



Spain: the Grand Tour

15 ~ 29 April 2006

trip report

Leaders: James Lidster & Santiago Villa

Participants: Wim Vader, Alex Alexander, Mike Henty, Alan Oliver, Aline Oliver, Dave Owens, Ray Banks

Coto Donana had more water than last year, although the best birding was split between the large heronry in front of the Jose Antonio Valverde centre, which was stacked with Glossy Ibis, Purple Herons and Cattle Egrets and the small lake nearby where Marbled and White-headed Ducks shared the same scope view.

HIGHLIGHTS (FROM THE SUNBIRD NEWSLETTER)

This year's grand tour of Spain was quite simply outstanding, with good bird after good bird, seen in a variety of landscapes - from the snowy, frozen Pyrenees to the sunny shores of the Straits of Gibraltar. On our first morning we enjoyed scope views of a male Wallcreeper, closely followed by our first Lammergeiers (a displaying pair which were just 2 of a dozen seen that day), drumming Black Woodpeckers and close up views of Citril Finch, Alpine Choughs and summer plumaged Water Pipits.

Two nights around Sepulveda rewarded us with a Dupont's Lark on view for ten minutes (although it was a good job several of the group were over 6' 4 or we may not have seen it!) as well as singing Western Orphea, Spectacled and Dartford Warblers, a couple of Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, striking Western Black-eared Wheatears, Golden Eagle, an adult Great spotted Cuckoo, flocks of Rock Sparrows and displaying Calandra Larks, dwarfing (and drowning out) the Short-toed Larks.

During our journey south towards Extremadura we stopped for views of our first Purple Swamphens and Purple Herons, groups of Lesser Kestrels, and a fly over Goshawk with a Red Kite, the next day the same site produced a Black-shouldered Kite. Monfragüe was shrouded in mist and rain on our first morning but we were not to be put off so we waited by the Portillo del Tietar and in a break in the weather were rewarded with displaying, calling and perched Spanish Imperial Eagles. Then an adult Eagle Owl flew past, sat in the open for several minutes, tried a couple of other perches before disappearing back into the cliff face. And if this wasn't enough, we also had brilliant views of Egyptian and Black Vultures, Black Storks, Rock and Cirl Buntings and a Bonelli's Eagle. On one evening we enjoyed Great Bustards turning themselves inside out in display, while a couple of male Little Bustards called from the flower covered hillsides.

A full day spent in similar habitat produced several flocks of Sandgrouse, with Pin-tailed out-numbering Black-bellied. This was exciting, but Santi was even happier when Dave picked up a 1st summer male Red-footed Falcon, about the 3rd record for Extremadura and a new bird for Santi. At times it shared the scope view with Lesser Kestrel, Montagu's Harriers and flocks of Sandgrouse! A Golden Eagle made a couple of appearances over our heads during the day, and we saw at least 5 Rollers along the wires, some of which kindly obliged by rolling for us.



Black & Red Kites in Jaca / Photo: James Lidster



Spanish Imperial Eagle in Monfragüe / Photo: James Lidster



Little Swifts at Strait of Gibraltar / Photo: James Lidster

Also Red-knobbed Coot were seen among over 100 Black-necked Grebe and hundreds of Terns included Gull-billed, Whiskered and Black; while Avocets and Black-winged Stilts mobbed a Marsh Harrier. Nearby we saw more White-headed Ducks and Red-knobbed Coots, flocks of Audouin's Gulls and on the east side of the river were rewarded with more Greater Flamingoes, Slender-billed Gulls and 3 Red-necked Phalaropes, including two striking females.

The south coast was just as exciting and we enjoyed rare European breeding birds such as Little Swifts and Rufous Scrub Robins alongside migrant Honey Buzzards, an Ortolan Bunting and a couple of Black Wheatears. Of course these were just some of the special birds and Spain is so bird rich that rarely a moment went by when there weren't raptors overhead, Nightingales and Cetti's Warblers singing, or Woodchat Shrikes and Bee-eaters to be admired.

The tour was made all the more enjoyable with great company, good food, plenty of local wine and of course Santi's local knowledge.



Lammergeier at Hecho Valley / Photo: James Lidster

James Lidster