

Spain: Birding & Nature

April 18 – May 1, 2025 | Trip Report

by Carlos Sanchez



With tour leader Carlos Sanchez, local guides Manuel Morales and Vicente Malagon, and 9 participants: Heike, Rochus, Marjorie, Mike, Terri, Lenore, Harold, Stewart, and Debbie



Sat., April 19 Laguna de El Campillo & Laguna del Prado

After the previous night's dinner at the hotel restaurant, we enjoyed a not too early start today in Madrid before packing up for our drive to Almagro. We stopped at Laguna de el Campillo en route to Almagro, one of several disjunct national park sites in the outskirts of Madrid, for our first introductory birding. We spotted our first Sardinian Warbler, Common Nightingale, and Great Tit in the wooded thickets by the road, while the large lake held Ruddy Shelduck and Common Pochard. The sheer cliffs rising to our left had quite a few Rock Sparrow and Black Redstart. Continuing onwards, we stopped at the famous windmills that inspired Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, before reaching Almagro in time for lunch.



After checking in at our hotel, we visited Laguna del Prado. It was very windy and cold, yet we still had an impressive variety of waterfowl and shorebirds in just about an hour. Ducks included Common Shelduck, Northern Shoveler, Red-crested Pochard, and White-headed Duck. Shorebirds included Pied Avocet, Kentish Plover, Common Snipe, Curlew Sandpiper, and Little Stint.

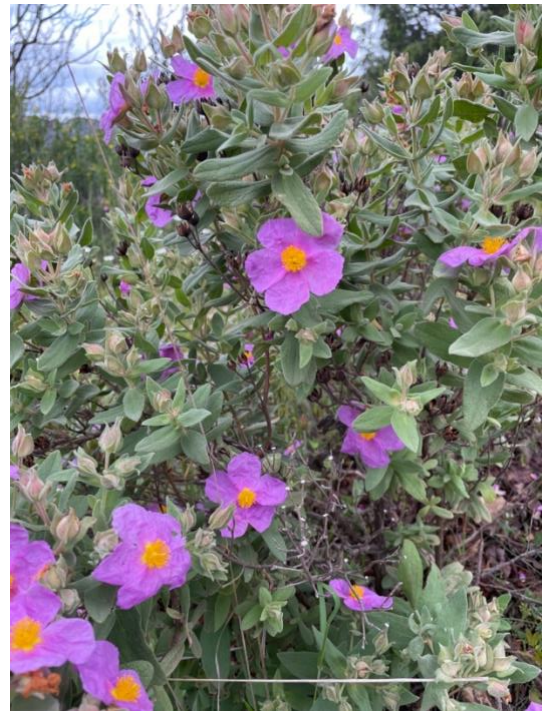
Sun., April 20 Tablas de Daimiel & Laguna de la Vega

Tablas de Daimiel National Park is a critically important remnant of floodplain wetland. Despite being Spain's smallest national park, it boasts over 80 species of breeding bird. Although the reeds had been severely cut back recently, we still managed to observe good numbers of rare and local waterfowl such as Ferruginous Duck, White-headed Duck, and Marbled Duck. Both Common Reed-Warbler and Great Reed-Warbler were defending territories in the patches of reeds that did remain. We also had fantastic views of a singing Savi's Warbler, with its seemingly endless insect-like trill. Islands of low Mediterranean woodland dotted the landscape, hosting a different subset of birds, including both migrants like Garden Warbler and breeders since as Eurasian Penduline-Tit. The highlight of our time here was spotting a Little Gull mixed in within a flock of Black-headed Gull, an infrequent vagrant for this region of Spain.

In the afternoon, we explored one of the saline lakes that dot the plains of Castilla-La Mancha. In spring, these ponds are very busy with the commotion of thousands of nesting waterbirds. Activity never ceases all day long! Laguna de la Vega gave us our first sightings of Greater Flamingo, Collared Pratincole, Eared Grebe, and Western Marsh-Harrier. We also managed to re-find a vagrant Lesser Flamingo!

Mon., April 21 Campo de Calatrava & Castillo de Calatrava la Nueva

Today, we drove to the nearby Calatrava Steppes in the early morning. The steppes are one of the most endangered habitats in all of Spain. Unfortunately, due to the modernization of agriculture, the Spanish steppes have largely been converted to fields of wheat and other grains. However, near Almagro, there are still areas of steppe habitat mixed in with more traditional farming methods which harbor an interesting selection of birds. Great Bustard, Little Bustard, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Eurasian Thick-knee, Montagu's Harrier, and Little Owl all made appearances. However, the great highlight of the morning was watching a displaying male Great Bustard.





