

## 12th-20th May 2002

Luis Baumela's invitation for me to give a lecture course at the *Politecnica* some time in 2001/02 was a great opportunity to go to Madrid and renew my acquaintance with some of the excellent birding to be had within a few hours of the Spanish capital. I deliberately (and ingeniously) arranged for my week of lectures to be given during the week of 13-17 May, prime breeding season and arranged to bird for a long weekend afterwards.

I had hoped that Steve Young would be able to join me, but in spite of my encouragement (and, I think, his own desire to come) he was unable to because of a potential work trip to Brazil (ironically, eventually cancelled the day after I left for Spain). Knowing that birding with a mate can be more fulfilling in various ways, I instead emailed Richard Hall, with whom I had enjoyed an excellent day of winter birding on the Norfolk coast in January earlier this year, and he needed no further encouragement: within two hours he had booked flights and was set to arrive late on Thursday.

I arrived in Madrid on Sunday evening and spent Monday at the *Politecnica* (after an unforced error in navigation got me lost in suburbia and stuck in grid-locked traffic near the junction of the M40 and A6) getting everything in order for the lecture course, and then giving the first lecture/lab between 5 and 8 that evening. The now familiar Nightingales and Serin were singing in the scrub behind the car park at the *Facultad*.

### Tuesday 14th May

#### *Valdetorres de Jarama*

With my lecture not happening until 5pm, and matters under control at the Politecnica, I decided to do some sparrow-fart birding near Madrid and be back in the lab by late morning to get some miscellaneous work done. Foolish, I reasoned, to come this far and waste birding opportunities by sleeping in.

Over a beer and some tortilla in the *Residencia* bar lateish on Monday evening, I assessed the options. One was to go to El Pardo, a place I had never previously explored bird-wise. Others included either of Sepulveda and the Hoces del Duraton, or the Sierra de Guadarrama. While the former could be done as brief morning visit, the latter were half- to whole-day jobs and I sensibly decided to leave them for later in the week when Richard had arrived. I had been intrigued many times reading Rose's book by his mention of a site close to the airport where Great Bustards could be seen, but had never really believed it; consequently I had never explored the area. Here, then, was a great opportunity to use my "bonus" time to nip out and see if there was any truth in it.

Thus with relatively low expectations, but curious nonetheless, Tuesday morning found me heading out early (6am to beat the rush hour) beyond Barajas Airport to Valdetorres de Jarama.

Rose suggests exploring the tracks running east of the north-south road between Valdetorres and Talamanca. The one I took was immediately north of the small roundabout at the *poligono industriale* immediately north of the village, and about half a kilometre south of a small bridge.

The track was fairly wide and smooth, but when it forked after 1km or so I carried straight on along the rougher looking half while the smoother portion veered left (Staying on the wider left fork, as I discovered later that morning, leads down to a stream and on to some farm buildings. Nightingales were singing in the scrub by the stream, and a Fan-tailed Warbler zitted above a clearing nearby). After 50m the track forked again, and again I took the right fork. Generally the going was ok, but in one or two places I had to be careful about clearance on the bottom of the car. A pair of Thekla Larks after only 100m or so were the first good birds of the morning (not counting a Cattle Egret which was seen in flight as I drove north towards my destination).

I stopped at the first opportunity affording a view over more open ground (the track ran between wheat fields up to this point), and scanned. I was totally blown away to see two Great Bustards on a ridge about 200m north of the track almost immediately! As I got out the scope I heard the little farting noise of a Little Bustard somewhere in the same direction but much closer, and shortly afterwards a Quail began calling from field to the left of both bustard species (during this early morning period I heard at least 3-4 Quail, but they were silent by the time I left at 10am).

A third GB was located right of the first two, slightly closer, and strutting about with its tail cocked. At this point I decided to whip out the lab Coolpix and the adapter the workshop guys had kindly made for me (initially they had cut the internal diameter a fraction of a mm too small so it wouldn't fit over my 30x eyepiece; I spent an hour or two on the weekend with a file gradually increasing it by frustratingly small fractions at a time). A few passable record shots of

his bird were my first "proper" digiscoped pictures (not counting holding the Kodak DC240 up to the eyepiece and hoping...)



Minutes later the bubbling call of Black-bellied Sandgrouse erupted and 5 rose from the field immediately next to me and flew down not far from from the Great Bustard but in a gully out of sight. I drove on along the track for 100m or so in the hope that I might get an angle down the gully to view them. They were actually quite easily located and scoped, but flushed while still at quite long range as I tried to approach a little closer on foot.

I retreated to the car and scanned again. A pair of female Little Bustards was remarkably close to the track, and distant perched raptors were presumed to be a Kestrel and a Red Kite.

Another short trundle of 100m or so and I scanned again. This time I located a group of 6-7 male Great Bustards (again north of the track). Flashes of white popping up behind a ridge in the middle of this group were tantalising, as I realised that just out of sight one of the males was in full display. I did not have long to wait for a great view of a displaying male, as another bird in a more exposed location went through the motions for the benefit of what seemed to be the only female in attendance. Fabulous stuff!

During this period the incessant short-sharp raspberries of the various Little Bustards seemed occasionally to be interspersed with a more distant, weaker and wetter noise, as if squeezed through a more compliant orifice. Only in retrospect did I realise that the sound must have been coming from the displaying male Great -- its prelude to the full squittery crescendo, which sadly, I never heard.

There were also more Black-bellied Sandgrouse here (4), and at one point I managed to get them scoped on the ground at about 100m range. Only a scope width away from these beautiful creatures I had one of the group of GBs, and only a few metres in front, in the same scope view, was a LB as well! A further GB was south of the track, being observed by a bloke in a 4WD who had presumably come along one of the other farm tracks.



