

THE TIP TOP BIRTHDAY BIRDING TOUR 2023
TRIP REPORT



Casa Rural El Recuerdo

Day 1. Saturday 25th February Arrival, Pago de San Clemente and Plains of Trujillo

David and Duncan arrive at midday at the very lovely Casa Rural El Recuerdo, near Trujillo, run by Claudia and veteran guide Martin Kelsey, where Alfonso and I await them. We go for a short walk along the path past the church, between dry stone walls and olive groves to one side, open land with Holm oaks to the other, a church and several ruined buildings. Storks bill clap on the church tower, Iberian magpies swoop between trees, Chiffchaff, Blackcap and Sardinian warblers flit along the shrubs and there are groups of Chaffinch, Serin, Linnet and Greenfinch, feeding, perching and singing. Stonechat and Black redstart appear and disappear, Robin keeps an eye on us. A Hoopoe calls, Iberian magpies creak and Blackbirds cluck. Around us Barn swallows fly low announcing rain showers. It's February but spring is in the air here. By the path there's Mediterranean Catchfly, small pink flowers with hairy striped seedpods.



Silene colorata

In the distance we see Griffon vultures and a colony of storks in the trees, and close by a pair of Short-toed tree creeper creep up the trunks of the olive trees.

Back at the house we have a picnic lunch on the stone table and bench in the front yard. The weather holds out for us. After lunch as we're loading the van a surprise squatter installs himself in the passenger dashboard box: it's Boots, the house cat. He likes birdwatching too.

We head out to the plains of Trujillo, cloudy and cold now, with the wind picking up.



We stop off to watch Golden plover all over the ground, with Lapwing, Stonechat and Skylark. At a distance a large light coloured raptor flies away: probably a young Spanish imperial eagle. At a gate, and remembering the place from our visit two years previously, we stop, and David spots a large flock of Pin-tailed sandgrouse on the ground feeding.



Pin-tailed sandgrouse

They gradually creep away and then take flight and land on the far side of a fence. We watch through the telescope as they continue to graze.



Pin-tailed sandgrouse

Red kite criss-cross the sky towards their roosts. At another stop we see a Marsh harrier on the ground, Meadow pipit, Corn bunting, and Rock sparrow on a fence. We wind our way on a sinuous road between dehesa and narrow valleys towards the plains of Caceres. As the light fades we watch more kites coming in to roost in a Eucalyptus stand, before heading back to base.



Day 2. Sunday 26th February Plains of Trujillo and Caceres

The day starts off cold with fog in the hills but by the time we've finished breakfast it's sunny. We've had a tip from Martin Kelsey where we might see some Little bustard, so we head back to the plains, stopping off on the way to watch some Griffon vulture resting on the brow of a hill, Iberian shrike and a Great spotted cuckoo being chased by magpies and later joined by a second cuckoo. Where the cattle haven't grazed there are wild flowers everywhere.



Griffon vulture



Iberian shrike

A little further, Lapwing and Golden plover all around. We get to the recommended spot but no sign of them, so we stop off at the places we visited yesterday and try another route between Santa Marta and Trujillo. Here after a cup of tea we see lots of Shoveler in a pond and carry on until the track becomes too stony. Amazing landscape of upended slate stones. As we head back up the hill we see a large dark raptor: adult Spanish imperial eagle flying around in the distance.



Spanish Imperial eagle

A bit further we stop to look for Little owl and David suddenly spots a male Great Bustard walking alone amongst rocky outcrops.



Great Bustard



Lesser kestrel

A little further on we see a lesser kestrel, then several others appear in the sky or perched on a fence post: it seems they've just arrived.



Plains of Trujillo SPA

From here we head to where we ended the day before, in the Llanos de Cáceres, this time with good light. We drive up to a bird hide with a sign showing a picture of Great Bustard and Little bustard. Looks promising. There's a woman in the hide who says she hasn't seen much. She leaves and as soon as she drives off about 50 Great Bustard fly out in front of the hide. It's like the photographer and the [Kitkat](#) advert. They circle for a while looking like they're about to land and then fly over our heads before disappearing again over the brow of a hill. Wow.







They appear to fly with open beak! They circle and retreat again.



Great Bustard Plains of Caceres SPA

We decide to have a bite to eat in the hide as it's so windy outside.
After lunch we drive along the track.
Suddenly, an explosion of Calandra lark emerges from a field.



Calandra lark

Later on our way back we stop to watch some Golden plover, Lapwing and Goldfinch.



