

Spain: Birding & Nature | Trip Report

May 11 – 23, 2019 | Written by Carlos Sanchez



Guide: Carlos Sanchez, with 6 participants: Christine, Laura, Brad, Cathy, Elizabeth, & Richard





Sat., May 11 Arrivals in Madrid | Gredos

After meeting at our comfortable hotel in Madrid at around 9 a.m. we began our journey west through the city of Madrid towards the alpine scenery of the Gredos Mountains. After about an hour's drive, we made our first stop at the Bulls of Guisando. The four ancient granite sculptures were built by an ancient Celtiberian tribe around the 2nd century BCE. They are a recurrent feature in Spanish literature, including the novel *Dox Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. As it was spring, the surrounding riparian woodlands rang with the calls of nesting birds such as Cetti's Warbler, Common Nightingale, and we saw our first European Bee-eaters flying overhead.

After an incredible lunch overlooking a forested valley, we continued onwards to Puerto del Pico in the Sierra de Gredos. This mountain pass, at about 4,600 ft, was already far above the tree line (the tree line is surprisingly low in Spain), and we could clearly see an ancient Roman road stretching out before us—still in excellent condition even after two millennia. A little patch of trees in the parking lot held our first Great and Blue Tit, as well as our first Common Firecrest.

After reaching our lovely lodge near the town of Gredos, we were soon exploring a grove of pine trees right below the lodge. Birds came steadily, with lots of excitement as each species revealed itself for us to enjoy—Coal and Crested Tit, Goldcrest, Eurasian Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Blackcap, European Robin, and European Serin. A gurgling stream held a White-throated Dipper, the only one of our trip, and an excellent find! We ate well that night and enjoyed the local red wine.

Sun., May 12 Sierra de Gredos Regional Park

A very cool and crisp morning out on the deck of the lodge, and it took a little while for birds to get moving. A European Pied Flycatcher was singing actively from the top of an evergreen, allowing great scope views. These flycatchers are quite local and different from the ones in the rest of continental Europe, and some authorities consider it to be a separate species (Iberian Pied Flycatcher). A Garden Warbler in a budding deciduous tree was a nice surprise! The Gredos mountains happen to be an important meeting zone between birds of cooler northwestern Europe, and the Mediterranean. Classic European birds such as European Robin, Garden Warbler, and Coal Tit reach the southern limit of their breeding range in this section of Spain.

The birding lodge happens to have a beautiful feeder setup with glass panes separating the viewer from normally shy birds, and we sat for a while enjoying many of these classic European birds such as the robin, Common



Chaffinch, European Greenfinch, Eurasian Jay, Eurasian Nuthatch, and Rock Sparrow—the photographic opportunities were out of this world!

After lunch and an early afternoon siesta, 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. It did not take long for us to have great views of the colorful Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush hopping around large boulders. Areas of short grass held Ortolan Bunting and Northern Wheatear, while areas of broom held many Dunnock and Woodlark. Although our local guide made a valiant effort, we were unable to connect with Bluethroat this year. However, the dramatic and magical landscape of these mountains left a great impression on our group—one of their favorite sites of the tour.

Mon., May 13 Extremadura & the Arrocampo Reservoir

On our final morning in the Gredos Mountains, we had a leisurely start in the pine groves below our lodge, Hostal Almanzor. Our main target was Citril Finch, but we had only brief views of a flock in the middle of a pasture. Still, it



was a pleasant walk in the relatively open forest, and we enjoyed great views of Booted Eagle, Mistle Thrush, and Eurasian Wren before our delicious lunch.

After lunch, we began our journey southward into the region of Extremadura. At the Arrocampo Reservoir, the only major large body of water for many miles in the region, we observed a great variety of very local resident birds, as well as our first taste of the very rich wetland birding of southern Spain – Black-winged Kite, Iberian Gray Shrike, Eurasian Spoonbill, Western Swamphen, Savi's Warbler, Corn Bunting, and many more! It was considerably hotter here than in the mountains, and we enjoyed a cool drink at a local bar before heading to Trujillo. Our beautiful hotel overlooked the main plaza of this historic town, the birthplace of many conquistadors.

Tues., May 14 Villareal de San Carlos | Trujillo

In Spain, nature and architecture seem to interweave—the old cathedral and buildings of the central square are also a major nesting area for White Stork, Lesser Kestrel, Common Swift, Eurasian Jackdaw, Spotless Starling, and others. It was a very birdy main plaza for sure, and so much fun to see so many nesting birds from our windows in the early morning.

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.

Our major target species of the day was Spanish Eagle (formerly known as Spanish Imperial Eagle), a majestic raptor endemic to the Iberian Peninsula. We quickly saw not just one but two of these eagles at Portilla del Tietar, cruising low and perching on a mountainside across a narrow ravine. Wow! We also saw our first Egyptian Vultures, striking white raptors with long, wedge-shaped tails. Nature documentaries often show them using small rocks to open ostrich eggs in Africa! Another wonderful sighting was our first Common Nightingale singing out on an open branch, a bird made famous in Western literature due to its long, melodic, and complex song phrases.