I finally prized myself away from this excellent birding, and as I drove back along the track, a gorgeous male Montagu's Harrier glided across a wheat field, rounding off a staggeringly good morning's "steppe" birding. In a virtual clean-up of my targets for the morning, I had had my best-ever views of Great Bustard (approx 12, including my first ever ball-of-feathers displaying male), at quite close range, as well as Black-bellied Sandgrouse (9) Little Bustard (approx 9), Montie's (1m) and calling Quail (3-4, heard only), all in quite compact area, and all before breakfast!

I drove back to Madrid well satisfied, zipping down the N1 and then around the M40 to the Politecnica in only 30 mins or so, arriving before 11am. As I parked my hire car (Ford Focus from Hertz) I had brief glimpses of a Sardinian Warbler (curiously, my only one of the week, anywhere). What a great morning's birding, made even better by the fact I had gone with relatively low expectations!

**Wednesday 15th May**

*Sierra de Gredos, Tietar Valley and Embalse de Azutan*

Over Monday and Tuesday I had been to-ing and fro-ing about what to do with Wednesday, a holiday in Madrid and therefore lecture-free. Combined with Thursday until my lecture at 5pm, I had the opportunity to do up to nearly 2 full days' birding.

My plan before arriving in Spain was to drive up to Fuente De in the Picos de Europa hoping for Wallcreeper, Alpine Accentor, Snow Finch and Alpine Chough (as reported by Phil Cruttenden in 2000). I estimated it would be 5 hours' drive from Madrid, a figure Luis thought reasonable, but others had suggested more, a source of some doubt and concern. The weather, too, concerned me. Leading up to my visit it had been unseasonably poor with much snow in the Sistema Centrale, and presumably also in the Picos. Not knowing how this might affect my chances of the targets I continued to be in two minds right up to Tuesday. The clincher was when I received email from John Muddeman (I decided to run my plan by him to see if he thought it was sensible) claiming it would be 7 hours drive, and a good chance of dipping at the end of it.

He suggested the Pyrennees as a closer alternative with perhaps better chances of my targets (4.5 hours to Huesca, then good birding thereafter at Monasterio de San Juan de la Pena, and Valle del Hecho, etc). Even so, I ended up reasoning, this was a long way to go to dip, and perhaps the sort of area I should be thinking about for a special trip, not a one day "smash-and-grab". Thus, my new plan became a trip to the Sierra de Gredos, and in particular, La Laguna Grande, which was a more manageable two hours' drive from the capital.

The shorter drive to the Gredos meant I could afford the luxury of breakfast at the Residencia, and this out of the way I was on the road at about 8am. Birding really started once I hit the C500 to Hoyos del Espino, on which I noted Bee-eater and Red Kite, before stopping at the Parador. My brief visit was amazingly productive: Crested Tit, Bonelli's Warbler both heard then seen, followed less than a couple of minutes later by Citril Finch, all in the pines behind the car park.

From the Parador it is only a 15-20 minute up the Broom scented slopes to the Plataforma. I noted a flock of Linnet en route, but I no doubt passed many interesting birds. Rock Bunting, as in June '00, were found easily in the carpark but I didn't linger since I was keen to set out on a walk to the Laguna Grande, my target species Bluethroat and Alpine Accentor. While the latter can be encountered lower down, I thought that I had at least 2-3 hours walk to get into the latter's domain near the lake itself.

Soon after I commenced my ascent in the steep gorge that leads up from the car-park, a pair of Water Pipits shot off downstream, and a number of Ibex were visible on the high ridge on the east side of the river. Shortly afterwards I had great scoped views of a Rock Thrush, though it was not obliging enough to stay put while I sorted out the Coolpix and adaptor. After 20 minutes walk, the fairly steep, well maintained path emerges into a flatter area of alpine meadow with large tracts of broom. The first such area is good for Bluethroat (Richard had two here on Sunday when I returned with him), but I didn't see any at this point. An English bird-tour group with whom I had ascended to this point stayed to look for them, but I was fairly confident of encountering them elsewhere, and pressed on.

The sweet, green alpine meadow, where Skylarks and Northern Wheatears were abundant, extends as far as a small bridge across an exquisite stream (I noted a pair of Crag Martins here), and then the path enters a more rugged, rocky area. Approaching the bridge an unfamiliar song alerted me to the potential of a good bird nearby, and shortly afterwards I had locked onto a gorgeous white-spotted Bluethroat, my first lifer of the week. I had more views of the same bird as I looked back after crossing the bridge, and another two birds much higher up a few hours later, close to the top just as I had begun my descent from the Cirque back to the car-park.

There was still a lot of snow about and the higher I ascended the harder the going became, with long sections of the path completely covered. Accentors were abundant throughout the ascent to the Cirque, but sadly I could have seen *this* species from my back window in Oxford. Dunnocks were *everywhere*, and by the end of the day I was sick of the sight of them.

The view from the top when I reached the Cirque was stunning, a great basin surrounded by imposing peaks on three sides.



*Cirque de Gredos*

From here I had expected to see the Laguna Grande below, but it was still frozen and snow covered. I descended about 500m into the Cirque, passing a few hardy souls who had evidently started hours before me and were already heading back. Some, amazingly, were carrying skis and walking in ski-boots. I could only assume that not only had they climbed down to the base near the frozen lake, but then back up to the peaks on the other side, and that they were responsible for the ski tracks in the snow down on the south facing cliffs.

