

SPAIN'S WILD WEST HONEYGUIDE TRIP REPORT MAY 2023

Day 1 Arrival and around Salvatierra



View from the hotel

We met up with most of the group at Madrid airport just after midday, and decided to drive straight to [Hotel Rural Salvatierra](#), in time for a late lunch. Through the French windows of the dining room we could see a Nightingale and Spotless starlings, who have settled for hotel life. After lunch Alfonso and I picked up Linda and Ron, who had come a few days earlier, from the bus station at Guijuelo, and, after a short rest, we had a wander around the village, consisting of a few elegant buildings amongst ruins and slate walls with a mix of ruderal plants and wild flowers growing everywhere in between.



Around Salvatierra de Tormes

It was very windy so the birds were unsettled but nevertheless abundant. Rock sparrow, Serin, White stork, Spotless starling and Linnet were the most visible in the village, with several Nightingales serenading us from the hidden depths of Elderberry and other bushes. Helen and Cheryl spotted a Holly blue butterfly, and a Clouded yellow flitted past the same spot, amongst Hemlock and Vetch. Further along we watched a light coloured Booted eagle as it flew towards us, showing clearly its landing lights and markings on the back. A little later a Raven was mobbing a Black kite, crested larks scampered along the roadside and there was a hybrid Spanish house sparrow.

Day 2 North of Salvatierra and Navahombela area, Sierra de Bejar & Francia Biosphere Reserve

On first looking out of the window we saw absolutely nothing: a fog had come down and stolen the view! But by the time we'd finished breakfast the sun was out and the starlings were back to imitation Golden orioles, one of their favourite calls it seems.

We drove up a track parallel to the reservoir and stopped at the crest of a hill to watch a Calandra lark singing on a rock in the middle of a field. Crested and Thekla lark appeared along the track or on the fence. A Northern wheatear bobbed up and down from a slate drystone wall, and a Black kite flew close by.



Calandra lark



Black kite

We followed the track leading down to the reservoir, an area of Mediterranean scrub and wild flowers: Spanish lavender *Lavandula pedunculata*, thyme, spotted rock rose *Tuberaria gutata*, an endemic Thrift, *Armeria transmontana*, the tiny Egyptian rock-rose *Helianthemum aegyptiacum*, *Orchis morio champagneuxii* Champagne orchid, small white rock-rose *Helianthemum violaceum*, Rampion bellflower *Campanula rapunculus*, Pale flax *Linum bienne*, Lesser hop trefoil *Trifolium dubium* and Umbrella milkwort *Tolpis barbata*. Present everywhere was a lovely bright yellow composite, as yet unidentified. In a field below was a small colony of Bee-eaters.



Near Salvatierra

Butterflies present were Small copper, Brown argus, Clouded yellow, Knapweed fritillary, and Large white, and we also found a dung beetle.

Amongst trees and bushes were Woodchat shrike, Western Orphean warbler seen in retreat and a Golden oriole singing.



Unidentified insect on Armeria transmontana



Small copper



Looking at Helianthemum aegyptiacum



Helianthemum aegyptiacum



Rampion bellflower, Umbrella milkwort (above right) and Pale flax

After coffee at the hotel we spent the rest of the day in Navahombela, with a picnic style lunch in the shade at [La Pedriza](#) bar in La Tala nearby. Along a track through a valley between fields and dehesa, birdsong everywhere, we could hear Golden oriole long before spotting it, flying between trees. Meanwhile when not drowned out by Nightingale, Cuckoo, Great tit and Blackcap, we heard the soft purring of the Turtle dove. After searching and almost giving up, it suddenly flew to a cable in full sight as if to say, okay, you wanted to see me, so here I am. Gorgeous bird.



Looking at the Turtle dove

We watched a Short-toed eagle hang in the sky, and both types of Booted eagle showed off their landing lights. Also seen were Black kite, Red kite, Raven, Woodchat shrike, Melodious warbler, Serin, Cirl bunting and Nightingale.