Later we paid a visit to the tourist town of Villareal de San Carlos and walked a trail, snaking through an old citrus grove where we saw Eurasian Golden Oriole, Woodchat Shrike, and Iberian Magpie. A tiny pond by the trail held several reptiles and frogs, including a Viperine Snake and Mediterranean Turtle.



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 Trujillo, we stopped at the Salto de Gitano—the incredible eyrie across from the castle. Over a hundred Eurasian Griffon were nesting on the sheer cliff, and we also managed to pick out several Black Stork, Cinereous Vulture, and even a Peregrine Falcon.

In the afternoon, we paid a visit to one of the most endangered habitats in all of Spain – the steppes. Unfortunately, due to the modernization of agriculture, the Spanish steppes have largely been converted to fields of wheat and other grains. However, near Trujillo, there are still areas of extensive steppe habitat that harbor healthy populations of many of its special birds.



As we drove through these dry grass plains, 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. Larks were aplenty, and we saw four different species: Greater Short-toed, Calandra, Thekla's, and Crested.

We enjoyed a spectacular traditional dinner in Trujillo, including codfish croquettes, slices of carefully prepared pork, and a lovely salad.



Wed., May 15 Andalusia | Magacela Castle

We had a late start this morning and began our journey south around mid-morning towards Andalusia. We made a couple brief stops along the way, including at La Zorita where we saw the “Partridge Eagle,” more commonly known as Bonelli’s Eagle. An area of nearby steppes had a few distant Great Bustard.

Our local guide had prepared a picnic lunch for us, and we enjoyed a fabulous spread of cheese, bread, wine, and cold cuts in the



shadow of Magacela castle. This ancient outcrop sits on the ruins of an ancient Roman fortress and overlooks the Spanish countryside for miles and miles. It also happens to harbor a small population of Red-billed Chough and Black Wheatear, which we saw while we ate lunch.

After a brief stop at the Spanish version of Walmart, we finally arrived at the Ardea Purpurea Hotel in Donana National Park. We had a fabulous dinner here, among the best we had in all of Spain.

Thurs., May 16 Donana National Park | Dehesa de Abajo

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 started our full day of birding here by visiting a grove of eucalyptus trees by a road, home to several dozen nesting pairs of White Stork, Gray Heron, and Eurasian Spoonbill. This stand of trees also held a large nesting colony of Spanish Sparrow, a close relative (but ecologically quite different!) of the abundant and familiar House Sparrow.

As we journeyed further into the park, we set our scope up on agricultural fields being flooded with irrigation water. Shorebirds and terns were gathering in the distant puddles, including several Red Knot in brilliant red breeding plumage as well as Common Shelduck. The Guadalquivir River itself was thronging with wetlands birds, with densities on par with those seen in Florida: Greater Flamingo, Western Swamphen, Great Crested Grebe, Northern Lapwing, Purple Heron, Squacco Heron, and Eurasian Spoonbill just to name a few.

We had lunch at the very popular Dehesa de Abajo, a popular weekend getaway for families from Sevilla and beyond. A large nearby lake held large concentrations of waterfowl, and we set up our scopes to see what treasures we could observe right after lunch. Among the many Common and Red-crested Pochard, Northern Shoveler and Gadwall, we spotted two Marbled Teal—an amazing find! One of the rarest ducks in all of Europe and the Middle East. We also managed to pick out a single Red-knobbed Coot, a species that reaches the northern limit of its range here.

After a leisurely siesta in the afternoon, we headed back 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!

Fri., May 17 Dehesa Tornero | La Rocina Visitor Center

After a short drive from the Ardea Purpurea Hotel, we arrived at Dehesa Tornero. 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 birds ranging from Little Owl to Common Cuckoo. 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!

In the late morning, we arrived at the 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 Spotted Flycatcher, Savi's Warbler (great views!), Eurasian Golden Oriole, and Iberian Magpie.

We had lunch at a seaside restaurant featuring locally caught fish. It was absolutely amazing! A walk through the surrounding sand dunes gave us some nice pop culture history, as it was here where some of the Star Wars dune scenes were filmed.

After a relaxed late afternoon by the pool, or siesta nap, we poked around the stone pine forest surrounding the Ardea Purpurea Hotel for some night birding. It did not take long for us to be surrounded by the evocative hooting of several Tawny Owl. A Red-necked Nightjar flew low and close to the group, an experience not soon to be forgotten!

Sat., May 18 Odiel Marshes | Laguna El Portil

Today, we paid a visit to the Odiel Marshes near Huelva. Declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1983, this protected area is a paradise for birds with its salt pans, lakes, sandbanks, tidal channels, and rivers. The birding was fantastic around the Visitor Center, including many Eurasian Spoonbill in breeding plumage (the emblem of the reserve), Greater Flamingo, Red-crested Pochard, Black-winged Stilt, Common Ringed Plover, Common Redshank, Little Egret, and more. A Montagu's Harrier cruising low over the fields by the road was a great find and surprise! This species is declining sharply due to the intensification of agriculture in the steppes, so we were very lucky to see one here.



