turned back and spent about 45min parked on a track running south from the road. In addition to another distant **Black Vulture** we also had **Booted Eagle**, **Melodious Warbler**, **Crested Lark** and the ubiquitous **Hoopoe** and **Bee-eater** here, but, alas, no Imperial Eagle.

We adjourned to another spot about 3km from the turning which gave a reasonable panorama, and while Steve grabbed forty winks, I walked along a farm track and had my first ever **Short-toed Treecreeper**. When Steve joined me for this, he also heard **Hawfinch**, but once again I missed out.

Caceres

Around 3.30 we decided that some lunch was in order and drove back to Caceres. The main square in the old town is a beautiful open area surrounded by the medieval walls and church, and full of **Storks**, **Lesser Kestrels** and swifts. Despite some unfavourable comments about Caceres as a birding base compared to, say, Trujillo, in trip reports I

have read (and also, e.g. Gosney p26), our experience here was that the food, scenery, atmosphere and birds were superior to Trujillo. After lunch, a couple of beers, and walk up through the narrow cobbled lanes, we took the an opportunity to sort out **Pallid** and **Common Swifts** since it seemed that both were present. Eventually we both locked onto the same bird for a long enough period to decide from overall paler appearance than other nearby birds, and the contrast between darker primaries and paler secondaries that we had definitely seen Pallid.

Rio Salor



The Rio Salor plains

Next on the itinerary was a drive along the track through the plains of the Rio Salor just south of Valdesalor which we had rescheduled from the morning. Although the drive did not produce any new birds, we did have excellent views of **Great Bustard**, and **Short-toed** and **Calandra Larks**, as well as more **Montagu's Harriers**.

After crossing the railway line and driving on to the gully referred to in Gosney's guide, we stopped and scanned. Seeing nothing at this point, I walked south of the track about 100m and noticed a single **Great Bustard** - unfortunately *after* it had noticed me and was flying away down into the gully. A few minutes later as I carried on walking, now joined by Steve, a flock of several GB took to



the air before we'd properly had a chance to look at them or take photos. We tracked their flight with our bins and realised that they must have settled below a ridge some 400m away which we could almost certainly approach without being seen.



A group of rocks on the horizon looked like a promising viewing point and Steve led the way towards these, stalking across landscape keeping below the level of the ridge. Our progress was arrested momentarily when a single **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** burst from the grass about 20m ahead of us and bubbled its way over our heads back towards the track. As the

"hunt" reached its climax and we stealthily approached the rocks, hoping that the birds were just on the far side. The rocks were conveniently divided down the middle making a natural hide, and Steve was able to slide between them to gain an uninterrupted view of the plain below. He immediately indicated to me that our quarry was there and fired off a couple of "shots". I slid my way up the rocks as best I could, and peering over the top saw a group of five male **Great Bustard**. As I adjusted my position I evidently broke their horizon and they turned and flew again, eventually joined by a sixth which had been separate from the main group and lingered a little longer.

Sierra de San Pedro

I was interested to see if the track from Valdesalor eventually came out on the road to the Sierra de San Pedro, and we followed it until it did, several kilometres south of where I had expected. With the sun soon to go down we decided to travel the 6 or 7 km south along this road to the edge of the SdSP to stake out the rocky outcrop reported by Gosney as an Eagle Owl site.