Not very far down I decided to stop, rest, drink and survey the scene. I rested for 30-40 minutes, scanning with bins regularly, and scoping distant passerines just in case, but there were no Alpine Accentors to be seen. Ravens came and went, as did a Kestrel. The best birds up here were Water Pipits, of which there were several, including one pair which made repeated climbs and twittering parachute descents nearby.

The highlights of the return trip were two Bluethroat and a large group of Ibex. It had been a beautiful walk, and not for the first time (and presumably not the last) I found myself wondering if my being a birder had actually spoiled what would otherwise have been a magic few hours. True, seeing Bluethroat had been a major highlight, the walk invigorating, the air clean, fresh and sweet, and the scenery magnificent, but I had dipped on a shitty little brown job and thus found it so much more difficult to concentrate on all these positives. Although by no means depressed or grumpy over the dip, my mood was certainly not improved when, on my return to the car, I re-read the relevant part of John Muddeman's book and realised that I probably should have carried on walking for another hour or so to the base of the Cirque to have had the best chance of the elusive Accentor.

The descent back to Hoyos del Espino yielded an Ortolan by the side of the road, but otherwise my next stop in the car was the Puerto del Pico on my way south to meet the N5. A Bonelli's Warbler was in pines opposite the small car-park when I stopped to admire the view and take a photo.

From here I drove south down the valley until I turned off through Arenas de San Pedro. After a rest break outside Arenas I carried on to Candeleda, and then south through the Teitar Valley, a picturesque area described in Muddeman's book, seeing little of special note (though Little Ringed Plover on sandbanks in the Teitar was interesting, and Woodchat Shrike is a smart bird).





*View from the Puerto del Pico*



*Rio Tietar*

The next good batch of birds came after I had turned south off the NV towards Calera y Chozas. Southern Grey Shrike, Little Bustard (good views), and Black-winged Stilt were all noted on the farm road leading to the village, which was en route to my final stop of the day, the backwaters of the Embalse de Azutan. Here I had Cattle Egret, Purple Heron, Night Heron, White Stork, Nightingale, Zitting Cisticola, Marsh Harrier and Stonechat, as well as hearing Reed and Cetti's Warblers. Red Avadavat I suppose officially counts as a lifer, but as a slightly dodgy introduced species, a couple of females were hardly worth getting excited about. The final bird of the day was a cracking male Montagu's, remarkably seen drifting across the N5 near Talavera as I set out on 120km trek back to Madrid.

I arrived back at the *Residencia* just in time to hear fireworks going off, a sure sign that Real had just won the European Cup!

### **Friday 17th May**

#### *Hoces del Duraton and Sierra de Guadarrama*

Richard arrived in Madrid at around 10pm on Thursday night, and in the early pre-dawn hours of Friday we were heading north towards the Hoces del Duraton in search of our first main birding target: Dupont's Lark. There is a very typical White Stork's nest on a the church spire just after the turnoff the N1 to Sepulveda, and we slowed to note this en route. Apart from this it was non-stop to the track leading to the Ermita de San Frutos, and we had parked up in "lark-city-central" as an overcast day dawned.

The air was filled with lark song of various species as we arrived. Worryingly though, the distinctive, mournful sliding whistle of Dupont's was not among them. We drove a little further along the track towards Ermita, stopping at a few points to listen and to my relief, eventually heard our first Dupont's. The last time I'd been here, in May 3 years previous, Steve Young and I had heard them immediately, but actually seeing them proved to be a completely kettle of larks, and today was not to be any different.

Having heard our first Dupont's, we then had a few birds singing almost constantly for the next three hours during which time the famous elusive skulker would lead us on as we approached, then fall silent, only for singing to start up again elsewhere. By the time we had our first glimpse we had already noted many good birds. Two Stone Curlew were virtually the first birds seen of any species, plus a party of several Chough, numerous Griffon, an Egyptian Vulture that Richard found drifting over us, three or four Black-eared Wheatear, Tawny Pipit, and of course the various larks: Skylark, Short-toed, Crested and Thekla were all present (did we have Calandra here too?).

Over an hour later, with the frustration levels rising, I finally picked up a bird in a small clearing amongst the low scrub and tussocks of grass. It was visible for only a few all-too-brief seconds, sufficient for Richard also to get it in his bins and add to his life list, but as I went for the scope it scuttled off out of sight. Richard was relieved, but also now understandably greedy for better views.

A couple of minutes later probably the same bird reappeared sitting up on a small mound of earth, but as I tried to give Richard directions it flew up. He now immediately locked on and we both now watched its song flight before it dropped down to the sandy ground further away and once again out of sight.

We then endured another long wait and more frustrating "chases", but were rewarded for our patience when the next bird to appear gave excellent views and stayed up long enough for me to fire off a couple of digiscoped shots.



It was now quite late -- 10ish -- and with birds still singing (perhaps the overcast, cool weather had helped us in this respect) we now drove on the final few hundred metres to the car park near the Ermita.

Amazingly, the first bird of the short walk down to the Ermita (apart from the huge numbers of Griffon) was a Sylvia warbler which flitted about in small bushes by the path. Although a lifer, I immediately recognised Orphean Warbler and relocated the bird as it flew across the path so R could confirm my ID. We spent some time down by the Ermita, admiring the view, taking occasional pictures of the Griffon, and noting other good birds such as Cirl Bunting, Crag Martin, Black Redstart, etc.



We finally dragged ourselves away from the gorge and drove back towards Sepulveda via Villar de Sobrepena, seeing still more of the ubiquitous Griffon. My second lifer target for the morning was Spectacled Warbler, and we stopped at various spots en route back to Sepulveda which looked to have a suitable scrubby habitat.

