

Costa Blanca Bird Trip 2013

25th March 2013

As we landed at Alicante (ahead of schedule), the weather was beautiful. We swiftly picked up our red Alfa Romeo and headed for El Hondo. On the way we drove past a Great White Egret flying by. Due to the North Gate only opening on Wednesday and Saturday we explored the visitor centre trails and hides today. As we arrived Clive and I noticed everything was a lot greener than in August. We walked up to a viewpoint next to the visitor centre to find several pairs of re-introduced Red-knobbed Coots. Hugh spotted a Little Egret skulking in the reeds whilst we were overwhelmed with the number of House Sparrows and Coots. We then strolled onto the boardwalk, overlooking the reeds and heath/scrub area. Clive spotted a Stone Curlew flying very quickly into a neighbouring field. It was soon obvious Sardinian Warblers were in abundance at El Hondo. We swiftly moved onto the two hides overlooking pools. The first hide held a couple of beautiful Red-crested Pochards, with many noisy Little Grebes. The other hide had Black-headed Gull, Mediterranean Gull, Shelduck, Black-necked Grebe and more Little Grebe. We then took the longish walk to a viewpoint looking over the large lake "El Raja". On the way we saw a Reed Bunting and three Greater Flamingos on "El Rincon". When we reached the viewpoint there were masses of Avocet, Shoveler and Mallard. A few Cattle egrets were situated in with them. Also a Marsh Harrier flew over the reeds which spooked the ensemble of birds. We walked back to the boardwalk, on the way seeing a Crested Lark. On the boardwalk Clive and I spotted a Penduline Tit fringing the reeds with Hugh only getting a brief glimpse. However Hugh spotted a male Hen Harrier flying low over the reeds! After our pleasant walk we quickly looked in on the viewpoint next to the visitor centre to be rewarded with a Purple Swamphen. Overall a good start to our trip.



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26th March 2013

On our second day we had an early start because we needed to pick up our tour guide, Graham Critchell, for the day and the rest of the week. Today we were going to Guadalentin Valley. As we arrived a Corn Bunting was showing very well singing on a nearby bush. Two Stone Curlews flew over our heads while a few Crested Lark were roaming in the field next to the road. Up the road a Stone Curlew was trying to hide in a cabbage field! A pair of Spectacled Warblers were also seen nearby. However next to the valley we did not see Bee-eaters which are meant to nest in the banks, probably too early for them. After that disappointment Graham took us down a quiet track/road. More Stone Curlew were seen, Quail were heard and several Woodchat Shrike were showing very well. As Clive pulled over to look in a bare field he noticed two Red-legged Partridge but then spotted a pair of Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Graham also noticed a Little Bustard in the distance being chased by a Marsh Harrier. After that, many more Little Bustard were seen, one flying right over us! Down the road, even more Stone Curlew were seen with Clive spotting two Great Spotted Cuckoo and a Southern Grey Shrike sitting in a nearby tree. Also Graham spotted a smart male Subalpine Warbler, however only Clive saw it. To our final destination Jack spotted a flock of 12 Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight with Thekla and Calandra Lark in the nearby fields. A very exciting day seeing all three target species.

After we dropped Graham off at his home we headed for the Vistabella Road, on the south side of El Hondo. After getting directions from Graham we soon found the hide, however having to go over a precarious board walk. From the hide we saw good numbers of Greater Flamingo, White-headed Duck, Pochard, Little Grebe, Black-necked Grebe and Shoveler.



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Hugh spotted a Whiskered Tern flying low over the water. There were also a few pairs of Red-crested Pochard. As we were walking back to the car a Booted Eagle flew overhead with 15+ Yellow Wagtails in the nearby fields. A pair of Great Crested Grebes were in a pool with a Blackcap skulking in a bush. We moved down the road to find two Little Owls sitting on walls right next to the road. A very good secret area of El Hondo which has many good species of birds.



27th March 2013

Again for our 3rd day we picked up our tour guide, Graham and headed for the world famous El Hondo North Gate. As the North Gate opened at half nine we headed for the local rubbish tip and football fields. As we arrived at the dump there were masses of Gulls, Grey Herons, Little and Cattle Egrets. There were meant to be three White Storks but they were not in evidence. We swiftly moved on to the football pitches to see some good birds. We found a Great Spotted Cuckoo, Black-eared Wheatear, Short-toed Eagle, Hoopoe and a Chiffchaff. Maybe the birds came out because Hugh put on his silly hat! It was soon half nine and we entered the North Gate with many Pallid Swifts circling above us. To Graham's surprise the North Gate was very busy; too busy. Everybody had the same idea as us; sit in the main OP for the three hours! It was very noisy, so elusive birds like Penduline Tit did not come and say hello. However we did see Purple Heron, Booted Eagle, Kingfisher, Marsh Harrier, White-headed Duck, Collared Pratincole, Whiskered tern and Black tern.



