

# Birds and birding in Madrid

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The Iberian Peninsula, amid two continents, has a range of geological and climate features suitable for the presence of a wide range of ecosystems, making it one of the most important biodiversities of the North hemisphere, and with no doubt, the place with the largest wildlife variety in Western Europe. These natural resources couldn't be found without maintaining the present traditional uses of land in many of its regions such as Extremadura and Andalucía. Examples of this are the large areas of unirrigated land, used mainly for grain, as well as the farming of herds of cattle, sheep and pigs. In addition, the existence of large private hunting grounds has kept large areas of woods and natural pastures almost without change in the last centuries. A reflection of this situation is a natural treasure represented by a high number of vertebrates, and specifically birds. About 370 species of birds are resident or regular visitors in the Iberian Peninsula, as well as a good number of vagrants and rarities which arrive mostly to our coasts.

tion of 85 pairs in 2006, and the third one, the Great Bustard which population represents at least 3% of the total of these birds in the world.

Madrid is placed right in the centre of Spain at about 1,900 feet above sea level. It has an area of 3,080 square miles (nearly 8,000 square kilometres) and a large mountainous area which covers its northern limit in a Northeast to Southwest direction. This mountain chain, which occupies almost the 40% of the total territory of Madrid, is known as Sierra de Guadarrama. The highest point of Sierra de Guadarrama is the Peñalara peak at 7,965 feet, placed inside the only Natural Park present in Madrid. These mountains act literally as a high wall against the cold Northern winds, and thus make the South slope much warmer than the Northern side, helping the growth of a flora typically Mediterranean. Nevertheless Madrid has a continental climate, characterized by very cold Winters and very hot and dry Summers. This climate of extreme temperatures determines the vegetation present in the region with woods of different quercus species.

To the South of Madrid, the Tajo river (or Tagus in English) works as a natural frontier for a few miles in the South East border of the region. This river crosses the country from East to West.

For a better understanding of the environmental diversity of Madrid and their most representative species, we will divide the region split into their different habitats:

**The Alpine Zone:** Mainly bare peaks, meadows and pyrenean brooms above 5,900 feet, where there are no trees, and consisting of the mountains of Sierra de Guadarrama, Somosierra and El Rincón. The most interesting species in these ecosystems are the two resident birds, Golden Eagle (12 - 14 pairs), and Red-billed Chough, plus Ortolan Bunting, Water Pipit, Tawny Pipit, Northern Wheatear, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Bluethroat and Alpine Accentor amongst the summer visitors. A very interesting place for birding is the known as



Although the city of Madrid has one of the highest densities of population in Europe, its region also has around the 60% of its territory under the protection of some kind of environmental regulation. So in the region of Madrid we find a Natural Park called Peñalara, three Regional Parks, and some other diverse nature reserves. In addition in Madrid there are a few Important Bird Areas which represent all together 23% of the total territory of the region. Currently there is also a project under revision to declare the mountains of Guadarrama as the fifteenth National Park of Spain.

Very few people arriving in Madrid, including wildlifers, know about the importance of the Madrid region for the conservation of some threatened species of flora and fauna. And we have three interesting examples. First is the Spanish Imperial Eagle, an endemic raptor from the Iberian Peninsula which has its highest concentration in the Monte de El Pardo, a nature reserve with restricted access which borders on the North side of the city and covers an area of 16,000 hectares. A total of 28 pairs of this eagle bred in Madrid in 2007. The second case is another raptor, the Eurasian Black Vulture, with a total popula-



Ortolan Bunting

Puerto de la Morcuera, a mountain pass at 5,900 feet above sea level with some good populations of Ortolan Bunting, Skylark, Tawny Pipit and Northern Wheatear, while Rock Bunting, also present in other type of habitats, is quite easy to see here. Between Puerto de la Morcuera and the city centre there are only about 40 miles, that means just 45 minutes by car depending on traffic.