The very first such pause seemed hopeful when we heard a scratchy Sylvia sp., but locking onto it with bins, we realised it was a call that should have been recognised: Dartford Warbler. Obviously not the hoped-for lifer but still a gorgeous little bird (my first since several at Thursley Common in the winter). The second such stop yielded another Sylvia sp. which gave very brief glimpses before flitting out of sight. We followed to relocate it, Richard reasonably convinced was Spectacled. Being able to eliminate all but Whitethroat and Spectacled from the brief view we'd had initially, I was hopeful too, but since it was a potential lifer I wanted to be really sure. As we observed it over several minutes, but with only brief views at any one time before it shot off to some new bit of scrub (I only ever scoped it once or twice), I noted that the gizz was all right -- apparently smaller size, and twitchier and flightier than Whitethroat -- but it wasn't calling or singing, and no matter how hard I looked, I couldn't see dark lores, having earlier convinced myself that this diagnostic feature needed to be seen. After chasing it around a small area of scrub several times, we picked up raptor overhead -- a dark morph Booted Eagle -- and this was not only an excellent trip bird, but also had the effect of spooking the warbler into giving the diagnostic "trrrr" alarm call of Spectacled! Hooray!. Later reference to



field guides revealed what I should have noted previously, that the dark lores only applies to adult males, and we had seen a female or juvenile.

The final stop came as we passed a small quarry when Richard yelled out "Rock Thrush" and I slammed on the brakes. The blue/grey, orange, black and white stonker was sitting on a pile of rocks allowing me to snap a reasonable picture of it just using the 4x zoom on the Coolpix. A great bird to round off a perfect morning.



My original plan was to try for lunch in the square at Sepulveda where I had had one of my most memorable meals ever -- the local specialty, roast lamb -- with Lourdes Agapito and Pablo Bustos. We arrived at about 12.00, looked around the lovely old town square and found the restaurant I was looking for. It seemed worryingly deserted. We repaired for a *canya* in a local bar and then tried the restaurant again at 12.30. I poked my head in the door and encountered the chef who informed me they were open for lunch at 1pm. He even invited us in to show us the specialty of the house -- several plates of roast lamb in a huge earthenware oven. This mouth-watering sight convinced us of the merits of staying but we still had 30min to wait. We returned to the car, whereupon we decided instead to head towards Pedraza, also renowned for its roast lamb, but (i) a place I had not visited before and (ii) on our route back to Madrid.

Lunch in Pedraza, a stunning, perfectly preserved medieval town at the base of the Sierra de Guadarrama, was not as amazing as the meal I remembered in Sepulveda in July '98, but it was still excellent. We sat in upstairs in a beautiful old building looking out onto the town square sharing a quarter of a lamb roasted in the traditional Spanish manner, with garlic and white wine. Meanwhile, the only significant rain of the day fell. By the time we eaten our fill, and my sleepy head had received the caffeine kick it needed via the now mandatory *cafe doble*, the rain had cleared and we were ready for more birding. Wandering through the town we noted Chough, House Sparrow, White Stork, House Martin and Swift, and we paused briefly to note the ridge to the north where Bonelli's Eagle has been reported. There was no time to linger, though, since we still had one more significant stop before I had to be back at the *Politecnica* for my final lecture.

Our final target for the day was Citril Finch at perhaps its best known site near Madrid, the Puerto de Navacerrada. The scenic drive up through the mountains was becoming slightly stressful for me as it began to rain again, and I worried that we would not have enough time at the top of the pass to find our quarry. Luck was on our side, however. Despite the rain, within the fifteen minutes we had to spare we heard Crested Tit, both Fire- and Goldcrests and Raven, saw our first Black Vulture of the trip, and sorted the main target for the site, Citril Finch: four birds were found within minutes near bins at the entrance to the *Zona Militar*, and, both content with our day's lifers (me: Orphean and Spectacled Warblers, Richard: Dupont's Lark, Citril Finch) we drove back down the south side of the Guadarrama back to the *Politecnica*.

While I delivered my final two hours of lectures and bade farewell to Luis, Richard wandered about the campus and the surrounding scrub hoping for perhaps a Sardinian or Subalpine Warbler (I had seen Subalp in the car park a day or two early). By 8pm we were on the road, but sadly stuck in stationary traffic on the M40: we, along with seemingly half of all *Madrilenos* were trying to leave the city for the weekend. A few miles along the N5 we eventually cleared the worst and we were on our way to Extremadura: first stop the Monfrague campsite for the night.

## **Saturday 18th May**

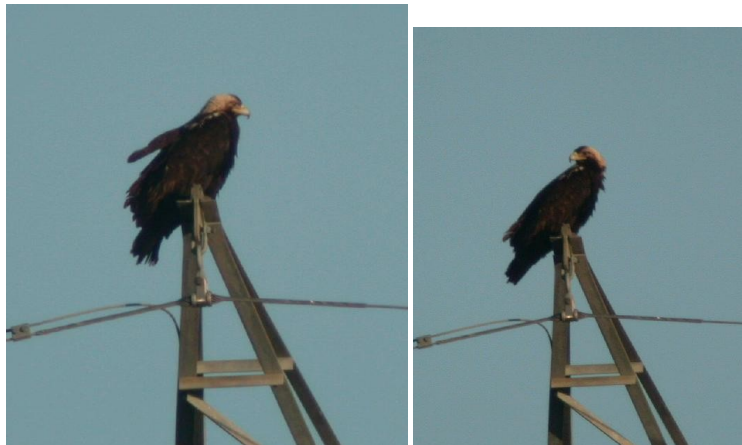
*Parque Natural de Monfrague and the Caceres-Trujillo Steppes*