Serin



Booted eagle

Bordering the tracks or on the banks were Narrow leaved lupin *Lupinus angustifolium*, Iberian endemic *Lupinus gredensis*, Field fumitory *Fumaria agraria*, one of the flowers on which Turtle doves depend for their seeds, Champagne orchid, Thrift *Armeria alliacea* and *Armeria transmontana*, Great wild bugloss *Anchusa undulata*, *Thapsia villosa* and endemic white and yellow clovers *Hymenocarpus cornicina* and *Hymenocarpus lotoides*.



Gredos lupin



Field fumitory

There were plenty of butterflies: Orange tip, Moroccan Orange tip, Brown Argus, Knapweed, Meadow brown, Queen of Spain and Spotted fritillary.

We also found two Bee-flies together in a shady spot on the banks, one nectaring on some Shining cranesbill *Geranium lucidum*. Sunning itself by some rocks was a n Algerian psammodromus lizard.



Queen of Spain fritillary



Large psammodromus

Back in the village we watched a Spanish sparrow colony installed around an electrical box, a refuge after the poplar trees were chopped a few years ago.



Spanish sparrow

On our way back to base we stopped to see an interesting roadside plant: Iberian and Moroccan Sainfoin *Onobrychis humilis*, which was at flowering stage in one place and already gone to seed at another. There was also a diminutive toadflax, probably a very late *linaria amethysteae*. We also saw a Common sandpiper by a pond in a field.



Sainfoin



Sainfoin seedpod



Amethyst toadflax

Day 3 San Esteban de la Sierra and Miranda del Castañar, Sierra de Francia Natural Park



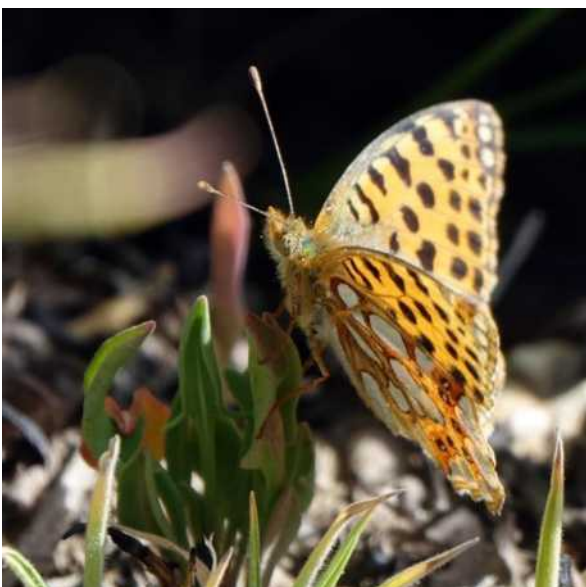
Our first stop was on a platform overlooking the eastern side of the Sierra de Francia, above San Esteban, mainly Mediterranean scrub and oak forest beyond. An ancient wine press carved from a granite boulder was the main objective, but there were Golden oriole, Woodchat shrike, Iberian magpies and many butterflies: Knapweed and Queen of Spain fritillary, Bath white, Brown argus, Scarce swallowtail and a lovely species of Purple barred yellow moth: *Lythria sanguinaria*.



Knapweed fritillary Photo VB



Photo Helen Crowder



Queen of Spain fritillary



Purple barred yellow moth

The wine press invited us to 'step inside' and do what people have done there for hundreds of years...



We had a coffee at San Esteban, and wandered down towards the bridge over the river Alagon. Here we looked at the rather large oval fruit of the *Aristolochia paucinervis*, and the gall 'goat horns' of *Pistachia terebinthus*. There was also wild honesty growing near the river, more *Dianthus lusitanus*, some Bladder campion *Silene vulgaris* and a yellow broomrape, probably *Orobanche alba*.



Fruit of *Aristolochia paucinervis*



Dianthus lusitanus

A plant which at first glance looked like a red orobanche seems to be some kind of navelwort, nothing we'd seen before.