Coastal mudflats and the beach itself held good numbers of Whimbrel, Common Ringed Plover, Sanderling, Dunlin, and Little Tern along with smaller numbers of Bar-tailed Godwit, Kentish Plover, and Slender-billed Gull. Three Collared Pratincoles migrating along the beach were quite the surprise and a real treat, a definite highlight for our day of birding.

On our way back to the Ardea Purpurea Hotel, we made a stop at Laguna El Portil. In the afternoon, this coastal lake attracts gulls to bathe and clean their feathers in the freshwater. Among the many Yellow-legged Gull, we managed to pick out a couple Lesser Black-backed Gull and a single Audouin's Gull. Formerly one of the world's rarest gulls, the main breeding colony for this Mediterranean endemic is in Spain.

Sun., May 19 Laguna del Tarelo |

Sadly, it was time for us to depart the region of Andalusia, but not before visiting the eastern side of the Guadalquivir River. Last year, Carlos researched and visited a wetland site called Los Palacios y Villafranca – Laguna La Mejorada which was thoroughly enjoyed. It was great this time around, too! We had fantastic 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.

At Laguna del Tarelo, we observed the endangered White-headed Duck, perhaps the rarest duck species in Europe. The salt pans of the Salinas de Bonanza held hundreds of Greater Flamingo and Pied Avocet, forming an incredible sight of elegant birds painted in either pink or black-and-white.

After a delicious lunch south of Sevilla, we began to head northeast towards the town of Almagro in Castilla-La Mancha. About half-way through our journey, we made a stop near the center of Cordoba to enjoy the Mosque-Cathedral (la Mezquita) and shop for some of the best olive oil in the world as souvenirs.

We arrived late into the town of Almagro, where our local guide was waiting for us and joined us for another memorable multi-course meal.

Mon., May 20 Laguna de la Vegailla

After the long drive yesterday, we had a later morning start to explore 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! A casual walk around Laguna de Navaseca, one of the richest and most diverse in the region, yielded nearly fifty species including several dozen endangered White-headed Duck, a couple hundred Greater Flamingo—and scores of ducks, shorebirds, terns, gulls, grebes, and reed-warblers.

After lunch, we paid a visit to another local lake—Laguna de la Vegailla. It had a very similar assortment of bird species as Navaseca, except this one had a nesting colony of Whiskered Tern and a Sedge Warbler collecting nesting material—a surprise, since this species is not supposed to breed in the region! We ended this easygoing day early, to recharge and relax, and some even booked afternoon massages at our hotel in Almagro.



Tues., May 21 Calatrava Steppes | Castillo Calatrava La Nueva

Today, we drove to the nearby Calatrava Steppes in the early morning to connect with a few charismatic species that had eluded us in Trujillo. Calandra Larks were very active in the dry fields, and we got to enjoy several ‘larking’ high above us in the sky. After some effort, we observed a total of five Pin-tailed Sandgrouse in the scope—their sharp patterns of gold, white, and chestnut impressed. However, the great highlight of the day was observing a flock of several male Great Bustard at fairly close range—wow!

After lunch and a 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 and Blue Rock-Thrush. Christine spotted a Hawfinch in the canopy of the surrounding woodland, but none of the rest of us were able to observe this striking finch. However, we all did manage to see a Great Spotted Cuckoo as a bonus—and we observed it at length, flying, perching, and calling as it went. This large and uncommon cuckoo specializes in parasitizing the nests of magpies. We celebrated another fantastic day in Spain that evening after seeing such a fantastic variety of charismatic birds.

Wed., May 22 Tablas de Daimiel National Park

Tablas de Daimiel National Park was the main feature of our last full day of birding in Spain, a critically important remnant of floodplain wetland. Despite being Spain’s smallest national park, it boasts over 80 species of breeding bird. The park features a series of trails and boardwalks allowing access to its various habitats. It did not take long for us to come across a lively flock of Bearded Reedling feeding in the reeds. These amazing little birds are so unique that they belong to their own bird family, only distantly related to other songbirds. Islands of low Mediterranean woodland dotted the landscape, hosting a different subset of birds. Two Iberian Green Woodpeckers gave us great views on one of these islands, a large and flicker-like woodpecker endemic to the Iberian Peninsula. A European Roller entertained us after lunch, allowing us to test its tolerance of approaching humans—over thirty feet!

After another afternoon siesta, we visited a few fields near Almagro to try for steppe specialties one last time. Although we did not see anything new, we did see several Great Bustard, Red-legged Partridge, Little Owl, Calandra Lark, Lesser Kestrel, and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse—always nice species to see again!

Thurs., May 23 Departures

On our way back to Madrid to catch connecting flights back home and elsewhere, we stopped at the windmills of Criptana—the windmills featured famously in Miguel de Cervantes’s work *Dox Quixote*. We said farewell at Adolfo

Suarez Madrid-Baraja International Airport, full of memories of an incredible wildlife and cultural experience in Spain!

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