

Spain

Coto Doñana and Extremadura

Dates: 4–11 May 2024

Leader: Led by Neil Gartshore

In a European context, these two wonderful yet contrasting areas offer birding at its very best, their top species in spring arguably being Marbled and White-headed Ducks, Black-shouldered Kite, Cinereous Vulture, Spanish Eagle, Western Swamphen, Red-knobbed Coot, both European sandgrouse, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Red-necked Nightjar, White-rumped Swift, Iberian Magpie and Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin.

Day 1 Flight from London Gatwick to Faro, Portugal, and transfer to Matalascañas on the north-western edge of the Coto Doñana for a four-night stay. We will be birdwatching on the 100-mile drive and species seen previously have included Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Black-crowned Night-heron, European Bee-eater and White Stork to name but a few, so it will be an eventful journey!

Day 2 Our first full day around the Coto Doñana. The National Park itself is strictly no access with the exception of Land Rover tours, which are really unsuitable for birdwatchers. There are several centres around the edges of the National Park, however, which are excellent for all of the species found in the park itself. These centres all have good hides and trails and we will start at the one nearest to our hotel, Acebuche, only about three miles away. The first birds we will see are Iberian Magpies which proliferate around the car park! There is a White Stork's nest on the information centre and constantly patrolling overhead will be both Black and Red Kites together with the occasional Booted Eagle and Short-toed Eagle. Walking the paths, we will look for European Serin, Dartford, Sardinian and Melodious Warblers and Zitting Cisticola in the scrub and Spotless Starlings in the grassy areas. Woodchat Shrikes and Eurasian Hoopoes are common and we will also see Eurasian Golden Oriole. The lagoons that the hides overlook will substantially add to our tally. Little Bitterns are usually seen in flight between patches of cover but, with perseverance, we should see one climbing around in the reeds, which are alive with Great Reed-warblers. Red-crested Pochards are common and we should also see Ferruginous Duck together with more common duck species. Some ten



Iberian Magpie

miles north of Acebuche is El Rocina, another excellent centre with a subtly different variety of species. Western Swamphens are easier to see here and there are usually Glossy Ibises and Squacco Herons with the commoner Eurasian Spoonbills and Purple Herons. Savi's Warblers are regular too but it may require a couple of visits to actually see one! Around the various trails we will look for Rufous-tailed Scrub-robin, Black-eared Wheatear, Common Nightingale, Short-toed Treecreeper and Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Just a few yards up the road from the information centre is a small bridge, from which we will survey the vast lagoon at El Rocío. Red-rumped Swallows breed under the bridge while large numbers of passage waders can be seen on the lagoon including Collared Pratincole, Little and Temminck's Stints, Pied Avocet, Eurasian Curlew, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Black-tailed Godwit, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Dunlin and Common Ringed, Little Ringed, Grey and Kentish Plovers. Gull-billed Terns will be hawking the marshes as we search through the masses of Eurasian Coots for the extremely rare Red-knobbed Coot. Raptors will be patrolling the sky and, as well as Western Marsh-harrier, there is a possibility of seeing Spanish Eagle from the bridge. In the evening we will visit a nearby area of Cork Oaks to look for Red-necked Nightjar.

Day 3 Today we will head for the northern Marismas along a rather potholed road! Again, the birds in this area are subtly different and raptors we can expect to see include Eurasian Griffon and Egyptian Vulture. Southern Grey Shrikes regularly put in an appearance and we will see plenty of larks including Crested, Calandra and Greater and Lesser Short-toed Larks. Spectacled Warblers can be found in the sparse scrub and we will keep a special lookout for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. After a break at the information centre at Lucio Cerrado Garrido, where we will see plenty of Black and Whiskered Terns and look for Marbled Duck, we will drive through the Stone Pine woods back to El Rocío and make repeat visits to both El Rocina and Acebuche information centres.

Day 4 White-headed Duck is our target species today and to find them we will cross the river Guadalquivir to the salt pans near Bonanza. White-headed Duck numbers have increased over the past few years but their sites vary from year to year depending on water levels. Nevertheless, we regularly see them on our tours together with Slender-billed Gulls and Little Terns. Greater Flamingos are found in good numbers on the salt pans and, in the surrounding farmland, we will see Montagu's Harriers and Corn Buntings and have another chance for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse.

Day 5 Following an early breakfast, we will head north towards Extremadura. After we reach the plains north of Merida, we will see a major change in the avifauna. On the Rio Salor plains we will see large flocks of Spanish Sparrows. Our main target, however, is Great Bustard and, when we find them, it is likely that there will be a splendid adult male together with immature males and females in a small flock. Whilst looking for them, we will encounter their much smaller and commoner relative, Little Bustard. Black-bellied Sandgrouse can be found almost anywhere around here, although they are most likely to be seen in flight. Our base for the next two nights is in a beautiful rural setting close to Trujillo. Lesser Kestrels breed alongside White Storks on the church, so we are assured of good views! Common and Pallid Swifts can be found in the town and European Scops-owl and Red-necked Nightjar breed in the gardens of our lodge.

Day 6 Exploring the remote plains to the north of Trujillo, where both Great Spotted Cuckoo and European Roller are common, we should also see more Great and Little Bustards and have another chance for Black-bellied Sandgrouse. As we move north we will be entering prime Black-shouldered Kite country and there is also a good chance of seeing Spanish Eagle. Soon we will be enjoying the wild and spectacular scenery of the Monfrague National Park. Large colonies of vultures nest here and we will have superb views of Eurasian Griffon-vulture, Egyptian Vulture and the rare Cinereous Vulture. Bonelli's Eagle also breeds here together with many other species including Black Stork, Eurasian Crag-martin, Black Wheatear, Black Redstart, Blue Rock-thrush, Thekla Lark, Western Olivaceous, Western Orphean and Subalpine Warblers, Rock and Cirl Buntings, Rock Petronia and Alpine Swift. There is even a chance of seeing White-rumped Swifts flying around the castle. The stunning scenery together with the birds is likely to make today the highlight of the tour.

Day 7 There will be time for another early-morning look around the plains in case we have missed any species before returning south via Seville to Matalascañas for the night.

Day 8 After breakfast we will return to Faro to catch our flight home.

General Information The climate can be quite hot at this time of year while evenings can be chilly, especially on the plains. The tour pace is fairly relaxed and the level of fitness required is only modest.

Group Size Minimum number for tour to go ahead: 6; maximum group size: 8 with 1 leader, 16 with 2 leaders.

Tour price: £1795

Air price: £250

Manchester flights available

Ground price: £1545

Single supplement: £225

Deposit: £250

Price includes charter flights between London Gatwick and Faro in Portugal, accommodation in twin-bedded en-suite rooms in medium-category hotels, breakfasts and evening meals, all transport within Portugal and Spain and guiding services throughout. Excluded are lunches, alcoholic drinks, insurance, gratuities and items of a purely personal nature.

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