After lunch and a short siesta, we drove to Castillo Calatrava La Nueva. This medieval castle sits high on a ridge overlooking the Spanish countryside. Due to its rocky nature, it is home to several pairs of Black Wheatear, Eurasian Crag-Martin, Rock Bunting, and Blue Rock-Thrush. We enjoyed fantastic views of the castle, overlooking the expanse of plains of Castille-La Mancha.

Tues., April 22 Calzada de Caltrava & Drive to Donana National Park

We visited an area of Mediterranean woodland called Calzada de Calatrava in the early morning hours. Unfortunately, there was quite a bit of disturbance from a maintenance crew, so we were unable to connect with Hawfinch this year.

Afterwards, we began to head southwest towards the town of El Rocio in Andalusia. About half-way through our journey, we made a stop near the center of Cordoba to enjoy the Mosque-Cathedral (la Mezquita). We arrived late at our lodge Hotel Malvasia in the late afternoon, right next to the wetlands of La Rocina. This beautiful hotel features a sophisticated old world charm, as well as fine dining and a swimming pool.

Wed., April 23 Puente de Ajoli & Donana National Park

After a short drive from Hotel Malvasia, we arrived at Puente de Ajoli. This cork-oak woodland harbors a well-known and healthy population of Iberian Lynx. We walked around for about an hour on this cool and crisp morning, seeing quite a few new birds for our growing trip list: Iberian Magpie, European Turtle-Dove, Eurasian Golden-Oriole, and European Serin. We also saw many of the lynx's favorite prey item – the European Rabbit – as well as many Spanish naturalists also searching for Iberian Lynx. Unfortunately, we did not see the cat that morning!

Donana National Park, one of the largest and most important wetlands in Europe, encompasses thousands of acres of marshes (marismas) at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River. We explored the park mostly by vehicle to cover more ground. The ditches and canals held many roosting birds, including Squacco Heron, Red-knobbed



Coot, Gull-billed Tern, and Lesser Kestrel. The visitor center Jose Antonio Valverde had a frenzy of Glossy Ibis, as well as a colony of Spanish Sparrow nesting underneath a White Stork nest.

At night, we walked just outside of Hotel Malvasia, we had fantastic views of a Tawny Owl.

Thurs., April 24 Los Palacios y Villafranca, Trebujena, Salinas de Bonanza

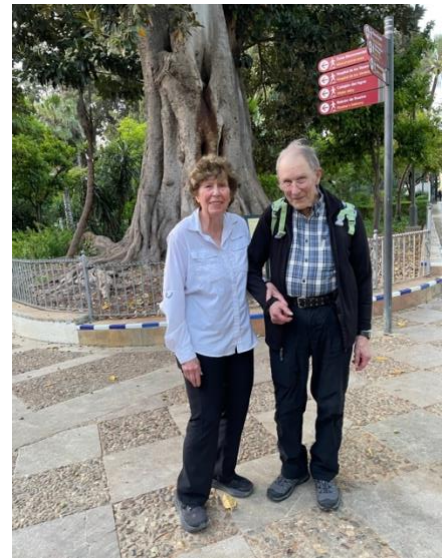
This morning, we visited the eastern side of the Guadalquivir River. Our first stop was Los Palacios y Villafranca. We had flyover views of the migratory European Turtle-Dove, one of the world's most rapidly declining dove species due to rampant and intense hunting pressure in North Africa. The tamarisks lining the lake here are also home to the localized Western Olivaceous Warbler, and we managed to have great views of this secretive species. Further south, we visited the vineyards of Trebujena famous for its sherry wine, where we had excellent views of the highly local Rufous-tailed Scrub-Robin and vociferous Melodious Warbler.

We reached the Playa del Montijo, where the tide was not in our favor. After seeing the colony of Little Swift in the port of Chipiona and a delicious seafood-themed meal, we stopped at the Salinas de Bonanza. Salt is still extracted from seawater in this complex using traditional methods, providing habitat for a variety of shorebirds such as Pied Avocet, Black-bellied Plover, Black-tailed Godwit, and Curlew Sandpiper. After an exciting day of birding, we had a lovely meal at the restaurant in El Rocio.

