



BIRDING CENTRAL AND NORTHERN SPAIN

28 APRIL – 30 MAY 2019



Moustached Warbler (photo Thomas Hochebner) is one of our targets on this trip.

Spain has long been an extremely popular destination for birders, offering as it does a wide range of typical Mediterranean habitats, along with easy, safe, and excellent birding. Many sites are in beautifully scenic settings, featuring Romanesque architecture and ancient, fortified hilltop villages. Much of interior Spain is very rural and way off the tourist trail. This is the finest region to sample a large array of southern European species and is especially good for raptors, with 23 species possible. Our very comprehensive itinerary provides a great diversity of birds, concentrating on three major and distinct habitats: the semi-arid steppes and cork-oak dehesas (a multifunctional agro-sylvo-pastoral system and cultural landscape) of the central and northern Spain interior, the scenic sierras and high, alpine Pyrenees to the north in Catalonia and Aragon, and the Ebro River delta wetlands and marshes on the Mediterranean coast. During spring the many resident and breeding birds of this region are joined by migrants en route from Africa to nesting areas in the north and the Arctic.

All the important bird areas in central and northern Spain are incorporated, and there has been an impressive list of birds recorded over the past 20 years. The current total is 265 species, with 220 species regularly recorded on each tour. This superb itinerary is combined with vital local knowledge of where special and localized birds are to be found each year, giving maximum chances and many backup sites for the difficult and scarce species.

We first visit the hills and cork-oak dehesas south of Madrid in the Monfragüe region. Our target species, which will not be found further north, include **Black Stork, Cinereous Vulture, Black-winged Kite, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Red-necked Nightjar, Red-rumped Swallow, Azure-winged Magpie, Spanish Sparrow, Pallid Swift**, and, most importantly, **Spanish Imperial Eagle** – a recent split from the Imperial Eagle of Eastern Europe and the only full endemic species in Iberia.

The Ebro Delta, the estuary of one of Spain's largest rivers, is one of the most important wetlands in Western Europe. The delta is a huge complex of easily watched coastal dunes, saline lagoons, fresh marshes, reed beds, and rice fields. Some of the many highlights include large numbers of waterbirds: **Red-crested Pochard, Great Crested and Little Grebes, Water Rail**, and seven species of breeding heron (**Little Bittern** and **Purple and Squacco Herons** are common). The ten or more tern and gull species include abundant **Slender-billed** and **Audouin's Gulls**, both very localized Mediterranean birds. Shorebirds include a mix of breeding species such as **Pied Avocet, Kentish Plover, Common Redshank, Black-winged Stilt**, and **Collared Pratincole**. Migrants may include **Wood Sandpiper, Spotted Redshank, Common Greenshank**, and **Eurasian Oystercatcher**. **Western Marsh Harrier** and **Greater Flamingo** are also common here. Passerine specialties include typical marshland and coastal scrub birds: **Zitting Cisticola, Savi's** and **Moustached Warblers**, and **Great and Eurasian Reed Warblers**.

To the west, the Spanish steppes are a habitat rapidly being lost to arable agriculture. Certain areas have been protected by international efforts and are now splendid reserves that we will visit. It is a land of flat stony plains, mesas, scrubby river valleys, and maquis vegetation not unlike some semi-desert regions of the southwestern United States. Primary birding goals will be **Great and Little Bustards, Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Montagu's Harrier, Red-legged Partridge, Little Owl, Lesser Kestrel, Eurasian Stone-curlew, Spectacled Warbler**, and eight species of

Lark, including the elusive **Dupont's**. **White Storks** are common, found nesting on village rooftops or precariously perched on ancient church spires.

The Pyrenees and the foothill sierras offer some of the most spectacular scenery of the tour. At lower elevations are unspoiled habitats of box scrub, olive groves, and stunted oak forest amidst impressive steep, deep limestone gorges and massifs of pink, red, and gray. Here are many classic Mediterranean species such as **Eurasian Hoopoe**, **European Bee-eater**, **Woodchat Shrike**, **Black-eared** and **Black Wheatears**, **European Serin**, **Cirl**, **Ortolan**, and **Rock Buntings**, plus many **Warbler** species including **Sardinian**, **Western Orphee**, **Subalpine**, and **Western Bonelli's**. Here, too, is one of the greatest concentrations of raptors found anywhere in Europe, with 20-plus species virtually guaranteed. **Griffon Vultures** are abundant, while we've never failed yet to find **Egyptian Vulture**, **Bearded Vulture**, **Golden**, **Booted**, and **Bonelli's Eagles**, **Short-toed Snake Eagle**, and **Red** and **Black Kites**. The area has magnificent, ancient, fortified villages, massively built of stone with immense protecting walls. And there are old cathedrals, churches, monasteries, and castles dating back to the 12th – 16th centuries, when Spain was divided into the separate states of Castile, Aragon, and Catalonia, and occupied in some areas by the moors from northern Africa. We try to make time to visit these if participants wish.

