

Comunitat de València 31st May-4th June

I have to admit that when I received the invitation some months ago to go on a birding trip to Extramadura I thought it was an email scam. I'm so glad I decided to reply. The first trip I could not avail of but a subsequent invitation from Esther Barrozo of the Spanish Tourist board to visit and bird in the Alicante and Valencia region. I was able to accept. Prior to my visit I got an invite to go to Tabarca Island as I was arriving a day earlier than the rest. After investigating I decided to hire a bird guide for a few hours instead as the island was flat and bird less after migration. I was not disappointed After contacting Virgilio Beltran of Acciona Birding I was met at Alicante airport by David Alejo the tourist board and driven to my hotel in Alicante, the Eurostar Luxurious. A modern four star hotel adjacent to Alicante castle the hotel was very comfortable, clean and they provided an excellent breakfast Unfortunately the restaurant was closed in the evening but just down the side street were a good selection of cafes, fast food centres and restaurants. I chose the 'Velvet' which was superb. After checking into my hotel I met up with Virgilio, a double for 'John Bellushi' and an amicable more friendly bird guide I could not have wished for. (Keep thinking he will shout 'Toga Party!!!!' Anyway off we went to a small marshland a few minutes from the airport called Clot De Galvany. This wetland is surrounded by housing development and yet provides an oasis and sanctuary for birds and other wildlife. We spent just over four hours there and highlights included, purple gallinule, red rumped swallow, pallid swift, southern great grey shrike, hoopoe, Sardinian warbler, Iberian green woodpecker and crested lark. 32 species in total and a very pleasant walk. After a deep sleep I got up at six am the next morning and climbed up to Alicante castle where I added peregrine falcon, yellow legged gulls, kestrel, serin and more Sardinian warblers and pallid swifts. A great view of the city can be had from here and I would recommend any visitor to make the climb for the view alone. David Alejo picked me up after breakfast and we proceeded to the airport to pick up the other party members and our guides for the next two days. Virgilio whom I had already met and Pau Lucio of Birdwatching Spain. The other party members were David Tomlinson, Barry Cooper, Isabel Ashworth and Simon Cox of Naturetrek. We loaded our minibus and said our adieu's to David an excellent host. Our first stop was El Hondo Reserve again a short drive from the airport. The Reserve at El Hondo is a miniature Ebro Delta with all the birds you want to see in a smaller area, marbled teal and white headed duck adds to its importance and impressive numbers of herons, gulls, terns and waders mean you good easily spend a whole day there. Photography presented good opportunities and I got great shots of black winged stilts, squacco heron, avocet, little tern, whiskered tern and audouin's gull. We introduced purple gallinule and red knobbed coot were doing well and we're obviously thriving on this well managed reserve. From here we went to Camping Marjal Costa Blanca for lunch and where we were staying in self catering bungalows on this well equipped family camping site. After lunch we headed to the Salinas de Santa Pola where there were good numbers of slender billed gulls, Audouin's gulls, terns nesting yellow legged gulls, Kentish plover and red rumped swallows overhead. En route we had Bee eater and Plover and we then moved to Monnegre, rugged hills just outside of Alicante. Here we notched up little owl, alpine swift and thekla lark. We then headed back to the campsite for dinner. David and I decided to do a pre breakfast walk from the campsite although we had not anticipated much birding in the vicinity. Our thoughts proved unfounded as we spotted zitting cisticola, glossy ibis, cattle egret, a roller and several calling and visible stone curlews. After a good breakfast our first port of call was the hills of Sierra de Mariola and as we stopped I picked out a black wheatear perched on the pinnacle of a high rock. We added blue rock thrush, black redstart, crag martin, nightingale and a family of recently fledged red legged partridge. Higher still we located some shy rock sparrows then a short drive to a griffon vulture nest site. We saw a couple of vultures flying and added raven and more peregrines to our day list. After lunch we went to Valle de Ayora, a steppe area much like you would see near Trujillo. We viewed a distant but obliging little bustard and heard short toed lark. A short stop later added calling golden oriole and a brief glimpse of a female in flight. A first Steppe location was a lesser kestrel colony another typical steppe species. We saw several birds in flight and saw several finches that are being used for artificial nest boxes to help this endangered species by the SEO. We then drove and checked into our hotel Hotel Cullera in Cullera and probably our best accommodation of the trip. A walk to the Restaurant on the promenade gave us tantalising views of Audouin's gull. The meal was fabulous and probably too much!!! The balcony view from my hotel room provided good views of the hills behind and an early walk next morning added blue tit, sparrow hawk, cuckoo, serin and spotted flycatcher to the increasing list. Virgilio told me the hills act as a funnel for raptors returning from Africa during migration in the Spring. We said our farewells to Virgilio and Pau that night and the following morning we met our new guide for the day Yania Maggiono an Argentinian of Italian descent. Our first destination was Albufera de Valencia National Park with extensive rice paddies. We first encountered purple gallinule an osprey and some little bitterns. A nice pair of summer plumaged curlew sandpiper, red crested pochard and our first marbled teal were bonuses for our list. We then had our view of the large sandwich tern colony and our target bird an elegant tern, a mer for the certainty and most of the others. This year the male and female have raised one chick although the male mates with the closely related sandwich terns from time to time. Around the colony slender billed, mediterranean and black headed gulls also breed providing a noisy spectacle. We then drove a short distance to the filter beds improving the water quality of the area. Here we watched a great reed warbler being ringed and our first great white egret. Lucia gave us an interesting guided tour of the green filters and seemed genuinely enthusiastic about her low paid role. From her house roof we had an excellent view over reeds and paddies and spotted black terns, gadwall, a marsh harrier and Savi's warbler. Lunch was near Yania's home and in the woods we had short toed tree creeper, firecrest and a kingfisher's nest with two young. Our hotel in Valencia was probably our only disappointing accommodation of the trip, the Holiday Inn. While clean and functional being stuck in the centre of a city with a bedroom view of a concrete wall is not the ideal location for an ornithologist. The only birds visible were introduced and escaped monk and ring necked parakeets. Dinner was at a fantastic restaurant in Valencia, El Principio del Fin where we met up with our last guide David Warrington an Englishman now living in Spain. After another delicious meal we headed out to look for owls and nightjars. We saw and I photographed one of three red necked nightjars but the owls were not performing. Breakfast in the hotel the next morning was unsurpassed but sufficient to start the day. Our first stop the coastal wetlands of Marjal dels Moros. Turtle doves were calling as we arrived and our best views of collared pratincoles, little terns, Med gulls, Kentish plovers and little ringed plovers were all present in good numbers. Only downside to the marshlands were the multitude of mosquitos and I was lurching. We then headed to the mountains of Sierra d'Espada. The walk to the picnic area produced two rare butterflies, two-tailed pashas. While having lunch we were joined by black redstart, short toed tree creeper and firecrest. Barrie heard crested tit but we failed to see it. Yania checked the eagle site and to our amazement and her obvious delight we were soon observing the pair of Bonelli's eagles, just below us on the cliff face. We journeyed down to the coast for a cool drink and then visited the southern end of the Valencia marshes where we had green sandpiper, glossy ibis, purple heron, garganey and Barrie heard moustached warbler. It was then time to head to our respective airports for the journey home. 136 species were seen or heard which was a fantastic number for such a short trip. A very memorable trip which I think I can safely say was enjoyed by all and our heartfelt thanks must go to the Spanish Tourist board and our impressive guides. I certainly will be back and have made provisional arrangements to take a group over in February 2016. Charles Garry Wilkinson Northern Ireland Ornithologist Club

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