#### **Pine woods of Middle and High mountains:**

Between the 4,900 and 6,500 feet of elevation we find some of the best woods of Scots Pine (*pinus sylvestris*) of the country. This type of forest is well present in the mentioned Sierra de Guadarrama. In some of the upper zones we also find some patches of European Black Pines (*pinus nigra*) introduced here from old reforestation works, while under 4,900 still grow some Mountain Pines (*pinus uncinata*). In the woods of Scots Pine at a higher altitude, there are small, open clearings where Citril Finch can be seen. Other interesting species are the Crested Tit, Crossbill, Raven, Pied-Flycatcher (the endemic subspecies *iberiae*), both Firecrest and Goldcrest, and European Nightjar. The best known pine woods with a high concentration in these species is the area around the ski resort of Navacerrada, at 6,100 feet a.s.l. The distance between Navacerrada and the city centre is again only about 45 miles.

**Deciduous Forest:** Woods in general between 3,300 and 4,900 feet high. The most abundant tree in these kind of ecosystems is the Pyrenean Oak (*quercus pyrenaica*), although there are also some Silver Birch (*betula pendula*) and one of the most southern beech forest in Europe, the known as Hayedo de Montejo de la Sierra, at Sierra del Rincón. In these woods there are many other species of trees such as Yews (*taxus baccata*), Holy Trees (*ilex aquifolium*), Whitebeams (*sorbus aria*) and an interesting selection of *cistus*. This is perhaps one of the poorest habitats in terms of variety of interesting birds for foreign birders but there are still good numbers of Honey Buzzard, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Azure-winged Magpies. Wryneck, Cirl Bunting, Tree Pipit, Bonelli's Warbler and European Nightjar are also present here. In the open fields with some Common Hawthorns the scarce Red-backed Shrike still survives. There are not more than six breeding territories in the valleys of Lozoya and Somosierra, in the North of the region.

**Mediterranean forest:** This is perhaps one of the most interesting ecosystems for birdwatchers coming from other countries. The vegetation in these places is mainly represented by Holm and Cork Oaks, but also Common Junipers, Umbrella Pines, Portuguese Oaks and a wide variety of bushes such as the ubiquitous Gum Cistus (*cistus ladanifer*) and Spanish Lavender (*lavandula stoechas*). Regarding the birds, Madrid has a population of 28 pairs of Spanish Imperial Eagle. This is out of a total population of 234 pairs, according to the 2007 census. (all in Spain except two pairs in Portugal). Surprisingly, the highest density in the world of this threatened raptor is in the Monte de El Pardo, which I mentioned earlier, a nature reserve property of the Spanish State and an old Royal hunting reserve very restricted access to the public. This vast area extends from the North of the city towards the Sierra de Guadarrama.

Together with the Monte de El Pardo, the Important Bird Area of the rivers Cofio and Alberche in the South West of the region... these are probably the best examples of this type of habitat. Sometimes the woods become clearer with less trees as a result of centuries of cattle grazing, giving rise to a savanna-like look in the landscape known locally as "dehesa", one of the most typical habitats of Western Spain. Another very special

raptor is the Bonelli's Eagle, but unfortunately in Madrid there are only two pairs.

Black Vulture is also well present in Madrid, especially in the Lozoya valley with a total of 77 breeding pairs in 2006, almost 90% of the total population of this vulture in Madrid.

The shy Black Stork is another usual inhabitant of the mediterranean forest. In the region of Madrid only 11 pairs bred in 2007, according to information given by the Environment Council of Madrid. All of them were in the South West corner of Madrid.

The other endemic of the Iberian Peninsula, the Azure-winged Magpie is also another resident species in the Mediterranean forest, being very common in some areas of Madrid. However it is absent in the Eastern half of the region.

In the transition from the Mediterranean forest to more open habitats such as farming, we can also find both Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrikes (the first only in Spring and Summer), and in the early Spring the Great Spotted Cuckoo. In some of these places the presence of Red-necked Nightjar is not uncommon and in the South West of Madrid there are a few pairs of the scarce Black-shouldered Kite.



*Great Spotted Cuckoo*

**Wetlands / marshes:** In the region of Madrid there are numerous reservoirs that supply water to the big city and the smaller towns in the surrounding areas, but there are also some natural wetlands which contain interesting populations of amphibians such as the Sharp-ribbed Salamander and the endemic Bosca's Newt, and of course there are birds, mostly in the Winter and during the migration times.

The best wetlands for some of the specialities are to be found in the South and South East of Madrid. In particular, in the Sureste Regional Park, there are healthy populations of Purple Heron, some Little Bittern, Red-crested Pochard, Purple Swamp-Hen, and Marsh Harrier with about 55 breeding pairs, approximately 7% of the total population of this raptor in Spain. Other species with an occasional presence are the White-headed and Ferruginous Ducks and the Squacco Heron.