Golden plover



Lapwing

David points out two Marsh harriers, and a Red kite which are mobbing a young straw coloured Spanish eagle. The eagle lands, and then takes off again and disappears.



Marsh harriers



Spanish Imperial eagle mobbed by Red kite



Spanish Imperial eagle



Spanish Imperial eagle

We decide to try the Little bustard place again.

We get there, go down a track a little way and: there they are: 44 of them! They rest or graze in a field, and are occasionally alarmed by a large flock of Spotless starling landing amongst them.



Little bustard



Little bustard



Watching the Little bustard

After watching for a good while using the van as a hide we finally go back to base, stopping on the way for a photograph of the walls of Trujillo and a quick visit to the square.



Trujillo in the background

In Trujillo square

Back at El Retiro we eat a very delicious dinner and celebrate Duncan's 54th birthday and seeing both Great and Little Bustards.

Day 3 Monday 27th February Alcollarin reservoir, Chozos de Llera to El Rocío

An icy but sunny morning greets us and we leave El Recuerdo and head out to Alcollarin reservoir.



Alcollarin reservoir



There are Great crested, Little and Black-necked grebe as well as Coot near the dam, and as we follow the track around the south shore of the reservoir we see Little and Great egret, Green sandpiper, Gadwall, Spoonbill and Cormorant. We drive on through holm oak woods to a smaller reservoir, and see Spanish sparrow, Chiffchaff, Barn swallow, Red-rumped swallow and House martin, a King fisher and white wagtail by the dam wall. Across fly a couple of Marsh harrier, displaying and in full courtship. Three pairs of Egyptian geese, apparently thriving here, roost in trees or on mounds. There are several pairs of White stork in their nests.



Black-necked grebe



Marsh harrier landing



Over on the other side of the main reservoir, we discover hundreds of coot coming from behind an island. Many Widgeon too, with Mallard, Little grebe and Shoveler.



Finally, as we're leaving, Alfonso spots a large disorganised flock of crane high in the sky: seems they're looking for somewhere to land, rather than on migration, which has already kicked in. Further on we see a large group feeding in a stubble field.

We head down to Hornachos, stopping for lunch, and drive up to the base of the castle to see if we can spot anything of interest (Ring ouzel in mind). Serin and Robin are most common here. Then we head up to Chozos de Llera, some thatched circular cottages overlooking a valley. Crag martin fly high above us. David hears an Iberian Green woodpecker, which we later see flying onto a dead poplar. Simultaneously David and I spot two large eagles: David's turns out to be a Short-toed eagle: first of the year, and mine is a second or third year straw to chequered Spanish imperial eagle. The Short-toed flies over us, then gets higher and higher until our necks ache watching it. Meanwhile, we spot the Imperial eagle being mobbed by a Buzzard, and eventually that too flies over and we get a great view of it.



Short-toed or Snake eagle



Spanish imperial eagle

We continue on our route and get to El Rocio and the Hotel Santa after dark, the village looking like something out of a western, with horse-drawn carriages and people on horseback all over town. It's the eve of a special holiday in Andalucia, and the town is buzzing.

Day 4. Tuesday 28th February El Rocio and Odiel marshes, Huelva

After breakfast we head down to the Charco de la Boca Lagoon on the south side of the village.



Flamingos, Glossy ibis, Greylag geese, Pintail, Snipe, Black-tailed godwit amongst others. A pair of Cattle egret land on the grass very near us and are unperturbed by our presence.



Glossy ibis



Black-tailed godwit

We enter the visitor centre and from the terrace peruse the numerous Coots in search of a Red-knobbed coot. There are a large group which swim ashore and start to graze behind the bushes, invisible. Another group in the water are fast asleep. Duncan spots one with a neck band - 350, but doesn't get to see the head properly. We ask the guy at the visitor centre who tells us that they band both common and red-knobbed, but the white band seems to indicate Red-knobbed. Eventually we get to see its face, and although it lacks the knobs the shield is concave rather than indented, and the beak is bluish, not pink. Then I spot another by its side, and as we watch another appears behind them which clearly has knobs! Bingo! Three Red-knobbed coots all along.



On the left, the three Red-knobbed coots, one banded.



3 Red-knobs!

We drive west along the coastal road, surrounded by Mediterranean pine forests of Doñana National Park, and stop for a fishy lunch at La Hija del Capitán in Mazagon.