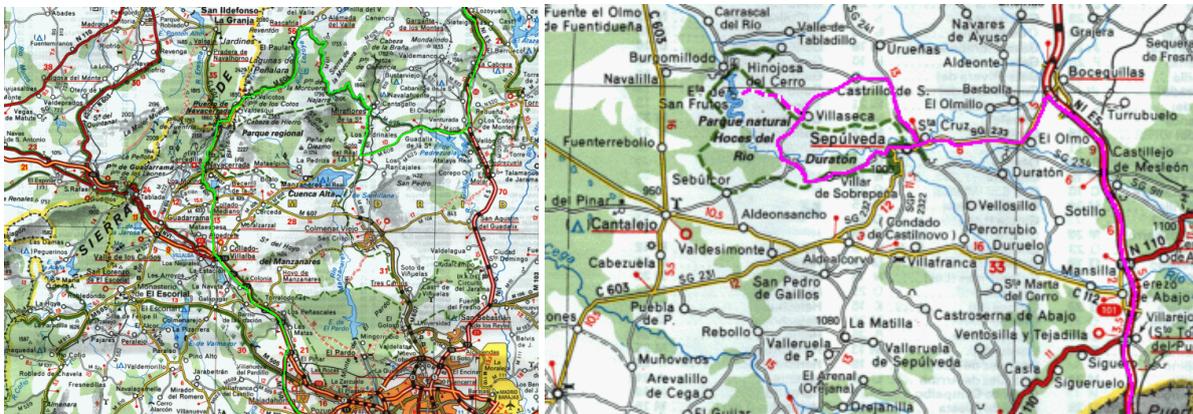
Although we scanned the rock carefully at regular intervals until dark we saw no sign of Eagle Owl. A **Sub-alpine Warbler** teased us from the scrub behind us, and I recognised a flutey call from some distance as a **Golden Oriole** from my one and only encounter with this species in Norfolk in 1997.

On our return walk to the car we briefly caught sight of a long tailed, pointed winged silhouette whose identity was immediately in some dispute. Steve commented that the wing-beats seemed too rapid for Nightjar and decided Cuckoo, but I was equally convinced that the wings had been raised significantly above the horizontal during the stroke, which would rule out his conclusion. More weight was added to my thesis when, a few minutes later, we heard the unmistakable call of **Red-necked Nightjar** through the still night air.



The plains north of the Sierra de San Pedro

Sunday 16th May



Sunday was a reserve day for which we had made no definite plan. Our idea had been that if we'd not seen any of the steppe species we would drive to La Serena, which although further from Madrid, is reputedly the best area of steppe in Europe. Since we were satisfied with our lot, we decided instead to drive back towards Madrid and spend some time in the Sierra de Guadarrama, perhaps connecting with Rock Thrush en route to Sepulveda where we were hoping for the elusive Dupont's Lark.

Malpartida de Caceres

The day began with a casual rise and a wander through Pablo's garden where we noted **Spotless Starling**, **Black Kite**, **Hoopoe**, **Bee-eater** (over the back wall), a pair of **Red-rumped Swallow** nesting under the eaves just outside Pablo and Almudhena's window, and just down the road a **Sardinian Warbler** in a neighbour's garden. After thanking P and A profusely for their hospitality we bade goodbye at about 10am.



Next to the traffic lights at the western edge of the village is a low white building next to a clearing. I had seen **Lesser Kestrels** here in March and we decided to check it out before the long drive back to Madrid. As we arrived several were hawking around the clearing, and it was clear that at least six pairs, possibly as many as ten, were nesting on the roof of the building. These were without doubt our best views of this local specialty, but although we tried for a long time to get a good photo, in the end we had to settle for a few rather mediocre efforts.

Just west of Caceres I had noticed a curious derelict building, which has been completely taken over by **White Storks**. Even by the standards of this area, where there seems to be a nest on almost every available man-made structure, this building is quite extraordinary, and we stopped briefly on our way past for souvenir photos.



Storks' nests, just west of Caceres

The drive back to Madrid - about two hours on N5 - began with the lowest point of the whole five days. As we approached Trujillo from Caceres within a few hundred metres the speed limit drops from 120kmh to 70kmh and then to 50kmh. Sadly for us, I was still doing just over 70 as we entered the 50 zone and encountered a zealous cop lurking with a speed gun. It was clear as soon as he strode over to the car that he was in no mood for leniency, and after trying to argue the toss we had no alternative if we wanted to be swiftly

on our way than to pay up the 20000pts on the spot fine. I drove on rather cautiously now, with a sick feeling in my stomach, in part because we now both sensed that maybe our luck had finally run out.