*(or "How to see (almost) all the Extremaduran specialties in one day")*

We rose relatively early the next morning and, after noting Azure-winged Magpies all over the campsite, we headed south through the park. The aim was to get to Sandgrouse and Bustard country while it was still fairly early (I had even toyed with the idea of sleeping in the car near Caceres, but decided in the end that even the less than salubrious tent was preferable to the car after what had been a long day, especially for the driver!). In doing so, though, we passed a number of good sites in and around Monfrague. Still, as we drove towards our "steppe" destination the temptation to

check out the Imperial Eagle site en-route was too great, and we made the minor diversion up the farm track to see if the eagles I had seen in '99 and '00 were present again this year.

Literally within seconds Richard had picked up a huge raptor gliding low above the horizon to the north and as soon as I saw the pale head, straight-edged wings and narrow tail I knew we had SIE. As I rushed for the scope it landed on a pylon and we now enjoyed leisurely views of this fantastic and rare Aquila. Showing little white on the shoulders, this was almost certainly the same bird Steve and I had seen in '99, which we had then supposed to be a youngish male. With the bird apparently fairly settled on its lookout we approached in the car to a better viewpoint (still c. 800m) where we were joined by three Spanish birders. It was bathed in perfect clear golden light, and with no heat haze yet to distort the view I managed several decent photos with the coolpix.



An elusive Rock Sparrow called from a tree near the car, and an alarm call, picked up and identified as Golden Oriole by the oldest of the three Spaniards alerted us to the presence of a pale morph Booted Eagle drifting by at remarkably close range nearly directly overhead.

Although we could have spent a lot longer here, more crackers (and potential lifers for R) were beckoning us just down the road. With some reluctance, therefore, we dragged ourselves away.

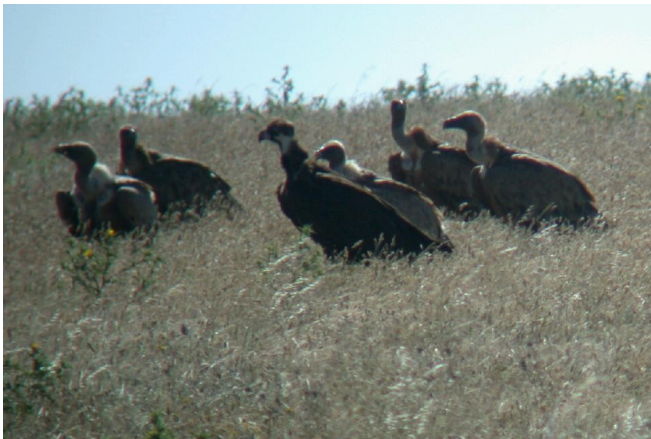
Next stop was scheduled to be the back roads north-east of Caceres good for both bustards and sandgrouse, but as we approached the well-known Black-shouldered Kite site near Monroy on the CC912, once again it seemed foolish at least not to have a look. I had dipped here on three previous occasions, but all of those were later in the day. My one previous European Black-shouldered Kite had been on the Rio Salor plains on an early March morning in '99. We pulled off the road next to the conspicuous cluster of firs home to a large colony of White Storks and scanned north over the dehesa. Amazingly once again within seconds Richard had picked up a small hovering raptor and identified it as our target. Like the Eagle site half an hour earlier we could easily have dwelt longer, but I was anxious not to miss the cooler morning hours when I was sure we would have better chances for sandgrouse, so after another short but pleasant and productive diversion we were back on the road.

On the much-improved Torrejon--Caceres road it was only a short 20 minute drive before we had reached the minor road which leads past the farms La Encinilla and Hocino de Arriba which had been so productive for me on previous visits. From not long after 9.30 until about 12noon we drove slowly along this road, stopping and scanning regularly. Although we noted all four of our targets, I was disappointed by the numbers and quality of views we obtained. A recently ploughed field north of the road not far from La Encinilla was most productive for sandgrouse: 4-6 Black-bellied in parties of two, and two pairs of Pin-tailed, while a single Great Bustard followed by a distant group of 11 a few km along was a poor return compared to my birding in the Jarama valley a few days earlier. Various Little Bustards squeezed out their tight raspberries; one initially gave good close views but managed to slink away unseen in the long grass as we approached on foot down a farm track.

At the farmhouse of La Encinilla itself we stayed for some time, trying to track down a long-tailed bird that had apparently flown to a tree near the small dam by the road. Great-spotted Cuckoo, the prime suspect, would have been a lifer for Richard but we left empty-handed after deciding it had somehow slipped away unnoticed. As we drove on we observed several Montagu's Harriers in this prime habitat, always a great bird to see, but without question the highlight of these few hours came as we neared the junction of the road with the Santa Marta road. A few Griffon gliding close to the ground first alerted us to the presence of something of interest. A cluster of 20-30 vultures, mostly Griffon, but a few majestic Black were huddled around a carcass in a field only a hundred metres or so from the



road. Using the car as a hide we sat and watched, fascinated, as birds came and went. Once or twice a Black Vulture would assert its authority, but for the most part the Black looked on with a certain air of disdain as a hardcore of Griffon jumped about and squabbled looking for all the world like the Scouse vultures of the penultimate scene in *The Jungle Book*.