Mystery navelwort



Lunch at [El Pipero](#) restaurant was a fantastic spread of different cold meats, cheese, salad, chickpeas with cockles and pisto, and dessert for whoever had room.

We then had a stroll through a forest of Strawberry trees *Arbutus unedo*, where we looked at various stages of development of Butcher's broom *Ruscus aculeatus*, the delicate wild Red vetchling with its single flower, *Lathyrus cicera*, Black bitter vetch *Lathyrus niger*, Black bryony *Dioscorea communis*, and Narrow-leaved helleborine orchid, *Cephalanthera longifolia*.

There was a southern Speckled wood butterfly *Pararge aegeria*. There were Firecrest calling, and short-toed treecreeper, all virtually impossible to see in the dappled light of the forest.



Narrow-leaved helleborine Photo Tim Hunt



Southern Speckled wood

From here we drove up to the square at Miranda and had a wander around the village, with its narrow streets, half-timbered houses and walls overlooking the Sierra.



Street in Miranda del Castañar Photo Tim Hunt



Anarrhinum bellidifolium

On our way back we stopped at a layby in front of a slate cliff to look for the delicate blue Daisy-leaved toadflax *Anarrhinum bellidifolium*... and there was: just one plant! There was Sage-leaved Rock-rose *Cistus salvifolius* in bud, Blue pimpernel *Lysimachia monelli*, Mountain sandwort *Arenaria montana*, and some very red-leaved Hare's-foot clover *Trifolium arvense*. There was also a very attractive Broom heather in flower *Erica scoparia*.



Cistus salvifolius Photo Tim Hunt



Blue pimpernel Photo VB



Hare's-foot clover Photo Helen Crowder



Erica scoparia Photo VB

A lovely Lang's short-tailed blue butterfly was spotted on Spanish lavender by Helen.



Lang's short-tailed blue Photo Cheryl Hunt

Day 4 Campo de Alba, River Tormes and Berrocal de Salvatierra



We stopped briefly on the grassy area by the reservoir dam, where we looked at *Andryala integrifolia*, wild animated oats *Avena sterilis*, yellow composites, tiny white rock rose, and colonies of house martin under the side of the dam and Crested larks courting on the ground.



Avena sterilis



Andryala integrifolia



Crested lark singing at Sta Teresa Reservoir

As we were leaving we stopped again to watch a large group of Griffon vultures, and amongst them we spotted a pair of Egyptian vulture being mobbed by raven.



Griffon vultures



Raven mobbing Egyptian vulture

After coffee in Galinduste we continued to wards Alba, stopping to avoid running over a splendid Ocelated lizard *Timon Lepidus*.



Ocelated lizard

We drove along a track and into the cereal steppe lands habitat.



There were lots of yellow wagtail, *Iberiae*, perched on wheat stalks or on the cable above us, singing.



Iberian Yellow wagtail if you look closely you can see its tongue as it sings

In the distance a male Hen harrier got into an aerial scrap with a female marsh harrier.

A little later Linda spotted a male Montagu's harrier, possibly the male which had bred close by three years before: these are the birds that the Honeyguide Conservation foundation will help through the donation to the Harrier Campaign of our Salamanca branch of SEO Birdlife.



Montagu's harrier Photo Cheryl Hunt



Photo VB

We watched Lesser kestrel in the nearby village of Herrezuelo where they use nesting boxes.



Lesser Kestrel Photo Cheryl Hunt



Photo VB

We picnicked by the river at Alba, deciding to skip a visit to the castle, choosing nature over culture. After lunch we walked between the river and a mill pond under the shade of Alder and Willow. On the pond surface were several Large red damselfly *Pyrhosoma nymphula* which were laying eggs, the male holding down the female so she could deposit the eggs under water.



Large red damselfly

We were serenaded by a Nightingale which let itself be seen and photographed. There were Cetti's warbler and Blackcap too, as well as Reed warbler and Iberian chiffchaff. We could hear but not see Penduline tit. I spotted a loose elongated ball of fluffy white seed dangling from a poplar: an abandoned half-finished nest? - and a little way off Helen spotted the finished creation: in use. We watched discretely through the trees, as father Penduline tit entered and exited so quickly it was hard to actually see him.