Closer to Madrid we swapped over the driving duties and the traffic began to get heavier. With the scenery dull and our next potential birds still an hour away I decided to have forty winks. On waking, a little light entertainment was in order, which I hoped would also have the effect of ensuring Steve was still alert at the wheel. I popped the tape of Great Bustard 🦅 into the player and wound it to the appropriate place. Guessing my intentions immediately, Steve guaranteed that this time, he wouldn't laugh. His vain promise was always doomed. The moment the first squittery fart spluttered out he was off, and by the time the flatulent beast (the GB, not Steve) had squeezed the last raspberry out Steve had tears streaming down his face, doubled over barely able to breathe, and was weaving across the road at 120kmh. Mission accomplished - he was certainly wide awake now - but I resolved in the interests of self preservation never to use this technique again.

Sierra de Guadarrama

Our main target today and tomorrow morning was Dupont's Lark at the Hoces del Duraton near Sepulveda. However since there was no point in getting there before evening, we skirted around the western edge of Madrid and drove north into the Sierra de Guadarrama, hoping for raptors and a few of the other goodies mentioned in Rose's book.

First stop was the Puerto de Navacerrada, a high alpine pass and ski resort. After farting about a bit trying to find exactly where Rose was referring to, we found the place and parked up on the road near the base of the ski lift. A half-hour walk through the typical alpine woods in the fresh cool mountain air, yielded **Coal Tits** everywhere, a **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, and a female **Pied Flycatcher**, followed closely afterwards by a cracking male. Emerging from the conifers onto a now bare ski slope, we set up scopes and scanned the far side of the valley for raptors. We picked up more (but very distant) **Griffon** and **Black Vultures**, but sadly no Eagles.

As we trudged up the bare ski-slope, two green/grey finches flew up towards the lift area. We scrambled up the slope in pursuit and on reaching the top were rewarded with fabulous views of a pair of **Citril Finches**, another lifer for me! On the return journey to the car a **Black Redstart** popped out in front of us briefly and then for 20 minutes we fruitlessly searched the wood immediately adjacent to the car, following the intermittent calls of a **Crested Tit**. During this period a **Raven** flew close overhead, and we also heard and had poor views of a "Crest", probably Gold.

Our route from here took us through some fantastic alpine scenery, punctuated by various stops to check out raptors seen from the car. At a waterfall before Rascafria we had several more **Griffon Vultures**, a pair of **Black**, and a single **Booted Eagle**, but disappointingly still no bigger eagles. From Rascafria the scenery changed dramatically,

becoming less forested, more open, and as we ascended towards the pass at Puerto de la Morcuera, the air was filled with the sweet fragrance of Brooms.

At various points with suitable panorama we stopped to scan, but only once did we connect with further raptors (a Black Kite about 2 miles from the top of the pass). On one occasion Steve wandered off up the road while I fiddle farted by the car (stupidly leaving my glasses on the bonnet, never to be seen again). I followed up the road and found him looking up into a tree at a **Bonelli's Warbler**, one of specialties of this area mentioned by Rose. Looking up I soon located a *phylloscopus* and noted the clean white unders, weak super' and greenish flight feathers (yet another lifer for me and only Steve's second ever). It flitted about in the leaves picking off insects for some time, occasionally exchanging bursts of song (which was quite unlike Willow Warbler or Chiffchaff) with another bird on the other side of the road, but it disappeared down the valley before Steve, who had nipped back to the car to get the camera, could return for a photo.

At the top of the pass, a short walk across some heathland not unlike the area on Dartmoor where Steve and I had had Dartford Warbler a few weeks previously, yielded several "English" species: **Northern Wheatear, Dunnock, White Wagtail** and **Carrion Crow** (remarkably our first of the trip), which are all presumably better suited to the milder, cooler and wetter climate at altitude.