We then go on through an industrial Blade-Runner type landscape of oil and gas refineries, to the Marismas de Odiel, a Natural Park near Huelva. Here the visitor centre is closed, but we park nearby and are able to walk along a spit of land and see across the lagoons. Black-winged Stilt, Redshank and a surprising Yellow wagtail feed by the shore close by. Further out are Flamingo, and Shelduck, Black-headed, Lesser black-backed and Herring gull rest on the mudbanks.



Black-winged stilt and Redshank



Lesser black-backed gull and Shelduck



Black-necked grebe

Further on we see a Black-necked grebe in gorgeous nuptial plumage, and David spots a Caspian tern resting amongst the gulls. A Turnstone is spotted by Duncan. We also see Whimbrel, Grey plover, Curlew and Black-tailed Godwit, some of which are already bright orange.



We drive along the spit of land and stop at some more mudflats. Here are many more waders: Ringed and Little plover, Black and Bar-tailed godwits, Sandpiper, and Little stint.

We stop near the saltpans, a muddy refuge for more waders: Greenshank, Godwit, Redshank, Little stint, Ringed plover, Grey plover, Oystercatcher and Dunlin.



A very muddy Dunlin



Day 5 Wednesday 1st March Doñana: Dehesa de Abajo and El Rocío

We skirt around the north of Doñana, driving through beautiful Mediterranean Pine forest to get to the Dehesa de Abajo, where we have special permission to drive into the reserve, thanks to the director, Beltran Ceballos. There are storks nesting in the olive trees around the visitor centre, which sadly is closed after the roof partially collapsed. The restaurant remains open however.



We start at the far end platform where the surrounding trees are full of Blackcaps, and at a distance we can see Coot, Glossy ibis and a few waders but the water is far away. We go back up the track and drive down to the two main hides. Here are large groups of Flamingo, Glossy ibis and Shoveler, with smaller groups of Teal.



Lagoon at Dehesa de Abajo

David spots a Garganey, Alfonso sees a couple of Marbled duck but they disappear before anyone else sees them. Large groups of migrating Crane form knots which then unravel in the

skies above, heading northeast, their trumpeting sounding like a farewell call. See you next autumn!

A very bedraggled Black kite perches to preen on an electric post, and a winter plumage Bluethroat wanders about in the grass in front of the hide, spotted by David's eagle-eye.



Black kite



Flamingo



Bluethroat

We decide to stay at the Dehesa for lunch, which is bountiful and very good. From here we wind our way back across endless stretches of ploughed land, fruit and olive groves and what were once rice fields on our way back to El Rocio. It would be fairly easy for one to get lost here, hardly any of the roads have signs and the Google map doesn't always correspond. We get back however, and have another hour or so birding from the west bank of

the lagoon, seeing myriad Yellow wagtail (bright yellow!) feeding in the mud, Little and Ringed plover, Flamingo, hundreds of Coot, Glossy ibis, Black-winged stilt, Shoveler and Teal and some small waders off in the distance, probably Dunlin.



West end of Lagoon with El Rocío in the background



Black-winged stilt

We see a family of Red deer at the other side of the lagoon cross the water and retreat to cover in the restricted zone of the National Park.



Red deer (top right corner of the lagoon)



Glossy ibis

We go back to the visitor centre and briefly spot the Red-knobbed coot with its knobs, before they are frightened off by something, possibly a dog, and retreat to the water.

Day 6 Thursday 2nd March Brazo del Este, Vejer

We skirt Doñana and make our way to the ferry across the river Guadalquivir, and along tracks between endless agricultural plains, until we get to the Brazo del Este, an ox-bow lake to the east of the river Guadiar. At the first stop we see Zitting cisticola, Purple swamp hen, Grey heron, Avocet and Flamingo.



Flamingo



Grey heron

At the second stop on either side of the track are many Black-tailed Godwit, Flamingo, Avocet, Shoveler, Black stilt and White stork.



Brazo del Este, Ox-bow lake of River Guadiar



Flamingo, Swamphen and Black-tailed godwit



Avocet



Purple Swamphen



Flamingo



Brazo del este

From here we cross a labyrinth of dry fields and canals and eventually emerge near a village where we have a hugely abundant lunch at a workers' restaurant, then drive south-east towards Barbate. We stop off at the lagoon of Medina and walk along a raised boardwalk with native riparian vegetation to one side and Mediterranean woodland to the other. From here we can see Flamingo, Shelduck, Avocet and Teal, with a Short-toed eagle perched on a post far away.