Nightingale Photo Cheryl Hunt



Penduline tit at nest Photo Cheryl Hunt

Later we headed for Berrocal de Salvatierra, (rescheduled from the first day) and on our way saw fourteen Red kite in a field. Berrocal was a total habitat contrast: an arid exposed slate landscape with scattered Spanish lavender, and predominantly Small copper butterflies.



After searching and not finding Black-eared wheatear we drove to another known territory. Storm

clouds were building up and the birds seemed to know it and lie low. We watched a large group of Ravens circling together: there were over twenty of them, maybe family groups meeting up. We scoured the landscape and every rock to check for the wheatear, and finally I spotted a male on a barbed wire fence. Here was the Black-eared Wheatear looking dapper and splendid. He seemed completely unphased as we watched him.



Black-eared wheatear



Another Small copper

Day 5 Granite meadow, Sangusin and Alagon valleys, Sierra de Bejar & Francia Biosphere Reserve



Our first stop was a wet granite meadow, now sadly almost dry because of lack of rain, amongst large granite boulders. The idea was to look for Tongue orchid *Serapias lingua*. We came across many of them, and amongst them in patches were Squill *Scilla verna*, Pale flax *Linnum bienne*, Long-beak stork's bill *Erodium botrys*, a pink campion *Silene scabriflora* and hundreds of bright yellow composites, possibly *Reichardia picroides*.



Tongue orchid



Squill, Tongue orchid, Pale flax, Stork's bill and Yellow composite

There was the Iberian Small heath *Coenonympha pamphilus* which has an extra tiny ocellus on its underside forewing and tiny ocelli on its underside hind.



Silene scabriflora



Iberian Small heath

We next moved on to the Sangusin river valley, and stopped on the medieval bridge to watch Spanish pond terrapin *Mauremys leprosa* and Iberian Green frog *Rana perezi*, difficult to spot amongst the dense flowers of the Water crow-foot, probably *Ranunculus penicillatus*.



View from the bridge Sangusin valley



Spanish pond terrapin



Iberian frog

We watched a Black and Red kite clash in the air, and Short-toed and Booted eagles.



Red kite below, black kite above

We then continued by vehicle, stopping to see the Bee-eaters up to their antics around their colony.



Bee-eaters Photo Cheryl Hunt



Watching bee-eaters from a safe distance

Further on in the open Ash dehesa woodland we found another Lythria moth *Lythria purpurarea*, various plants, and Helen found a Lavender (?) moth on the Spanish lavender *Athroolopha pennigeraria*. Despite the recent lack of rain there were Garden Star of Bethlehem *Ornithogalum umbellatum*, White asphodel *Asphodelus albus* and *Euphorbia oxyphylla*.



Asphodel and Ash dehesa



Lythria purpurarea



Star of Bethlehem



Athroolopha pennigeraria

We had lunch under the shade of a Montpellier maple, to the sound of Bee-eaters in the sky above. After lunch we went further northwest into the Sierra de Francia, through the village of Pinedas, and drove along a track high above the Alagon river, bordered by Gum cistus *Cistus ladanifer*, Montpellier maple, Juniper, Strawberry tree *Arbutus unedo* and Tree heather. Suddenly a large dark butterfly crossed in front. We stopped and jumped out of the vehicle, and on a branch, in full view was the Two-tailed Pasha. A first for many of us!

We drove towards some Hackberry or Nettle-trees *Celtis australis*, to see them and look for the Nettle-tree butterfly, and we were able to see several of them on the tree. Another first for many!



Two-tailed pasha Photo Cheryl Hunt



Nettle-tree butterfly, open and with wings folded Photos VB

To top the day, on our way back on the road we spotted a Black stork by a pond near some woods. As we stopped at the side of the road, it flew to the nearby trees and stood watching us as we watched it, before flying to a lagoon nearby.