Sepulveda and Hoces del Duraton

On p1 of Gosney's guide *Finding Birds in Northern Spain*, he advertises the joys of birding in Northern Spain thus: "...and lastly, there is the chance to find one of Europe's most elusive and enigmatic birds. Dupont's Larks may seem to be just dull-brown birds in the books, but if you search for them by day they will take on a mythical quality. At dusk, however, hearing a sudden burst of their remarkable song is one of birding's most magical moments." When I first acquired this guide I'd not even heard of Dupont's Lark, but reading this sentence aroused my curiosity, and I read up on it in various guides. Although the sites Gosney suggested were rather too far from anywhere on our proposed itinerary, the range maps in all the guides I consulted seemed to take in Madrid and other areas more accessible to us. I decided to search the web for references to it and remarkably turned up several, most of which were in the EuroBirdNet archives. It was clear from the tone of the postings in the archives that DL is a real "birder's" bird, high on many people's target lists for trips to Eastern Spain, and most of the references I found were in fact requests for information. While there were no responses with specific information, one posting was particularly interesting, since it referred to an organised trip to Segovia, which might just be in range if I could find out where exactly to go.

I exchanged email with the poster, John Muddeman, who turned out to be a British birder now based in Madrid, leading birding tours around Madrid and to Extremadura, and currently writing a book about birding sites in Extremadura! In lieu of his own completed

product (which he hopes to publish in August this year for release at the UK Birdfair), he suggested that I look at Rose's book, which I subsequently ordered. Before I'd seen Rose, though, I asked John specifically about Sepulveda, since the habitat near the gorge seemed right to me and this is indeed just in Segovia. I wrote, "for close-up views of Griffons in spectacular scenery, I thought the Ermita de San Frutos was as good as Monfrague. I have not looked for Dupont's Lark around here. Would it be worth it??", to which he generously responded in the affirmative, and with more specific gen.

The precision of JM's information gave us some cause for optimism, but we knew that the only times we'd have a chance of catching the little bugger were dusk and dawn, and that even then it might prove difficult, so we arrived in Sepulveda between 8 and 8.30 pm in the evening, giving ourselves two opportunities - tonight and tomorrow morning. We were both very hungry and food or more birding was a tough call. Steve was keen on the latter, but I have to admit that, mindful of the superb lunch of roast lamb I'd had here in August with Spanish friend Lourdes de Agapito, combined with the fact that we still had Monday morning at our disposal, I was leaning towards food. A brief wander around the town square showed the bars to be bereft of people eating (lunch in Spain is a much bigger deal than dinner, so in retrospect this was not a big surprise), so with our decision made for us, we bought bread and other provisions and drove off in search of the famous LBJ.

The road to Villar de Sobrepeña

About two or three kilometres from Sepulveda on the road to the tiny village of Villar de Sobrepeña, I noticed a pair of raptors cruising along the ridge above us on our left. I pulled over and Steve checked them out. I was expecting the usual Griffons - common in this



area - and my immediate thought when I heard Steve say "Get yourself out here it's a f***ing **Golden Eagle**", was that he was winding me up. I grabbed my bins, jumped out, and focused on a large, long-tailed raptor almost directly above me now. The uniformly pale unders clearly ruled out Golden Eagle, and I made some disparaging remark to this effect to Steve (slightly incredulous that he could have got it so wrong). "Not that one, it's a Griffon, you ****!" was his response. Since it so clearly was *not* a Griffon either here was my opportunity to extract a

modicum of revenge for the relentless piss-taking that had been coming my way ever since, in my eagerness to beat Steve to an ID, I managed to call a Mallard as a Little Bustard the previous day. "No it's f***ing not, you moron!" - not exactly rapier wit, but the best I could come up with in the heat of the moment. Within seconds of this polite exchange it became clear that we had two eagles, and I switched my attention to the Golden, scoping it gliding lazily along the ridge, the sun catching its Golden nape, which I noted was much richer than the straw colour of Imperial. Later reference to our field

guides confirmed our initial diagnosis, that the only possible ID for the pale raptor was **Short-toed**. As they both drifted out of sight ahead of us, we jumped back in the car and followed, hoping to catch up. Although finding one or two **Griffon**, we did not reconnect with either eagle, and despite our pleasure at being able to add both Golden and Short-toed to our trip lists (and for me, the former to my life list!), we were also ruing the irony that after much of the day looking out for raptors, two goodies should come along at once.