At higher elevations are true alpine habitats of coniferous forests, fast-flowing streams, open, flower-rich meadows, and splendid, craggy mountain peaks, some still snow-covered. Further specialties we hope for here are **Alpine Accentor**, **Red-billed** and **Alpine Choughs**, **Ring Ouzel**, **White-throated Dipper**, **Grey Wagtail**, **Alpine Swift**, **Citril Finch**, **Black Woodpecker**, and the fabulous **Wallcreeper**. If lucky, we may find **White-winged Snowfinch**, though this usually requires more serious hiking.

Your guide will be driving you in a comfortable vehicle. Optional pre-breakfast birding and after-dark owling are offered. The tour does not require a great deal of walking or steep hiking to see the bulk of the birds, though there are opportunities for longer hikes if you wish. The highest altitudes involved are usually between 1800 – 2100 meters (6000 – 7000 feet), but only for one or two days of the tour. Being a private tour, you may wish to adapt the daily itinerary and schedule, do more or less birding, or add in historical sites as you wish and as it is feasible within the given framework of the tour.

Food is generally good and plentiful, and it is customary in Spain to provide plenty of wine free with the evening meal. Your accommodations all have private bathrooms and range from 4-star to small, simple, family-run rural hotels. Many are delightfully individual in pleasant and beautifully renovated ancient stone farmhouses nestled in quiet, charming villages, where **Eurasian Scops** and **Tawny Owls**, **Common Nightingale**, **Black Redstart**, and **Woodlark** sing outside our windows at night!

Please note that the detailed itinerary below cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.

Itinerary (16 days/15 nights)

Day 1. Madrid to Extremadura

Many people choose to arrive into Madrid prior to the start of the tour to get over jetlag and enjoy the cultural aspects of Madrid. If you are not arriving ahead of time, then a flight arriving into Madrid no later than 10 – 11 a.m. is requested. Once you've met your leader either at the airport or at a convenient place to be decided, you will depart immediately for the Monfragüe region. En route there will be plenty of time for some great initial birding – finding many of the common species, such as **Spotless Starling** and **European Serin**, and hopefully specialties such as **Azure-winged Magpie** and **Spanish Imperial Eagle**, before reaching our hotel in the heart of the cork-oak dehesas for a three-night stay.

Overnight: Hospedería Parque de Monfragüe, Torrejón El Rubio

www.hospederiasdeextremadura.es/hotel/hospederia-parque-de-monfrague

Days 2 – 3. Monfragüe Region

You will have plenty of time here to check out the scenic sierras, dehesas, and woodlands for the specialties of the region: breeding **Spanish Imperial Eagle**, **Black Stork**, and **Cinereous Vulture** in particular. Other great birds we'll be searching for here are **Azure-winged Magpie**, **Red-rumped Swallow**, **Pallid Swift**, **Spanish Sparrow**, **Black-winged Kite**, **European Roller**, and **Great Spotted Cuckoo**, all species difficult or impossible to find further north. We will also make our first searches for **Bonelli's Eagle** and **Great** and **Little Bustards**, and will have time to visit ancient, historic, fortified towns such as Trujillo (good for **Pallid Swift**). After dark we can venture out to look for **Red-necked Nightjar** and resident **Western Barn Owl** around the village.

Overnight: Hospedería Parque de Monfragüe, Torrejón El Rubio

Day 4. Monfragüe to Valencia

Today we will set out northeast across the great open plains of La Mancha - Don Quixote's country. This is a vast open landscape of mixed agriculture and pasture (a further opportunity for more bustards) and isolated lagoons, good for the local **Bearded Reedling** and a very good chance to find **White-headed Duck**, a globally threatened species with a limited world range. By early evening you'll arrive at a beautiful "bodega" hotel in the province of Valencia – **Eurasian Scops Owl**, **Red-necked Nightjar**, and **Rock Sparrow** may be found just outside our windows after sampling their own fine wines with dinner.