Black stork

Photo Cheryl Hunt

Day 6 Monleón, Honfría woods and Sierra Quilamas, Sierra de Bejar & Francia Biosphere Reserve

We visited the lovely medieval walled village of Monleón, with its towering castle home to sparrows, spotless starlings, barn and red-rumped swallows, crag martins and swifts.



At Monleon with castle

Below the walls was a purring Turtle dove, in the sky a Black vulture. We wandered through the Coria gate, down a path between the walls and steep banks over the river Alagon, covered in wild flowers which in turn hosted many butterflies including Spanish festoon *Zerynthia rumina*, Niobe *Argynnis Niobe*, and Queen of Spain fritillaries, and one which we took to be Spotted fritillary, but on closer inspection is Lesser Spotted fritillary *Melitaea trivia ignasti*.



Turtle dove Photo Cheryl Hunt



Niobe fritillary Photo V B



Lesser Spotted fritillary Photo V B



Spanish festoon Photo Cheryl Hunt

There were endemic Foxgloves *Digitalis thapsi*, Blue pimpernel, Cheesemaker thistle *Carduus carpetanus*, Blue hounds' tongue *Cynoglossum creticum*, Salad burnet *Sanguisorba minor* and the tiny –flowered endemic *Scrophularia bourgaeana*. The Hoary mullein *Verbascum pulverulentum* was also about to flower.



Foxglove and Hoary Mullein Photo Tim Hunt



Blue hound's tongue Photo VB



Scrophularia bourgaeana

After coffee in Linares at Bar Sta Martina we drove up to the Honfria woodlands, to see shade plants. There was Yellow wild garlic *Allium moly* everywhere, which attracted the butterflies; Purple orchid *Orchis mascula*; an endemic blue borage *Omphalodes nitida*; the tiny Chalk milkwort *Polygala*

calcareo: endemic Three birds toadflax *Linaria triornithophora*, Wild peony and Columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris* possibly subspecies *dichroa*.



Orchis mascula Photo Tim Hunt



Omphalodes nitida and Yellow garlic Photo Vega Bermejo



Columbine Photo Tim Hunt



Photo VB



Three birds toadflax Photo V B



Detail Photo Tim Hunt

Amongst the flowers were butterflies and moths: more Lesser spotted; a gorgeous Long-tailed blue *Lampides boedticus* (photographed) which, at the time we may have passed over as a Lang's short-tailed, Glanville fritillary *Melitaea cinxia*, Moroccan orange-tip and the moth *Isturgia famula*.



Long-tailed blue Photo Cheryl Hunt



Glanville fritillary Photo Helen Crowder



Photo V B



Lesser Spotted fritillary Photo V B



Isturgia famula Photo Helen Crowder

We then drove up on to the mountain for a picnic lunch under the shade of a stand of Pyrenean oak.



After lunch we explored the surrounding mountain side: Champagne and Purple orchid, Star of Bethlehem, Red Bartsia *Parentucellia latifolia*, Mountain cornflower *Centaurea montana*; an endemic toadflax *Antirrhinum meonanthum*; Iberian endemic Mountain sandwort *Arenaria montana*; Kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*, Buckler mustard *Biscutella valentina* and a tall brassica wrapped in silvery purple leaves: *Arabis pauciflora* or *Fourraea alpine*.



Red bartsia



Mountain sandwort Photo Tim Hunt



Kidney vetch



Buckler mustard with Forester moth



Purple orchids



Antirrhinum meoanthum



Arabis pauciflora

There were Scarce swallowtail, Queen of Spain, Spotted, and Knapweed fritillaries, Green forester *Adscita statice* and Chimney sweeper *Odezia atrata* moths and Iberian wall lizard *Podarcis hispanicus*. We also saw Black vulture, Crag martin, Thekla lark, Skylark, Nuthatch, and heard Bonelli's warbler.