Ermita de San Frutos

We found the place described by JM easily at 21.15 and pulled the car off the road with about an hour left before it would be too dark to see anything. This location could have been the scene in Killian Mullarney's painting, so closely did the habitat of flat sandy ground with tussocks of grass and small rocks resemble the picture in the Collins Bird Guide. We turned the engine off and sat with the windows down in silence for a few seconds, straining our ears for a sign of **Dupont's** presence. Faintly but clearly, the distinctive, melancholy song was drifting our way, sliding mournfully up and down between notes 🗣️. Steve looked at me excitedly to confirm that I had heard it too, and we immediately jumped out of the car and stalked steadily along the track towards the sound. The location of the song was difficult to pinpoint accurately, and for a while seemed to stay at constant distance from us. Was this just an illusion, the sound carrying well in the still evening air, or was the bird moving away as we approached? It certainly seemed like the latter, but whatever the answer, we were gradually drawn further and further from the car, and despite careful and regular scanning nothing was seen.

Further along the track, eventually we reached a point where we seemed to be able to pinpoint the sound, which appeared to be coming from a clump of grass no more than about 15 metres away. We scanned again from here for some minutes, and although the song continued from the same direction we still couldn't see a thing. Slowly and steadily we edged forward to about 10 metres range. Another bird started singing also, apparently concealed in a large tussock about 8-10 metres to our left, but we concentrated our efforts on the first one, creeping up until, with it still singing we were tantalisingly close, perhaps no more than 5 metres from where it still sang - but where the f*** was it? At one point Steve saw some movement and the adrenalin rushed through me, but whatever he'd seen was never seen again.

Running out of ideas, we split up. I followed the song of a Dupont's yet further from the car, trying to line up the sound perpendicular to the track, but found that as before, regardless of how far I walked, the bird always seemed just ahead of me. Perhaps I was hearing multiple birds in different territories, one moving ahead, then doubling back while the next took over. Surely this had to be the case since I had walked a distance little short of 400m. About half way along I had completely lost sight of Steve over the brow of an incline, and now with the light fading rapidly I began to trudge back towards him. During

this manic period, a **Quail** called from a field nearby (I heard the distinctive call, and Steve identified it when we met up later).

My main thought now, was that even if I was going to dip, I just hoped (prayed!) that Steve had seen it in the last 15 minutes since we split up. As he came into view he was looking intently into a tussock no more than three metres from where he stood on the track. When he looked up and saw me he began beckoning and pointing - his urgency could only mean he was onto a Dupont's. I quickened my pace but by the time I was within range, it had disappeared. We compared notes, and he described how he'd had nothing until minutes earlier, when he'd seen movement and caught it running rapidly between tufts of grass, occasionally stopping to sing. Even his best view had been poor (but identifiable), as it sang briefly from a small stone behind a close tuft of grass. I watched the spot for a bit in the forlorn hope it would reappear, but it was now singing from another nearby, but well concealed spot. Although I was becoming resigned to dipping tonight, I was at least relieved that Steve had seen it. I was upset, since it was me who'd first wanted to see it, done the research, and I had sparked his interest, but I was also mindful that it was much better for the mood of the trip that if one of us was going to dip, it was much better being me!

Since the light was now quite poor, Steve was not going to get any better views and wandered back to the car, which in our haste and excitement we had foolishly left about half a mile back along the track, doors open and keys in the ignition. I walked about 100m in the opposite direction towards another singing bird, but peering into the gloomy semi-desert still saw nothing and gave up.

Various Dupont's were still singing as I walked back towards the car (we probably heard between six and a dozen different birds in all), but by now I couldn't be bothered to scan, and just carried on walking. However when one sounded much closer, only about 2 or 3 metres from the track, and I stopped for a quick squiz just in case, but not really holding out any serious hope. Incredibly, a small brown bird (much smaller than expected, but in retrospect clearly a trick of the dim light) ran rapidly across a sandy patch and stopped behind a tuft of grass. Although I could not see any plumage detail, or even the down-curved bill, I could make out its pale throat, its neck stretched as it delivered its curious song. I tracked it to the next tuft where it repeated the process, before it ducked behind yet another and I lost sight of it. Knowing this was the best I'd get in the conditions, I didn't bother trying to relocate it; instead I ran a few steps along the track, jumped and punched the air, letting out a whelp of joy and relief, and surprising myself with how serious and intensely involved I had become with the search for this classic LBJ.