Boardwalk and vegetation at Laguna de Medina

We continue to a location recommended by a colleague, near Vejer de la Frontera, where we stop to see a colony of Bald ibis on a cliff-side. Incredibly, the colony is just a few metres above a main road, with lorries and cars passing constantly at the foot of the cliff. We go to a specially built hide across the road from the cliff. The birds seem unperturbed, and preen, touch beaks or squabble regardless of us birders staring at them and the constant rumble of vehicles. David cannot get over how ridiculous it is.



Bald ibis cliff colony



Bald ibis



Intimate moments



Bald ibis in flight



Cliff colony





Absurd roadside Ibis colony

From here we get to our base, the Beach Hotel Dos Mares, which overlooks the Atlantic sea and the coast of Africa just 20 kilometres away, its towns visible and all lit up. Jupiter and Venus are clearly visible in the west.



Beach hotel Dos Mares with Jupiter and Venus above the Atlantic Ocean

Day 7 Friday 3rd March La Janda, Marismas de Barbate and Estrecho Natural Park

After another good breakfast we're off to what was once one of the most important wetlands in Spain, now sadly drained for agriculture but with the prospect of restoration if plans go forward: La Janda, inland from Barbate.

We do a circuit along farm tracks. House sparrow occupying nest boxes for Lesser kestrel, Dunnock, Stonechat, Calandra, Short-toed and Thekla lark, Greenfinch, Goldfinch and Linnet, and a Siskin in one of the older riverine woodland strips.



House Sparrow Squatters

On a post a strange Buzzard stands out with a very red tail: it's a Long-legged buzzard, *rufinus*, a vagrant from Southeast Europe or North Africa.



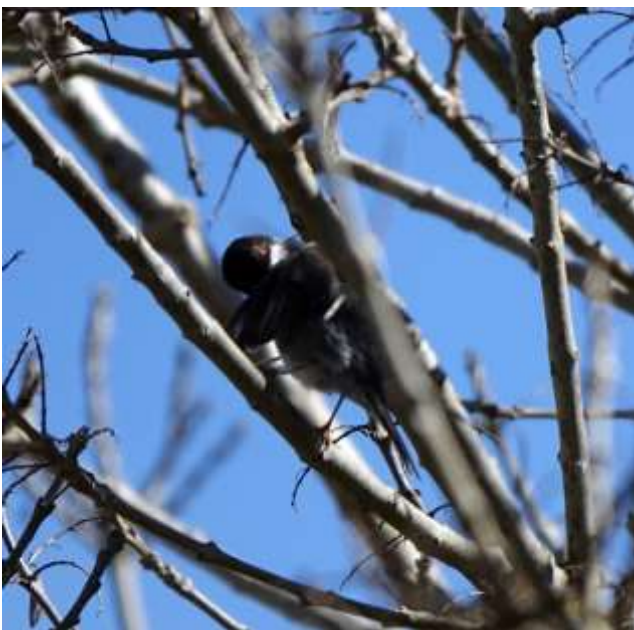
Long-legged buzzard



Long-legged buzzard in flight

I see a dead bird in a field and get close to identify it: it's a hen! Roars of laughter from the van.

Blackcap are everywhere, and there's also a Sardinian warbler. We see our first Wheatear of the year, next to a pool, along with yellow wagtail.



Sardinian warbler



Mediterranean woodland



La Janda once wetlands



La Janda and surrounding hills

We stop for a tea and a Spanish imperial eagle appears, as well as Griffon vulture. A brief look over a nearby reservoir yields Jackdaws and Cattle egret. On our way back we stop and see a Bluethroat feeding on the grass beside a reed bed. We see small flocks of migrating waders too far off to identify.

It's lunchtime so we find a restaurant in nearby Zahara de los Atunes, where there's also some noisy carnival celebrations going on and many people dressed in costume. Our restaurant, the Avante, is reasonably quiet and the food is good. On our way to Barbate, I see a Montague's harrier, my first this year. Just outside Barbate is a wetland, former gravel pits restored with some high banks running through the middle, signposted as paths but much better left alone if the birds there are to nest.

We watch from one side, a few other birders in the same spot. Here is a flock of resting Audouin's gulls and one Mediterranean gull, Flamingo, Black-tailed godwit, Kentish plover and Dunlin, Curlew sandpiper, Sanderling and Little stint. Avocets and Black-winged stilt.



Barbate wetlands



Birding at barbate

We drive along the edge and come across dozens of Stone curlew resting on an island. There's one lonesome Golden plover with a very marked eyebrow.



Stone curlew

We see a strange looking Marsh harrier with a very dark head and mantle.



Marsh harrier

We decide to head back and visit the Parque Natural del Estrecho by Tarifa, and on our way out David spots a Bald ibis flying over the wetland. A flock of waders, probably Dunlin, fly overhead.