Black vulture



Iberian wall lizard



View to the picnic area and plains below

Goshawk was seen in the forest on the way back. We stopped briefly for more butterflies by a stream and meadow near Monleón, where we saw Lang's short-tailed, Glanville fritillary, Sooty copper *Lycaena tityrus bleusi*, and two Lesser spotted fritillaries mating.



Lesser spotted fritillaries Photo Cheryl Hunt



Sooty copper Photo VB

Day 7 Sierra de Béjar and Candelario, Biosphere Reserve



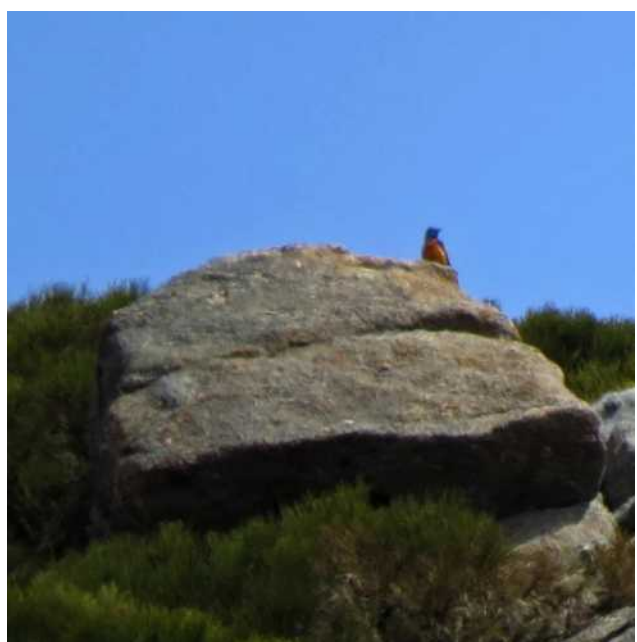
Despite forecast of clouds and possible rain we headed uphill to the Sierra de Béjar near the ski slopes. On the way up we caught a glimpse of a male Rock thrush peeking out from over a rock. We saw Northern wheatear, Skylark, Tawny and Water pipit, Dunnock, Linnets and Whitethroat.



Northern wheatear



Tawny pipit



Rock thrush

Also the delicate purple toadflax *Linaria elegans* and some lovely Persian speedwell *Veronica persica* around the parking area.



Linaria elegans



Persian speedwell

Candelario for coffee and a glimpse of Pallid swifts as they glided by amongst their cousins: almost impossible to follow with the binoculars let alone a camera, but the pallid look browner and chunkier.



Coffee in Candelario

From here we drove up the mountain to a small area next to a mountain stream. There were more *Linaria elegans* and some beautiful endemic *Leucanthemopsis pulvurulenta*.



Linaria elegans



Leucanthemopsis pulvurulenta

We could hear Ortolan bunting singing in the distance, then one was spotted quite far, and another suddenly appeared on a rock, with food in its beak, followed by a Rock bunting a little further. The Ortolan disappeared to feed its young presumably, and came back later to sing.



Ortolan bunting Photo Cheryl Hunt



Rock bunting Photo Cheryl Hunt

Further up the mountain we found some Yellow flowered ranunculus *Ranunculus abnormis*, endemic to the Central system.



Ranunculus abnormis Photo Tim Hunt

After lunch in a pine forest we explored a lavender habitat with curled mountain grass and butterflies such as Green-underside blue *Glaucopsyche alexis*, Glanville, Queen of Spain, Knapweed, Small copper and many moths, including a stunning Broad-bordered bee hawkmoth *Hemaris fuciformis*.



Broad-bordered bee hawk moth



Glanville fritillary Photo Tim Hunt



Green-underside blue



There were Coal tits calling Cheryl spotted a Tree pipit.



Unidentified curly grass



Tree pipit

We made our way to the Oak forest of the Dehesa de Candelario, where we had a short walk and watched Crag martins flying around a cow barn, a Nuthatch at its hole and a young Dipper waiting to be fed and heard but weren't able to see Bonelli's warbler.