Our itinerary was taking us on a grand circuit of the plains north of Caceres and Trujillo, and our lunchtime destination was the latter, an impressive walled town, famed as the birthplace of conquistador Pissaro. Before heading there for much deserved lunch I was keen for yet another brief diversion, this time to the Embalse de Guadiloba. 10-15 Collared Pratincole were sitting on the spit into the lake and flying about. A new hide overlooks this point but it was locked. Nevertheless the views from the path down to the hide over the spit and lake were adequate and we also noted 100+

Cattle Egret, Little Tern (we only saw one, but surely there were a few about), two Little Ringed Plover and added Great Crested Grebe and Gadwall the trip list.

Although we now drove the back roads through Santa Marta en route to Trujillo, the only significant additions to the morning's collection were Roller, and Red-rumped Swallow (a few were hawking over the bridge west of Santa Marta). Richard also spotted a Terrapin sp. in the water below the bridge.

The steep pre-lunch walk up to the castle in Trujillo overlooking the plains to the west was tiring -- all the driving of the last 36 hours was taking its toll -- but it was worth it for the views of Pallid Swift. There were hundreds of swifts scything through the warm air, a reasonable proportion of which were Pallid. The views from above to the church towers in the plaza were particularly instructive: the improved contrast of the birds in front of the pale stone made picking the paler but more "contrasty" Pallids, relatively easy, their bigger white throat patches and darker eye markings showing up well.



We enjoyed much needed refreshments in the form of gazpacho, some salad, a small beer and a double espresso in the atmospheric plaza before making our way back down the hill to the car and soon we were on our way north back to Monfrague. The road from Trujillo to Torrejon is now much improved and it was not long before we were driving up the steep ascent to the Castillo.

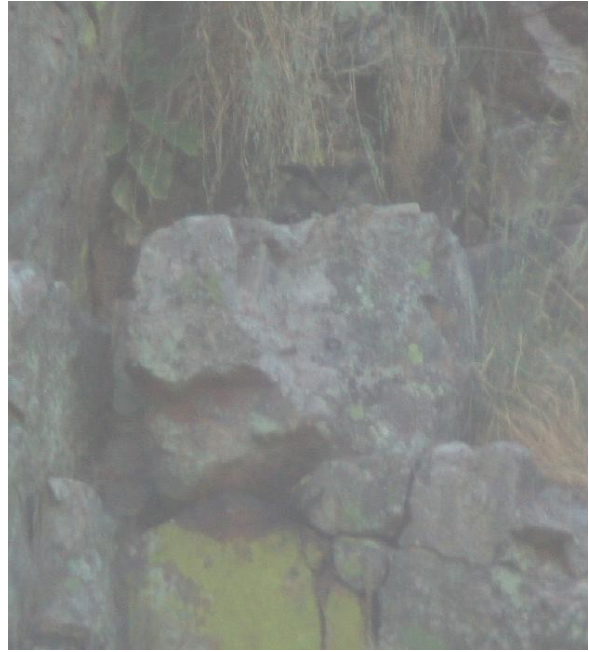
Half way up we passed a pair of birders -- rapidly established to be French -- who were scoping something up on the ridge behind the castle. Of course we stopped to enquire (the impressive ridge stretching east away from the castle looks perfect for Bonelli's Eagle, my Extremaduran bogie bird) and learned that they thought they might be onto a Black Wheatear, but were not sure. It was currently out of sight, but since this was not far from where Steve and I had this relatively rare cracker in '99, we decided it would be worth staking out for a few minutes and we set up our scopes to scan the rocks at the top of the ridge about 200-300m along from the Castillo. Within minutes a dark passerine had hopped out into view, and as the French guys continued to question their own judgement it turned nicely in profile to wave its snowy-white botty at us. Having confirmed the ID for ourselves and for them, we thanked them for the gen and carried on up to the castle where our target was another white-rumped cracker.

I had seen White-rumped Swift here relatively easily on successive days in early June '00 but Steve and I hadn't seen any sign in mid-May '99 (not technically a dip since we weren't really looking). Richard and I had heard second- and third-hand rumours that they might be back already this year, but we had not actually spoken to any birders who could confirm this, and they usually return in late May. We spent the next hour or so atop the castle. Unlike June two years previous when swifts and hirundines we constantly buzzing about the castle, there was very little activity other than the ubiquitous Griffon Vultures, a few Crag Martin and Blue Rock Thrush. At one point a party of 15-20 Common Swift suddenly appeared and we furiously checked them all out before they drifted over to Penafalcon and eventually completely out of sight.

This first dip of the day was a bit disappointing, but not entirely unexpected in view of the lack of positive gen. Our other main targets for the day were Eagle Owl and Red-necked Nightjar, and with plenty of time before dusk we decided to drive through the park and on to the Embalse de Arrocampo.



A brief stop at Mirador de Bascula yielded Black Vulture, but we did not linger long enough to find anything else of interest. We carried on the few km to the Mirador de Portilla del Tietar where we were hoping for Eagle Owl later that night. A stop here yielded Griffon Vultures, and a Black Stork which flew around the rock face. As we were about to leave we got chatting with a pair of Danish birders who, with their rather tolerant wives, were picnicking here. We asked about Eagle Owl and I was forced to double-take when they replied that a roosting adult was in their scopes at the left end of the rock face. Nestling on a ledge above a lichen-stained rock, part of a tall pillar isolated to the left of the main rock-face, was the impressive bird -- perhaps *the* most watched Owl in the Europe! -- which we had not expected to see until much later that evening. Without directions we would never have found this on our own and the Danish birders confessed on our congratulations that they too had been put onto it by other birders earlier in the day (later that evening when I tried to show it to others through my scope some of them still couldn't see it!). With the sun almost directly in our faces above the cliff, the light was poor for photography (what a picture I could have had if we'd been here in the morning!) but I fired off a couple of shots with the coolpix for the record before once again we were in the car, this time non-stop to Embalse de Arrocampo.