I walked back now with a spring in my step, until as I approached the car which Steve was driving slowly down to meet me, I tried to look slightly downcast in a childish attempt to make him feel bad. As he pulled alongside I couldn't keep up the facade and gave him a

double thumbs-up through the window, and we made our way back to Sepulveda for a celebratory beer or three.

Cañon del Duratón

After a couple of beers at a bar in Sepulveda and a sandwich in the car we finally got around to tackling the tricky question of where we would sleep tonight. It was now after 11pm and completely dark, and since we would be up at dawn, the obvious - indeed the only - choice was to sleep in the car or pitch the tent next to the car. I remembered a nice looking area on the way to the Ermita, near the bridge at the base of the canyon where cypresses lined the stream, and half an hour later we had pitched our tent in the car headlights on a small grassy verge. As we lay down for much needed rest we could hear the peaceful babbling of the stream below us, and a **Nightingale** began to sing, and, joined by another, sang throughout the night until we left at dawn.

Ermita de San Frutos

As the sun was rising, we were arriving back to the spot of last night's race against the light, except that this time we were relaxed in the knowledge that for both of us Dupont's was already in the bag.



We needn't have panicked last night. Several birds were singing away, and over the next few hours we had fantastic scoped views (including through my 40x eyepiece) as at least three

different birds sat up obligingly on small rocks and sang away, giving a lie to their elusive behaviour of last night. At 8.30 as we drove on to the Ermita at the gorge we even had one fly up and deliver its song flight, the only time we saw a **Dupont's** in the air.

Also of interest here were the **Thekla Larks**. With more experience we were now more confident of picking these from their nearly identical relative, and here we independently noted the slightly greyer colouring, and marginally shorter and conical bill, rather than straight lower mandible of



Crested. This was also a very good area for **Black-eared Wheatear**. Having had only one for the trip to date it was nice to get some excellent views in the crisp morning light of at least two birds, with both white- and black-throated morphs present.



A pair of tawny pipits was flitting about the carpark when we arrived at the end of the road (spot on from Rose again), and while Steve made a quick sketch of Dupont's as seen this morning and wrote himself some reminder notes, I wandered down to the Ermita. It is easy to see why the monks chose this area, being remote, beautiful and spectacular, the cliff dropping sheer into what is now a reservoir about 60m below. The sight of the **Griffon Vultures** here in this impressive setting, early in the morning before most have wandered off for the day, is one of



the most amazing birding experiences I have had anywhere. This is the third time I have come here and on each occasion I have been in awe of the size of the birds at incredibly close quarters. Two or three soared past me now at



only 10m range, and I could hear the wind rushing over their massive wings. In fact so close were some that it made photographing them with a 500mm lens almost impossible, so completely did they fill the field of view. This is also an excellent site for **Chough**, and as a pair flew overhead at relatively close range, I managed a single picture of one, but disappointingly I found only one distant **Egyptian Vulture**, rather fewer than I'd expected. Also of interest here were **Girl Bunting** and **Black Redstart**.

As we walked back to the car up the rocky footpath, Steve noticed a stocky falcon perched on the cliff top. We scoped the **Peregrine** (a retrospective check of Rose showed this, yet again, in exactly the spot marked), pleased to be able to add this fantastic bird to our trip list. Just as we had packed away scopes, I noticed that it had taken off, and another - its mate - was also in flight. We soon saw why. A woodpigeon had foolishly strayed into range and now seeing a hungry dark missile heading its way was frantically trying to outrun its predator. We watched enthralled as the pair hunted as a team. One sped around and rose from beneath it, going close and then pulling away at the last

minute. This dummy run had lined up the prey for its mate who, as yet unseen by the pigeon had gone up high and was now stooping on it. At the last second the pigeon realised the danger and a desperate swerve just avoided the outstretched talons of the stooping falcon. Two near misses and we thought that perhaps the pigeon had avoided being Peregrine lunch, but they regrouped and set out in pursuit. With no element of surprise any more, it now became just a straight speed race, with the falcons gradually edging closer and closer, urged on by their human admirers below. Tragically (for us!), just as they seemed to be set to strike our view was obscured by trees, and we never saw the outcome of this thrilling hunt.