Waders

At the Estrecho Natural Park we head up a narrow winding road to the observation point on the cliff. We can see Gannet plunging into the sea and Turnstone below, as well as many gulls out at sea following fishing boats. Morocco is clearly visible across the Straits.



Look! Africa!



View of Africa from the Parque Natural del Estrecho

Duncan spots a Black stork, then we see a small group, then a migration: 42 in total. They are coming in over the Strait of Gibraltar, we greet them.



Black stork migrating into Spain

Swallows also come in on the breeze, and we wait but don't see more.



Time to get back to watch the sun setting over the Atlantic.



Day 8 Saturday 4th March *Jabal Ṭāriq* Gibraltar or The Rock

Barbary partridge is our desired bird for the day, so after crossing the border we try the cemetery near the airport, recorded there on E-bird, but nothing there. So we next go to the Botanical garden, where we are told it can sometimes be seen. Above we can see some apes on the wall of the clifftop and one halfway up the Rock. No luck with the partridge, but a helpful park worker gives us a tip where she recently saw a pair, along a road towards Europa point.



Barbary apes

We park where we shouldn't (but very briefly) and after staring at a very steep vegetation covered area across the road, with a sign showing a picture of the partridge so it's obviously a mini-reserve, David looks below over the car park wall and spots a couple just a few metres away. Duncan and I briefly see one before they scuttle off through the undergrowth.

We make our way to Europa Point, sightings also recorded there on E-bird, and I scan the base of the cliffs, in a rocky area with patches of vegetation which look like the sort of place Partridge in general like. Suddenly I see one on a rock, so we all get a good look, and then when I see the top of a lorry go by in the telescope I realise it's very close to the road, just above a roundabout (covered in metal partridges)!

We walk a bit closer and spot another one, probably its mate. Gorgeous creatures. Ridiculous place. Success!



Barbary partridge



We decide to do a mini tour of the Rock around the base of the east side, which involves a very long claustrophobic tunnel deep within the Rock, but apart from Rock doves (the genuine article), some rabbits, a nesting Yellow legged gull and a handsome cormorant in its breeding plumage, there's little else to see.



(Gibraltar) Rock Doves



Yellow-legged gull



Cormorant



We follow some signs to see if we can get closer to the apes, but only get close to a man stopping the traffic and telling us that we have to either walk 9km from there or pay his guide 25€ per person to be taken to see the apes. Daylight piracy so we decide to turn around and get back to Spain.

After a rather long wait to get back over the border we have lunch in a popular sea-front restaurant in La Linea: Mesón la Gaviota: friendly service and excellent seafood. We then head straight to our accommodation, the Hotel La Almoraima, a converted convent and palace in the Alcornocal Natural park. We spend the afternoon resting or exploring the building and its beautiful surrounding woodlands. After an excellent supper we stroll out to listen to night sounds, but the hotel ventilation system drowns out any possible birdcalls.

Day 9 Sunday 5th March Almoraima grounds & Alcornocal Natural park



Hotel Almoraima

After breakfast we have a walk through the hotel grounds and woodland of Cork, Algerian and Holm oak, and see Firecrest, Great spotted woodpecker and Speckled wood butterfly.



Firecrest



Speckled wood *Pararge aegeria*



Alcornocales Natural Park

After leaving the hotel we head out through the Natural Park towards a nearby reservoir, stopping off on the way for magnificent views of the Castle of Castellar and the reservoir below.



We reach padlocked gates, however, so we turn around and head out towards the coast, scouring the map for wetlands. One thing I hadn't banked on is that this part of Spain has been taken over by exclusive urbanisations for rich holiday makers, with guarded private roads cutting

off the wetlands and estuaries from the public. Grrr.

So we head for a rather more shabby, less exclusive coastal town, where there is a tiny micro-reserve next to a wide beach: a wetland surrounded by a patch of dunes to make space for breeding Kentish plover. We hear and then see Thekla lark, but no sign of Kentish plover.



Micro-reserve



We then head out towards Gibraltar and say our goodbyes to David and Duncan at the border, so ending the TIP TOP BIRTHDAY BIRDING TOUR 2023.

In total we have seen 135 bird species on the trip, with sightings of the desired birds: **Spanish Imperial Eagle, Little Bustard, Great Bustard, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Red-knobbed Coot, Bald Ibis and Barbary Partridge.**

Only the Black-bellied Sandgrouse managed to elude us.... Perhaps next time.