Fri., April 25 El Rocio, Palacio del Acebron & Flamenco

After breakfast, we headed to La Rocina Visitor Center of Donana National Park and a new habitat for us to explore – Andalusian ponds surrounded by riparian thickets and ancient stone pines. We had a lot of success with songbirds here, including Iberian Chiffchaff, Long-tailed Tit, Dartford Warbler, and Short-toed Treecreeper. The mild Mediterranean climate is also conducive to some interesting flora, and we got to see Mediterranean Fan Palm (the only palm native to Europe), European Royal Fern (closest living relative grows in the eastern USA), and Lusitanian Bellflower among others. Continuing onwards, we visited a similar habitat at Palacio del Acebron where we had incredible views of Eurasian Wryneck and heard Lesser Spotted Woodpecker.

After lunch in El Rocio, we headed out to Sevilla to enjoy a night of Flamenco, the traditional dance of the region. As we watched the lively performers, we noted the many layers of history and cultural influence in Spain reflected in this dance, from Arabic to Jewish to Romany to western European. We had a grand time! After the performance, we enjoyed Spanish tapas and got to walk around la Giralda of Sevilla.



Sat., April 26 Drive to Caceres

Our time in Andalusia had come to an end, as we continued our journey – this time north towards the city of Caceres in the region of Extremadura. We arrived at our hotel near Caceres by lunch time, and we had an easy afternoon to catch up with photos, emails, and more.

Sun., April 27 Llanos de Caceres

Today, we made the short drive to the Llanos de Caceres. Here, we spotted several very colorful European Roller sitting on the wires. These crow-like blue birds were nesting in artificial nest boxes right by the road! In the distance, we spotted the impressive Short-toed Snake-Eagle with its large, forward facing eyes. We also spotted both Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse in the same area, a rare treat to get the former on this tour! As the sun rose higher in the sky, we visited an area of low growing heath and cork-oak woodland where we had excellent views of Spectacled, and Dartford Warbler.

We enjoyed a picnic lunch at the Hermitage of Risco on the Sierra de Fuentes with spectacular views of the steppes and the city of Caceres below us. This low series of mountains rises only about 1,500 feet above sea level and provides excellent views of the surrounding landscape. Large numbers of both Common and Pallid Swift feeding overhead provided us with excellent comparisons. After our late picnic lunch, we headed down to our resort lodging for an easy evening. Some tour participants chose to relax in the spa amenities!

Mon., April 28 Monfrague National Park

Today was a very special day, since we were visiting Monfrague National Park. This park features a park-like woodland of cork and evergreen oaks (called *dehesa*), as a result of centuries of traditional, low-intensive farming. The ruins of an ancient castle form the centerpiece of the park, overlooking a sheer cliff that functions as a massive eyrie for hundreds of raptors. Formalized as a national park in May 2007, Monfrague National Park harbors the largest collection of raptors in both numbers and diversity in all of Europe!

We started our visit at Salto del Gitano, overlooking a majestic eyrie with hundreds of raptors: Cinereous Vulture, Eurasian Griffon, and Peregrine Falcon! We also saw our first Egyptian Vulture, striking white raptors with long, wedge-shaped tails. Nature documentaries often show them using small rocks to open ostrich eggs in Africa! Later, we paid a visit to the tourist town of Villareal de San Carlos, where we enjoyed some mid-morning coffee and walked several trails meandering through a mosaic of heathland, Mediterranean woodland, and rocky scree. We had excellent views of Western Orphean Warbler here.



Our full day of birding at Monfrague National Park seemed to come to an end too soon. However, before exiting the park on our way back to Caceres, we stopped once again at Salto de Gitano to enjoy the view from Castillo del Monfrague. Both Cinereous Vulture and Eurasian Griffon often flew right at eye level from this vantage point.

Tues., April 29 Arrocampo Reservoir & Gredos

The Arrocampo Reservoir, the only major body of water for many miles in the region, was our first stop today as we made our way to the higher mountains. Here, we saw a great variety of very local resident birds, including some specialties that had eluded us elsewhere such as Little Bittern and Common Kingfisher. After a visit to a coffee shop nearby, we continued on our journey up into the mountains.