At 10.30 we finally bade the gorge farewell, and drove back up the track towards Villaseca. As we passed through the Dupont's habitat we stopped and listened, hoping for one last birding experience of the trip. A single Dupont's was still singing, and we reflected again on the manic search of just over twelve hours earlier. Our amazing streak of luck, interrupted only by the speeding fine in Trujillo, held to the last, as we rolled into the hire car return at Madrid airport with the fuel level anchored on empty, as it had been for the last 5km of the journey.

Trip Summary

| | English | Espanol | |
|---|------------------|------------------|---------|
| | Cormorant | Cormor n grande | AM |
| * | Little Bittern | Avetorillo com n | AM |
| | Cattle Egret | Garcilla bueyera | Various |
| | Grey Heron | Garza re l | Various |
| * | Purple Heron | Garza imperial | AM |
| | Black Stork | Cigu  a negra | M |
| | White Stork | Cigu  a com n | Common |
| | Mallard | Anade re l | Various |
| | Black Kite | Milano negro | Common |
| | Red Kite | Milano re l | Common |
| | Egyptian Vulture | Alimoche com n | M,SP,S |
| + | Griffon Vulture | Buitre com n | Common |

| | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|---------|
| + Black Vulture | Buitre negro | SP,SG |
| Short-toed Eagle | Aguila culebrera | S |
| Marsh Harrier | Aguilucho lagunero | AM |
| Montagu's Harrier | Aguilucho cenizo | V,CT |
| Buzzard | Ratonero com n | Various |
| *+ Spanish Imperial Eagle |  guila imperial | M |
| * Golden Eagle |  guila real | S |
| Booted Eagle |  guila calzada | SP,SG |
| Lesser Kestrel | Cern calo primilla | T,C,MC |
| Kestrel | Cern calo vulgar | Various |
| Peregrine | Halc n com n | S |
| Red-legged Partridge | Perdiz com n | Various |
| [Quail] | Codorniz | S |
| Moorhen | Polla de agua | AM |
| Purple Gallinule | Calam n | AM |
| Little Bustard | Sis n | CT,V |
| + Great Bustard | Avutarda | CT,V |
| Black-winged Stilt | Cigu  uela | CT |
| Lapwing | Avefr a | CT |
| Common Sandpiper | Andarr os chico | AM |
| + Black-bellied Sandgrouse | Ortega | CT,V |
| *+ Pin-tailed Sandgrouse | Ganga com n | CT |
| Woodpigeon | Paloma torcaz | Common |
| Rock/Feral Dove | Paloma brav a | M |

| | | | |
|----|--------------------------|--------------------|---------|
| | [Turtle Dove] | Tortola común | Various |
| | Great Spotted Cuckoo | Crucialo | CT |
| | Cuckoo | Cuco | Common |
| + | Eagle Owl | Buho real | M |
| | Little Owl | Mochuelo común | CT,V |
| * | European Nightjar | Chotacabras gris | M |
| *+ | Red-necked Nightjar | Chotacabras pardo | M,SP |
| | Swift | Vencejo común | Various |
| * | Pallid Swift | Vencejo pálido | C |
| | Alpine Swift | Vencejo real | M |
| | Kingfisher | Martin pescador | M |
| | Bee-eater | Abejaruco común | Common |
| * | Roller | Carraca | CT |
| | Hoopoe | Abubilla | Common |
| | Great Spotted Woodpecker | Pico picapinos | SG |
| *+ | Dupont's Lark | Alondra de Dupont | S |
| + | Calandra Lark | Calandria común | CT,V |
| | Short-toed Lark | Terrera común | CT,V,S |
| | Crested Lark | Cogujada común | Various |
| | Thekla Lark | Cogujada montesina | S |
| | Woodlark | Totovía | Various |
| | Skylark | Alondra común | S |
| | Crag Martin | Aviador roquero | M,S |
| | Swallow | Golondrina común | Common |