The San Juan lagoon deserves a special mention. This is another Important Bird Area next to the Tajuña river and only 47 hectares in size, but surrounded by an interesting belt of reeds where Penduline Tit, Bearded Reedling and Reed Bunting occur. In the nearby farms the Stone Curlew is present all year around. Nowadays it is protected as a Fauna Refuge.

In the gypsum cliffs that surround this and other lagoons in the South one can also often see Eagle Owl, Black Wheatear, Rock Sparrow, Peregrine Falcon, Red-billed Chough and Blue Rock Thrush.

**Farming land and natural pastures:** Certainly the most representative species of the open fields is the Great Bustard. In Madrid there are 15 leks of breeding males. In the 2004 census there were around 1,300 individuals, which is nearly the 3% of its world population. These breeding sites are placed mainly in dry land of cereals to the East of Madrid, all around another Important Bird Area, known as Plains of the rivers Henares and Jarama.

With Great Bustards we also find Little Bustards. In the census made in the Spring of 2005 were counted 2,647 individuals. In the winter census only 975 were recorded in the same places in the same year. We know that the Little Bustards of Madrid overwinter in areas of Extremadura and La Mancha.



*Little Bustard*

Two other special steppe birds are Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. In the census of 2005 a population of 50-100 Black-bellied were recorded, while the presence of Pin-tailed was merely anecdotal, with just a few birds in the South and East of the region, bordering the provinces of Guadalajara and Toledo.

We shouldn't forget to mention the two harriers, Montagu's and Hen. In the 2001 census there were 26 pairs of Hen Harriers, while in 2003 the population of Montagu's was 128 pairs.

The Lesser Kestrel, a colony species which breeds in towns and old building, is also considered related to the pseudosteppe habitats. A population, estimated at 200 breeding pairs, is suffering, as in the rest of its breeding range, an important decline due over all to the loss of its natural habitat.

Besides all these species mentioned here we can also find in good numbers of Stone Curlews, Bee-eaters, Crested, Calandra and Short-toed Larks... less common but also present are Roller and Black-eared Wheatear. However the Corn Bunting is by far one of the commonest species of the open fields in Madrid... and Spain.

**Riparian forests:** All the rivers present at the region of Madrid belong to the river basin of the Tajo, the longest of the rivers in the Iberian Peninsula being 630 miles long.

The most representative riparian vegetation is repre-

sented by trees like Willows, Alder, Common Ash, Black and White Poplars, Elm and Tamarisk.

The typical species of birds present in these kind of ecosystems are Golden Oriole, Wryneck, Scops Owl, Penduline Tit, Spanish Sparrow, a gregarious bird that in Madrid the 85% of the population breed in the vegetation of riversides, Green Woodpecker (ssp. Sharpei) and a wide selection of common passerines in our latitudes but scarce in other countries such as Cetti's Warbler, Melodious Warbler, Nightingale, Short-toed Treecreeper or Hawfinch... This is possibly the place to watch some of the commonest birds present in Madrid and also in Spain.

**Towns and Madrid city:** Strange as it may seem the city of Madrid is another interesting place for birdwatching, specially those large urban parks of the capital like Parque del Oeste, the Royal Botanical Garden or El Retiro. These are mainly common birds but with some interesting species for the visitor such as Scops Owl, Serin, Iberian Green Woodpecker, Hawfinch or Golden Oriole. Placed at the west of the city there is an extensive park called Casa de Campo of almost 1,800 hectares. This is the biggest public urban park of the city and it is mainly formed by "dehesas" of Holm Oaks, but Stone Pines are also present and of course lots of foreign species. Besides the species mentioned I shouldn't forget the Hoopoe, Tawny Owl and Stock Dove amongst the most representative birds. In the last years an invasion of Monk Parakeets is taking place in some cities of the country, being one of easiest birds to see within the city. Black Kites also breed in this park.

Regarding raptors there are other species breeding in the city such as Common Kestrel and the Peregrine Falcon. From the roughly 30 pairs nesting in the region of Madrid, at least two are breeding as wild birds in the city itself, and one of them using a nest box put by SEO/BirdLife in 2006.