Overnight: Hotel Entreviñas, Valencia

www.entrevinas.com

Day 5. To the Ebro Delta

Today we will incorporate new sites for further special birds – **Red-knobbed Coot** and **Marbled Duck** (another globally threatened, range-restricted bird), plus a superb breeding colony of **Mediterranean Gull** at Albufera de Valencia. On route to the Ebro Delta we can visit other unique coastal wetlands to show you another very localized species, **Moustached Warbler**, along with colonies of **Collared Pratincole**. Arriving in the Ebro Delta, we will check into our superb, modern hotel (famed for its wonderful seafood), a short walk from good birding sites.

Overnight: Hotel Miami Mar, San Carlos de la Ràpita

www.miamicanpons.com

Day 6: The Ebro Delta

A full day on the Ebro Delta, exploring the varied coastal habitats, will give a large boost of species seen on this tour without having to travel any great distances at all. The focus will be on waterfowl, herons, gulls, terns, shorebirds, and specialties of the reed beds and marshes. Waterfowl should include **Common Shelduck**, **Great Crested** and **Little Grebes**, and large numbers of bright **Red-crested Pochard**. Equally abundant is **Greater Flamingo**. There will be smaller counts of **Grey**, **Purple**, **Black-crowned Night**, and **Squacco Herons**, **Great** and **Little Egrets**, and **Little Bittern**. We will probably also find one or two scarcer species such as **Eurasian Spoonbill**, **Glossy Ibis**, **Water Rail**, and **Purple Swamphen**. **Western Marsh Harrier** can be a common sight over the extensive reed beds, where **Common Reed Bunting**, **Great** and **Eurasian Reed Warblers**, **Savi's** and **Moustached Warblers**, and **Zitting Cisticola** sing. We should see breeding **Common Redshank**, **Pied Avocet**, **Kentish Plover**, **Caspian**, **Little**, **Sandwich**, **Gull-billed**, and **Whiskered Terns**, **Yellow-legged Gull**, and the attractive **Slender-billed Gull**. Migrants should be present – **Little Stint**, **Wood Sandpiper**, **Common Greenshank**, **Spotted Redshank**, **Eurasian Oystercatcher**, **Ruff**, and **Black-tailed Godwit** being regular.

Overnight: Hotel Miami Mar, San Carlos de la Ràpita

Day 7. Ebro Delta to the Steppes

As always, the approach to the daily itinerary is flexible and will reflect what species have been seen or are still needed. We anticipate departing the Ebro Delta after optional pre-breakfast birding, setting off inland towards the famous Monegros area of arid steppe. If we've not seen **Bonelli's Eagle** by now, there may be other sites known to us to check. You may cross a labyrinth of farm tracks across the steppe to look at the salt lakes, for good chances of encountering various lark species, both sandgrouse, **Eurasian Stone-curlew**, and **Tawny Pipit**. You may wish for us to have our first try for seeing the elusive and scarce **Dupont's Lark** in areas we know where densities are particularly high. By early evening you'll arrive at Letux in Goya country, now amidst a burgeoning wine-growing area.

Overnight: Hotel Rural Rincón del Cierzo, Lécera

www.rincondelcierzo.com

Day 8. Spanish Steppes

A day spent in the steppe areas and preserves of Belchite, paying special attention to finding **Dupont's**, **Calandra**, and **Thekla Larks** and **Lesser** and **Greater Short-toed Larks**, the bustards and sandgrouse, **Lesser Kestrel**, **Little Owl**, **Long-eared Owl**, **Eurasian Stone-curlew**, **Egyptian Vulture**, **Montagu's Harrier**, **Red-legged Partridge**, **Black-eared Wheatear**, **Southern Grey Shrike**, **Spectacled Warbler**, and no doubt a whole host of other great birds. Birding along the Ebro River near Zaragoza can be very productive for birds of the more lush and verdant river edge, such as **Little Ringed Plover**, **Eurasian Wryneck**, **Eurasian Penduline Tit**, **Melodious** and **Cetti's Warblers**, **Eurasian Golden Oriole**, **Eurasian Hobby**, and more. Nesting **Northern Goshawk** and **Long-eared Owl** in the area may be staked out, along with other good sites for the scarce **Bonelli's Eagle**. We'll pass by Belchite, where we may find time to pause at the old town, which was bombed into dereliction in the Spanish Civil War and left as an eerie monument to the conflict.