I have been to this compact but amazingly rich wetland several times before and knew it quite well. In the two hours from 6-8pm Richard and I collected all of the "usual" birds: several Purple Gallinule; a good collection of heron sp., Little Egret, Night Heron, Grey Geron, Purple Heron, and best of all, Little Bittern (One burst from the reeds at the north-western edge of the causeway. I called it and got Richard onto it in the few seconds before it dropped back to dense cover); Marsh Harrier (one late on drifted above the western reed-bed, spooking a Shoveler in the process); Black Kite (remarkably seen trying to catch fish in its talons); a collection of warblers to rival the Heron tally: Cetti's, Fan-tailed, Reed and Great Reed, Melodious (Richard's attention was drawn to leaf-warbler song in scrub to the north of the reeds and got me onto this nice addition to the trip list), and the highlight of the evening for me, Savi's Warbler. This latter bird, though heard on all my previous visits here, was a lifer for me and gave great views perched atop reeds on the eastern side of the causeway giving me the time and the views to note all the important ID features. Also noted here were Spanish Sparrow (a few buzzed about in the north-west corner), a pair of female Red Avadavat, Bee-eater, Southern Grey Shrike and Gadwall. Sadly the Heron count did not include Squacco, though John Muddeman's email of earlier in the week had suggested they may now be established here, and likewise we saw no sign of Little Crake which he had said to look out for, hardly a big surprise. Nevertheless, a most satisfactory two hours birding, blighted only by the loss of my specs, which dropped from my pocket at some point, never to be seen again (the second pair I have lost birding in Spain!).

At 8pm it was still quite light but we got back in the car for the 30-40 minute drive back to Portilla del Tietar. A crowd of 20 or more -- as big as any I had seen in 3 years of coming here -- had gathered and were scoping something, although at 4 o'clock relative to where we'd seen the adult earlier in the day. I immediately set up my scope and confirmed the adult had not moved, subsequently soliciting more detailed directions to the other bird -- an Eagle Owl chick. As the light faded the adult became a bit more active, opening its eyes wider and turning its head occasionally until eventually it stretched its massive rounded wings and flapped across the rock face to another perch. After a short rest here it took to the air again, this time flying towards us over the reservoir before disappearing behind us -- magic!. From various comments overheard in the general excited chatter after the Owl's departure it seemed we were not the only birders who were now off to search the park for Red-necked Nightjar. As we drove towards the Mirador de Bascula we passed the French birders we'd met earlier in the day (and who had also been at the Eagle Owl stakeout), parked up next to some good looking Nightjar habitat. We carried on to the *Mirador* itself and wandered across the road to the open scrubby area where I twice been successful previously. A bird was knocking out its repetitive song and we saw its silhouette fly across to a tree not far off. We approached hoping for a better view but it must have flown off again unseen since it was not to be found in the tree we'd seen it fly to.

Eventually we decided to settle for this view -- not brilliant, but given the context, tickable for Richard -- and started to make our way back to the campsite. A few km beyond the dam wall we encountered two cars in the road and slowed to discover one of them was the French birders'. We pulled up slowly next to them and they pointed excitedly ahead --



the reason was immediately obvious. Sitting in the middle of the road at less than 10 metres range was a Nightjar. It seemed quite still and content, apparently unperturbed by the car headlights which illuminated it to give us crippling views. Another car joined our group, and fortunately they too were interested (whether or not they were birders) and so we were under no pressure to unblock the road. After a while we all edged forward on foot greedy for even closer views and in the hope of getting a photo with a compact camera. Down to about 5m or less it flushed, but flew only 20m or so down the road before settling, once again, in full view, at the side of the road. We decided it was time to head back to the campsite, but as we cautiously pulled the car forward and beyond, Richard, hanging out of the window, managed a crafty snap on his compact 35mm camera.

We finally returned to the campsite where it was now too late to get anything substantial to eat, but we enjoyed a beer and some crisps in the bar and reflected on the day's birding. A Scop's Owl singing from across the road was the first of two birds heard, the second as we prepared for bed after an exhausting but rewarding day.

## Sunday 19th May

*Monfrague, Belen steppes, Sierra de Gredos*

After packing up the tent and checking out of the campsite we drove back into the park, stationing ourselves at the top of the castle in the hope of finding our major dip of the previous day, White-rumped Swift. Once again though, we missed out. Since it was not clear that they had returned for the summer yet, there seemed little point in staying for too long when the time could perhaps be spent more profitably elsewhere.

As we descended in the car from the castle we stopped briefly to observe a Woodlark singing vociferously on one of the cork oaks. A chunky finch flew out from behind the oaks and across the road giving me just enough of a view to clock white bars on the broad wings and shout Hawfinch to Richard before it disappeared.

Our new plan was to drive the plains east of Trujillo which stretch out for several miles below the village of Belen. Various trip reports and site guides expound the birding delights of this area, but -- perhaps shamefully given that this was my fourth visit to Extremadura -- I had never been there. Having given up on White-rumped Swift, our only remaining target for Extremadura was Great-spotted Cuckoo, and Muddeman's book suggested that they are often encountered in the steppes near Belen. On this particular morning the region failed to live up to its high billing, and we didn't see any of the steppe specialty species that the area is famed for, not too much of a surprise since the day was now heating up. More disappointing was dipping again on Great-spotted Cuckoo. Indeed the only birds of note we saw here were a pair of distant little owls, and -- rescuing the journey from being a total write-off -- staggering, close views of a Short-toed Eagle gliding impressively over the car.