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After the three hours Graham suggested going to Crevillente to try and find the nesting pair of Bonelli's Eagle. We arrived to immediately find the two parents sitting on the top of a steep cliff face. We eventually found the nest site, but not in the place Graham expected it to be. Alpine Swift, Crag Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Chough and Sparrowhawk were also seen. Later in the afternoon after we dropped Graham off at his house we had our last exploration of El Hondo Visitor centre. We sat on the board walk for a while spotting a Cuckoo in a nearby tree and eventually getting good views and photographs of Sardinian Warbler. Along the track towards the hides we heard a Great Reed Warbler very loud and close, a Booted Eagle flew over our heads and a Fan-tailed Warbler was seen perched on a nearby post. Another good day seeing many new species.



28th March 2013

An early start saw us up at the Bonete Steppe area by 8-30am accompanied again by Graham.

We were quickly onto a pair of Mistle Thrushes and soon after a Black Kite appeared flying over nearby fields. Our second stop had plenty of Calandra Lark flitting around and then Graham spotted three Great Bustards flying in the distance. As we were viewing these fantastic birds in the scopes and watching the males for any signs of displaying Graham heard Pin-tailed Sandgrouse calling. Sure enough three were flying over us with five others flying off in the other direction. They were probably returning from their early morning drink. We were over 900m above sea level and the wind was gusting strongly.



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Hugh had to wrap up in his hood to withstand the windchill! Before leaving this venue a Short-toed Lark flew up and over quite close to our position.

As we fringed and then drove through some woodland a Woodlark was heard and Blue Tit, Jay, Iberian Woodpecker, Chaffinch and Sparrowhawk spotted.

Now we were on our way to Petrola Lagoon. Calandra Lark were very much in evidence and a flock of Linnet noted. At the lake as we were identifying the different waders a massive bird of prey appeared low down on the other side of the water being mobbed by a Montagu's Harrier. It became obvious that it was a juvenile Golden Eagle and we watched as it slowly climbed higher and eventually out of sight. Birds identified around the lagoon were Little Ringed Plover, Redshank, Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Black Winged Stilt, Flamingo and Water Pipit.

Moving onto the Corral-Rubio road we were on the lookout for more Great Bustards. We weren't disappointed when Jack spotted a fair size group including two male Great Bustards in full display, a fine spectacle indeed. As we moved along the road more groups were found bringing the total Great Bustard count to forty plus. As we made our way slowly back to the motorway a flock of Lesser-short-toed Larks were discovered affording close views from the car. At least twenty Rock Sparrow were spotted on a roadside telephone wire close to a disused building. A very worthwhile and enjoyable trip despite the wind! After saying our farewells to Graham we decided to have a quick look around El Pinet. Close views of Avocet and Black Winged Stilt were easily



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achieved through the screens. Kentish Plover and Flamingo were also evident. Further along we found a flock of Slender-billed Gull along with Sandwich and Common Tern. Roosting Dunlin and some busy Sanderling were on the next island. Jack spotted a superb male Redstart posing on a fence and even further along two Audouin's Gull were resting on an island. An excellent end to the day.



29th March 2013

A trip up to Monnegre was the order of the day before our early evening flight home.

At our first stop we soon found a Blue Rock Thrush whose song echoed off the surrounding cliff faces. Two Rock Dove were also located and lower down on some rocks a Black Wheatear showed itself. Further up the road we finally achieved some reasonable views of a Bonelli's Warbler which was constantly on the move through the bushes. A Sub-alpine Warbler came into view briefly, the first of two we saw today. By a hut we located a Black-eared Wheatear which gave really good views and a pair of Black Redstart which were obviously feeding young. All the way up the road there were plenty of Serin and Sardinian Warbler. In Monnegre village we found a smart male Redstart in an orchard, House Sparrow were numerous. Two Rock Sparrow on a wire just beyond the village where we also heard a Great Spotted Cuckoo and an agitated Magpie. Near the top of the road we had brief views of Rock Bunting and Crossbill. On the way back we noticed Crag Martin flying around the cliffs and also one or two House Martin nearby. Amazingly we saw no raptors on our final day but birds don't always follow the script!