Overnight: Hotel Rural Rincón del Cierzo, Lécera

Day 9: To the Pyrenees

This will be a fairly leisurely day to drive north into the Pyrenees near Hecho. There are many options, with great little stops and alternative sites for species still causing “gaps” in our list, or to obtain better views for you of anything you may have missed earlier. We can spend further time in steppe areas if necessary and visit very scenic cliffs, where **Black Wheatear** nests. Wetland reserves en route offer a chance of **Black-necked Grebe**, **Eurasian Bittern**, **Bearded Reedling**, and **Common Kingfisher**. We’ll arrive by early evening at a welcoming hotel in the Pyrenees, offering a wide menu including local game dishes.

Overnight: Hotel Castillo D’Acher, Siresa

www.castillodacher.com

Days 10 – 11. The High Pyrenees

Two full days based in Siresa will give us an optimum chance of finding alpine species. One day will be spent traveling to higher Pyrenean mountain passes at 1800 – 2100 meters (6000 – 7000 feet) elevation amidst spectacular scenery. Target species at these heights, from just below the tree-line to the open alpine zone, are **Alpine Accentor**, **Ring Ouzel**, **Citril Finch**, **Eurasian Crag Martin**, **Water Pipit**, **Alpine Chough**, and, depending on weather conditions and snow cover, perhaps a chance encounter with **White-winged Snowfinch**. There are pretty villages in the Roncal Valley that you may wish to visit, famed for its wonderful sheep’s milk cheese.

The second day may be spent revisiting higher areas, staying lower in wooded regions, or traveling further west to different beautiful mountain habitats in search of new birds like **Marsh Tit**, **Common Firecrest**, **Eurasian Bullfinch**, **Red Kite**, **Yellowhammer**, **Eurasian Jay**, and **Red Crossbill**. Our hotel is in a picturesque village close to prime birding sites, particularly for **Wallcreeper**. This stunning crimson, grey, and black species is a regular breeding bird in the deep, steep, rocky gorges just minutes away from our accommodation. There are several sites to try for this gem. Other target species at these mid-elevations are **Black Woodpecker**, **Blue** and **Common Rock Thrushes**, **European Crested Tit**, **White-throated Dipper**, **Grey Wagtail**, and, of course, excellent chances of **Bearded Vulture**!

Overnight: Hotel Castillo D’Acher, Siresa

Day 12. To the Sierra de Guara

There is great flexibility today while making the easy transition from Siresa eastwards to Huesca, our base for the next three nights. Depending on which species may be missing, or of interest to you, we can stay longer in the Siresa area, go high into the Pyrenees again, or move directly towards the impressively grand, red sandstone massifs of the Sierra de Guara. There may be time to combine birding with interesting historical monasteries or fortified villages in spectacular settings, such as the ancient monastery of San Juan De La Peña. Throughout the day we’ll watch overhead for more **Bearded Vulture** sightings. Loporzano is an idyllic, tiny, and timeless village, offering accommodation in a beautifully converted ancient farmhouse operated by expert local birders. This is a little haven, serving excellent food and wine.

Overnight: Boletas, Loporzano, Huesca

www.boletas.org

Days 13 – 14. Loporzano and vicinity

For two full days we will be based in Loporzano, with excellent birding literally on the doorstep. The varied habitats include precipitous gorges, box-scrub-covered hillsides, patches of stunted oak forest, tiny green fields surrounded by ancient stone walls, and olive groves, all creating a

wonderful, picturesque mosaic and ensuring a fine variety of birds. The whole area is rich in typical southern European species, and we'll expect good sightings of many of the following: **Subalpine, Dartford, Western Orphean, Sardinian and Western Bonelli's Warblers, Cirl, Ortolan, and Rock Buntings, Common Nightingale, Woodlark, Woodchat Shrike, Short-toed Treecreeper, Common Firecrest, Eurasian Hoopoe, and European Serin.** The region is phenomenal for raptors. It is difficult to look upwards and not see **Griffon Vulture** soaring overhead! **Bearded Vulture** is close by here, along with **Black Kite** and **Golden and Booted Eagles** and **Short-toed Snake Eagle**, plus occasional **Eurasian Sparrowhawk, European Honey-Buzzard, and Northern Goshawk.** There are plenty of options during our stay, depending on the birds seen and your preferences: there are longer hikes possible, or some downtime to soak up the fresh air and bird song at your leisure. We can visit some of the more spectacular gorge areas, where skies can be filled with raptors, or take time to visit some of the fine cultural sites nearby, such as Alquezar, a splendidly restored hilltop village with an ancient church and fortified monastery.