Greedily eager to try new habitats to add to the trip list -- and possibly life list -- Richard was intrigued by my mid-week jaunt to the Sierra de Gredos, not much more than an hour or two from where we ended up by the time we left the Belen steppes and joined the N5. After lunch, and a much needed siesta at a services just after the Puerto de Miravete, we headed back east along the N5 and then back up to the Plataforma, determined to get to the base of the Cirque and connect with Apline Accentor.

Although a brief stop at the Parador was unproductive, another -- at km 9 on the road up to La Plataforma -- was more fruitful, yielding great views of Ortolan, and Richard added an Iberian race Yellow Wag to the trip list in the car park. We set out in beautiful sunshine in good spirits and gradually accumulated the same set of birds as I had a few days previously along the way, including a few fantastic Bluethroat. A very close encounter with about 20 Ibex soon after the bridge was an added bonus, and after two to two-and-a-half hours we had reached the spot where I had given up last time. From here the Refugio on the far side of the lake -- our ultimate target -- was visible and did not seem too distant, so I was very surprised when some walkers we talked to on their way back suggested it would take us another two hours to get there.



As we pressed on the going became harder. The occasional snow patches we had encountered up high were replaced instead by occasional bare patches amongst the extensive tracts of snow which had survived in the more sheltered lower parts. Footsteps through the snow indicated the general direction of the path and mostly we followed these, although worryingly there was increasing evidence that a few footfalls had broken through revealing dangerous looking gaps between rocks. A lack of care, or even just bad luck could lead to a nasty ankle injury if we stepped in the wrong spot, the last thing either of us wanted for our walk from the car.

We had had no sniff at all of the rarer Accentor throughout our walk, and on reaching the edge of La Laguna as the last of the picnickers were packing up to head back we rested to assess our options. While near the refugio seemed the best bet for our target, scanning this area carefully with the one scope we had brought between us revealed no evidence of avian activity. Additionally, now that we were down by the frozen lake-side we could see that we still had at least 30-45 minutes walking ahead of us to get there, mostly over melting snow. Best, we reasoned, for discretion to be the better part of valour, to resign ourselves to dipping and begin to make our way back.

We maintained a high pace for most of the return, and rarely stopped for birds. Nearing the final descent after the bridge, Richard scoured the large tract of broom and was rewarded with another two Bluethroat, but I had walked on, my mind distracted by the prospect of two more hours' driving still to come to get us in range for tomorrow's itinerary (in retrospect, we may well have been advised to stay the night at the local campsite at the bottom of the valley where the various pine-loving species and even Dipper could have been good chances).

The drive was uneventful, and apart from some difficulty in finding the right exit from the A6, we had arrived in Manzanares el Real soon after dark. After pitching the tent in the car headlights in the Parque campsite 2-3km above the town, we drove back in and enjoyed a few canyas, a meal of stuffed peppers, and an episode of Spanish Popstars on the TV as we compiled our notes for the day. We awoke the next morning to the song of a Blackcap (another trip tick), and the sight of the impressive cliffs above us, which are reputedly home to Eagle Owl and hundreds of Griffon.

## **Monday 19th May**

### *Valdetorres de Jarama, Puerto de Navafria*

I had been disappointed with the views we'd had of both bustards near Caceres and I was keen to share my newly discovered area of Valdetorres with Richard. Since most of his targets had either been ticked or placed in the "too hard" basket, he had no objection and we spent the first half of the morning driving the same area as I had explored on Tuesday morning. Our tally of nearly 40 Great Bustard (at one point we counted three groups totally 36 individuals simultaneously in view) and excellent views of both Great and Little made this a suitably rewarding excursion.



The final bit of the morning's itinerary, before I had to be at the airport for mid-afternoon flight, was designed to give me one last crack at what seems destined to be my Spanish bogie-bird, Bonelli's Eagle. In an email exchange with a birder who'd written to me about my Extremadura '99 trip report, he claimed three Bonelli's cruising the ridge immediately to the north of Pedraza. A casual drive over the Puerto de Navafria seemed like a pleasant way of getting there, and so it proved.

Leaving Valdetorres and travelling up through the villages of Torrelaguna and Lozoyuela in the foothills of the Guadarama we enjoyed a brief encounter with male Hen Harrier (the initial reaction of another Montie's had to be quickly revised as we took note of its unmarked pale-grey, four-fingered wings).

The pine forests on the southern slopes and scrubby areas on the descent to Pedraza yielded a good selection of warblers: Bonelli's (sadly not its now-most-wanted namesake), Subalpine (Richard, keen to add this to his personal trip list knowing that I'd had one at the Politecnica earlier in the week, patiently hunted an elusive one down), Orphea (we were led to this in our efforts to track down the perpetrator of a distinctive but unrecognised song, glad to see it well again, but embarrassed and irritated not to have recognised the song), and Melodious, as well as Crested Tit and Firecrest (both heard only). A pair of Citril Finch in the deserted picnic area at the *puerto* was nice, but disappointingly for Richard, we had split up and by the time he had run over they had flown off into the forest.

Ultimately, the time left at Pedraza was ridiculously short to be expecting to find an Eagle, let alone one as rare as Bonelli's. Munching a few Spanish cakey things we sat by the car half-heartedly staking out the ridge to opposite, but seeing very little, until reluctantly I called time. We pounded down the N1 to the airport, me fuelled by yet another *cafe doble*, arriving as now seems traditional with only minutes to spare.