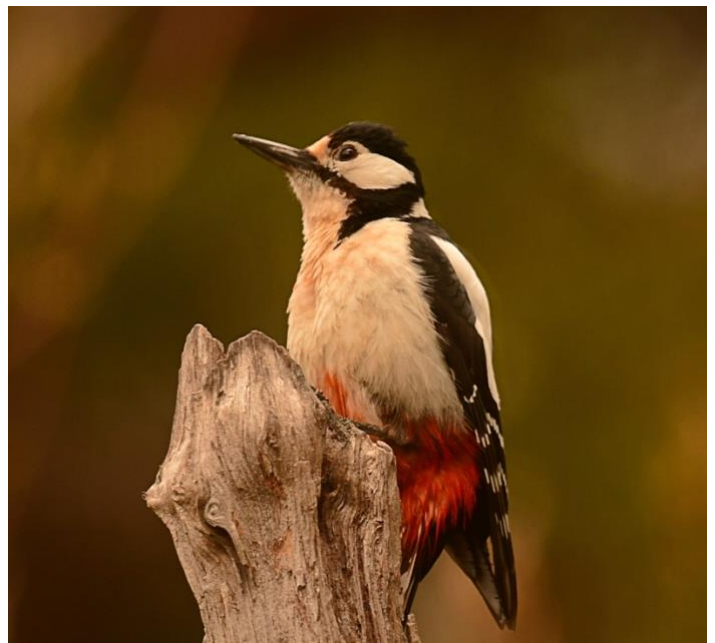
Soon, we were just below tree line at Hotel Almanzor, our lodging for the next two nights. Although sitting at only about 4,000 feet in elevation, the weather here remains noticeably cooler than elsewhere on our route. After reaching our lovely lodge and washing up, we were soon exploring a grove of pine trees flanked by a flowing river. The woods were rich with bird song, and we saw a quick flurry of new species: Great Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Jay, Crested Tit, Goldcrest, Firecrest, European Robin, European Pied Flycatcher, Red Crossbill, Wood Lark, and Gray Wagtail. Near the waterfall of Las Chorreras, we saw a White-throated Dipper visiting a hidden nest. The weather did not sound good for the following day, so we were happy to observe so many new species in one afternoon.

Wed., April 30 Gredos

It was a very cool and foggy morning, and it took a little while for birds to get moving. The Gredos happens to be an important meeting zone between birds of cooler northwestern Europe and the Mediterranean. After breakfast, we spent about an hour watching the feeders at Hotel Almanzor where we enjoyed great photo opportunities of Eurasian Hoopoe, European Robin, European Greenfinch, Eurasian Wren, and more.

Later in the morning, we headed to the Plataforma of the Sierra de Gredos Regional Park. This area protects alpine scree and meadows, providing wonderful hiking opportunities for both tourists and locals alike. Herds of habituated Iberian Ibex roam the mountainsides, and we got to enjoy individuals of all age groups, including some older males with spectacular sweeping horns.

Alpine meadows in Europe are home to a cool assortment of birds in late spring and summer. After a moderate hike and some searching, we had nice views of a Bluethroat singing away in an area of broom. We also saw many Northern Wheatear, Dunnock, Water Pipit, and Eurasian Skylark. The dramatic and magical landscape of these mountains left a great impression on our group – one of their favorite sites of the tour.



We had an easy afternoon after lunch, as the weather started to close in. At the nearby Parador, we had nice views of Citril Finch, Ocellated Lizard (the largest lizard species in Europe), and Eurasian Hummingbird Hawkmoth. We had a fantastic final meal at Hotel Almanzor, a three course meal.

Thurs., May 1 Departures

We made our way back to Madrid to catch connecting flights back home and elsewhere. We said farewell at Adolfo Suarez Madrid-Baraja International Airport, full of memories of an incredible wildlife and cultural experience in Spain!

Photo Credits: Scenic Vista, Windmills (Carlos Sanchez), Flowers (Marjorie Russel), Purple Poppy, Group (Carlos Sanchez), Soup (Marjorie Russel), Dartford Warbler, Chameleon, Spectacled Warbler (Mike Kershaw), Meat & Potatoes (Carlos Sanchez), Smiles! (Marjorie Russel), Black Stork, Eurasian Jay, Red Kite, Eurasian Hoopoe, Ocellated Lizard, Great Spotted Woodpecker (Mike Kershaw), Group Birding (Marjorie Russel)