Overnight: Boletas, Loporzano, Huesca

Day 15. To Barcelona

We will leave the Pyrenees today and head east to the Mediterranean coast and the bustling and historic city of Barcelona, birding en route. Depending on your preferences, you may wish to divert for other bird species along the way or go directly to Barcelona. You will stay in a hotel near the airport.

Overnight: Hotel FrontAir Congress, Barcelona

www.frontaircongresshotel.com

Day 16. Departure

The tour ends today with breakfast at the hotel. The hotel is close to the airport and offers a free shuttle service to the Barcelona International Airport (airport code BCN).

Duration: 16 days

Limit (Group Size): 4 – 8

Date: 28 April – 13 May 2019

Tour Start: Madrid

Tour End: Barcelona

Price: €4590 per person sharing, assuming 6 – 8 participants

€5531 per person sharing, assuming 4 – 5 participants

Single Supplement: €323

Price includes:

Accommodation

Meals (lunch on day 1 to breakfast on day 16, including wine with the evening meals)

Ground transport while on tour

Price excludes:

Flights

Insurance (including tour cancellation insurance)

Visa

Alcoholic drinks (except wine with the evening meals)

Any personal expenses, e.g. laundry, gifts, phone calls, etc.

Climate, Clothing:

The weather at this time of year may vary from hot, dry, and sunny to cooler (or, if unlucky, cold!) with some rain. Snow is possible in the high Pyrenees. Most of the time, light cotton clothes, t-shirts, and light walking shoes will be fine. However, for the evenings and at higher altitude carry a light raincoat, a sweater, and an anorak. A sun hat and sunglasses are advisable, plus a light rucksack. Although there is no requirement for any long or arduous walking, you may wish to wander further off the trails, so a pair of walking shoes or boots is advisable as well as lighter shoes or trainers. Laundry services are available at some locations during the tour.

Currency:

Euros - €, bring either a small amount of euros with you or change money on arrival. There is access to ATMs during the tour. You may want a little cash for drinks and small items.

Documents:

A passport valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure from Spain is required.

Visas are not required for entry by holders of EU passports or by United States citizens. Others should check at

<http://www.exteriores.gob.es/Consulados/LONDRES/en/Consulado/Pages/CheckPassport.aspx>

Equipment:

The guide will have a spotting scope for your use; but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so

Health:

Spain is free of all the tropical diseases requiring inoculations, as compared to more exotic destinations. There should be plenty of bottled water available, although tap water is considered safe. Bring sunscreen and perhaps a little mosquito repellent (though these are not usually a problem, especially at this time of year). Access to shops and pharmacies may be somewhat limited. If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary.

Miscellaneous:

Departure Tax – none

Electricity – 220 volts, 50 cycles, round 2-pin plugs

Language -- Spanish (Castilian), Catalan, Galician, and Basque

Time – CEST (Central European Summer Time)

Suggested Reading:

If you are interested in a particular subject (flowers, mammals, reptiles etc.), please let us know prior to departure and we will try to bring along relevant guides.

Birds:

Svensson, Lars, Peter J. Grant, Killian Mullarney, and Dan Zetterstrom. *Birds of Europe*. Princeton University Press, 2009. This field guide to the birds of Britain and Europe is undoubtedly the best produced for Europe. It is packed with 3500 color illustrations, masses of detail on identification, beautifully produced. *Highly recommended!*

Jonsson, Lars. *Birds of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East*. Princeton University Press, 1996 (Reissue edition). A good field guide with lovely illustrations.

Peterson, Guy Mountfort and P.A.D. Hollom. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*. Houghton Mifflin, 2001. Somewhat outdated, but still perfectly adequate if you already own a copy and don't want to purchase a new book.