| | | | |
|----|----------------------|--|---------|
| | Red-rumped Swallow | Golondrina d   urica | Common |
| | House Martin | Avi   n com   n | Common |
| * | Tawny Pipit | Bisbita campestre | S |
| | White Wagtail | Lavendera blanca | SG |
| | [Wren] | Coch   n | M |
| | Dunnock | Acentor com   n | SG |
| | Robin | Petirrojo | SG |
| | Nightingale | Ruise   or com   n | Various |
| | Black Redstart | Colirrojo tiz   n | M,SG,S |
| | Stonechat | Tarabilla com   n | Common |
| | Wheatear | Collalba gris | SG |
| *+ | Black-eared Wheatear | Collalba rubia | CT,S |
| *+ | Black Wheatear | Collalba negra | M |
| | Blue Rock Thrush | Roquero solitario | M,SP |
| | Blackbird | Mirlo com   n | Various |
| | Mistle Thrush | Zoral charlo | SP |
| | Cetti's Warbler | Ruise   or bastardo | AM |
| | Fan-tailed Warbler | Buitr   n | AM |
| | [Savi's Warbler] | Buscarla unicolor | AM |
| | Reed Warbler | Carricero com   n | AM |
| * | Great Reed Warbler | Carricero tordal | AM |
| | Melodious Warbler | Zarcero com   n | SP |
| | Subalpine Warbler | Curruca carrasque   a | SP |
| | Sardinian Warbler | Curruca cabecinegra | SP,MC |

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|----|------------------------|-----------------------|---------|
| * | Bonelli's Warbler | Mosquitero papialbo | SG |
| * | Pied Flycatcher | Papamoscas cerrojillo | SG |
| | [Crested Tit] | Herrerillo capuchina | SG |
| | Coal Tit | Carbonero garrapinos | SG |
| | Blue Tit | Herrerillo com2n | AM |
| | Great Tit | Carbonero com2n | AM |
| | Nuthatch | Trepador azul | SP |
| * | Short-toed Treecreeper | Agateador com2n | SP,SG |
| | [Golden Oriole] | Orop2ndola | SP |
| | Southern Grey Shrike | Alcaud2n re2l | Common |
| | Woodchat Shrike | Alcaud2n com2n | Common |
| | Jay | Arrendajo com2n | Various |
| + | Azure-winged Magpie | Rabilargo | Common |
| | Magpie | Urraca | Common |
| | Chough | Chova piquirroja | S |
| | Jackdaw | Grajilla | Various |
| | Carrion Crow | Corneja negra | SG,S |
| | Raven | Cuervo | Various |
| + | Spotless Starling | Estornino negro | Common |
| | House Sparrow | Gorri2n com2n | Common |
| | Spanish Sparrow | Gorri2n moruno | Various |
| *+ | Rock Sparrow | Gorri2n chill2n | M,SP |
| | Chaffinch | Pinz2n vulgar | Various |
| * | Serin | Verdecillo | Various |

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|----------------|---------------------|--------|
| * Citril Finch | Verderón serrano | SG |
| Goldfinch | Jilguero | Common |
| [Hawfinch] | Picogordo | M |
| Cirl Bunting | Escribano soteño | S |
| Rock Bunting | Escribano montesino | M,SG |
| Corn Bunting | Triguero | Common |

Key

| | |
|----|-------------------------------|
| AM | Almaraz Marsh |
| M | Montfragüe |
| T | Trujillo |
| CT | Caceres-Trujillo plains |
| C | Caceres |
| SP | Sierra de San Pedro |
| V | Valdesalor plains |
| SG | Sierra de Guadarrama |
| S | Sepúlveda / Hoces del Duratón |
| * | Lifer for me |
| + | Lifer for Steve |

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Notes

Photography: *Canon A1, 500mm mirror lens, Kodak Gold film at 400 and 800 ASA.*