In some of the villages, now considered as towns, within the Madrid area, as in the case of Alcalá de Henares, Lesser Kestrels still breed in acceptable numbers. At least 25 pairs breed here together with White Storks, which are common and present even in Winter.

Other species that are regularly seen around the buildings of some of the areas of the capital are Crested Lark, Black Redstart, White Wagtail and Serin, just to mention a few. And what can I say about the ubiquitous Spotless Starling, well present all year round. It's also worth paying attention to the flocks of Common Swifts which could include some Pallid Swifts, that breed in Madrid in very low numbers.

So to sum up, in Madrid we have excellent examples of the different ecosystems which are traditionally visited by birdwatchers when visit Spain. Extremadura, for example, has in Madrid part of its ecosystems well represented in Monte de El Pardo or the plains of the rivers Henares and Jarama... Spanish Imperial Eagles and Great Bustards in these two spots. The Pyrenees would be also represented with the mountains of Sierra de Guadarrama with its Alpine Accentors, Rock Thrushes and Citril Finches... and of course the Madrid version of Coto de Doñana in the Sureste Regional Park with the presence of Purple Heron, Purple Swamp-Hen and Little Bittern... and all of this at less than an hour from a European capital.

On the other hand and scarcely an hour and a half northwards by car you can reach the Parque Natural de las Hoces del Duratón, in the province of Segovia. Here one can find Dupont's Lark plus a wide range of steppe birds, although

this place is best known locally for the impressive colony of Griffon Vultures that breed there - around 500 pairs. To the south and approximately the same distance, one can find the area known as La Macha Húmeda, one of the best places in Europe to see White-headed Duck as well as a great variety of other interesting species such as Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Great Bustard, Little Bustard, Stone Curlew, Lesser Kestrel, Purple Heron, Little Bittern, Squacco Heron, Collared Pratincole, Savi's Warbler, Bearded Reedling, Red-crested Pochard, Black-necked Grebe, Kentish Plover, Marsh Harrier... perhaps the best site in central Spain to observe aquatic birds.



*Wryneck*

In addition, lovers of butterflies also have in Madrid a place of genuine enjoyment. Within the borders of the region and in a suitable season one can observe some of the most interesting butterfly species in all Europe such as Swallowtail, Apollo butterfly, Spanish Swallowtail, Queen of Spain Fritillary, Spanish Festoon or Two-tailed Pasha... in the south of the region there is a natural reserve specifically for butterflies with restricted access, but this gives a good idea of the variety of species that can be found in Madrid.

But not all is variety and joy in Madrid and, as in many other regions of Spain, there are a number of conservation problems that are affecting the numbers of some of the more scar-

ce species. For example, urban pressure is surrounding established bird sanctuaries, isolating them with urban construction in natural corridors that previously connected distinctive bird populations (as in the case of steppe birds such as Great Bustards). The increasing cost of houses in urban areas has made many people themselves obliged to move out into the outskirts of towns where land is cheaper but where still today land speculation occurs on the part of local authorities. In addition, there has been a proliferation of heavy electrical installations and these are having a very negative effect particularly on Great Bustards, White Storks and raptors including Eagle Owls.

The pressure from traditional pursuits must also be kept in mind - Spain is a country with over one million hunting licences!

Arson attacks occur at times, new infrastructure construction such as motorways and new roads, plus new rail lines for high speed trains, increasingly connect urban construction to the city, all reducing some of the best ecosystems within the Madrid region.

Faced with such attacks against the environment, the Spanish Ornithological Society (SEO/BirdLife) has tried, with mixed success, to condemn these activities before tribunals and publicising their concerns in the media. But we have to remember that although it is the oldest Non-Governmental Organization in the country, it has barely 10 thousand members, and its strength in fighting these situations is nowhere near that of, for example, the RSPB.

To sum up after this brief nature tour around the Madrid region, there would seem many good reasons to really get to know this corner of Spain, which is also worth a cultural visit with a multitude of choices such as some of the finest museums in the world (El Prado, Thyssen, Reina Sofia...), an interesting and lively nightlife, and some of the best restaurants in the country. Without doubt, one more than interesting option for a family holiday. Places such as the monasteries of El Paular and El Escorial, in the Sierra de Guadarrama, enable one to enjoy some of the architectural works most characteristic of Spain, whilst their surroundings offer the visiting birdwatcher a range of species that are not found in their country.