Young Dipper



Nuthatch

Day 8 Upper Tormes, Puente del Congosto, Biosphere Reserve & Neila de San Miguel (Avila)



Honeyguiders with Puente del Congosto in the background

We started off along a track parallel to the River Tormes, a mixture of Mediterranean scrub with Dehesa and pasture to one side and dry river valley to the other.

We looked at *Astragalus incanus*, endemic to the two Castilles and the mountains of Morocco, as well as a tiny Rock rose growing close by. There was also Hare's ear *Phlomis lychnitis*, and the aptly named wilted looking Sad stock *Matthiola fruticulosa*, which is night-scented. There were Villous deadly carrot *Thapsia villosa*, which attract numerous small beetles, Drumstick allium *Allium sphaerocephalon* and the endemic composite *Hispidella hispanica*.



Astragalus incanus



Hare's ear Phto Tim Hunt



Sad stock Photo Tim Hunt



Drumstick allium with Villous deadly carrot top left



Drumstick allium



Hispidella hispanica Photo Tim Hunt

We saw Black and Red kite, Booted eagle, Griffon and a Black vulture which flew right over us clearly showing its feet, and Woodchat shrike, with the ever present Nightingale singing from the side-lines. A Subalpine warbler made an appearance at the edge of the path, clearly visible before darting for cover, and we also saw Rock bunting, Serin and Iberian magpie.



Woodchat shrike Photo Cheryl Hunt



Black vulture Photo V B

There was Clouded yellow, as well as plenty of white butterflies: Small white, Western dappled white and Bath white.



Bath white Photo V B



Western dappled white Photo Cheryl Hunt

We headed back to the village of Puente del Congosto for coffee and cakes at the [Casa Rural El Gorgocil](#), which our friend Paloma, the owner, had prepared for us, the local café being closed. Her hospitality was most appreciated!



Honeyguiders inside Casa Rural El Gorgocil Photo Paloma Martin

After coffee we had a look at the Castle grounds and wandered down towards the medieval bridge. Swift and Crag martin flew over our heads so close you could have caught one. Spotless starling and Black redstart watched from the castle tower. In the church the white storks fed their young.



The Blue rock thrush was singing on a pole. Later we peered over the bridge, and saw him again: this was his territory and he was busy feeding his family.



View from the bridge at Puente del Congosto



Blue Rock thrush Photo V B



Photo Cheryl Hunt

We had a vegetarian paella lunch at the small restaurant La Casilla in the nearby village of El Tejado, then headed to Neila de San Miguel, in the neighbouring province of Avila. We walked in the Sweet chestnut grove with many wildflowers such as the pink campion with curly petal *Silene scabriflora*, Mountain thrift, the endemic thistle *Carduus carpetanus* (very popular with the butterflies), Spanish lavender and the ever present yellow composite.



Silene scabriflora



Ron and Linda in the Chestnut grove

Here we saw Cardinal, Scarce swallow, Glanville, Western dappled white, Sooty copper, and Painted lady butterflies, a Broad-bodied chaser and the attractive Ascalaphid *Libelloides hispanicus*.



Cardinal on *carduus carpetano*





Sooty copper (left) with Glanville fritillary



Scarce swallowtail



Libelloides hispanicus

As we were about to get in our vehicles, we spotted an Ocelated lizard peeping out between some rocks. We waited quietly and a second lizard, the male, came out as if to see what was goin on. WE watched them for 15 minutes: the female climbed over a stone and disappeared. Only to reappear a little later from the same hole. She had obviously used the back door!



Ocelated lizards Photo Cheryl Hunt



Photo V B

We stopped briefly to look at the singular bell tower before heading back to the hotel to pack and celebrate our last meal together.



Bell tower



Chestnut grove Neila de san Miguel

Altogether a very enriching experience for Vega and Alfonso, who apart from enjoying their company also learnt a lot from the group. Thank you Helen, Malcolm, Linda, Ron, Cheryl and Tim for coming out to Spain's wild west and sharing our beautiful nature with us!

Vega Bermejo Birding in Spain's Wild West Navahombela 30th May 2023