

Lynx, Tree Frog & Bustards, Spanish Weekend 2011.

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A whirlwind tour of central Spain, reacquainting with Iberian Lynx before heading over to Extremadura for delights on the plains. My second trip to Andujar in less than a year, the quest was two-fold, to seek out the enigmatic Iberian Lynx again, and taking advantage of the time of year, to look for Stripeless Tree Frogs and other amphibians. With these conquered, the plan was then to head over to the grasslands north of Trujillo for bustards, sandgrouse and other specialities such as Great Spotted Cuckoo.

10 March.

After a ping-pong around Europe, landed in Madrid at 10 p.m., hopped into a rented car and drove immediately south, arriving in the sleepy foothills of Andujar some three hours later.

11 March. Andujar.

'Twas 6 a.m., out onto the dark I staggered, a full day on the slopes of Andujar province ahead. Wound up the track to La Lancha, a Little Owl the first bird of the day (an owl also started each day in Andujar the previous year!). Red Deer scattered across the road, glints of dawn illuminated the dehesa, I reached my chosen vantage point, a roadside rock with excellent views over a wide expanse of landscape.

Azure-winged Magpies flocking, Serins trilling absolutely everywhere, a constant hoop-hoop-hoop of Hoopoes resounding through the valleys, ah Spanish birding, glorious. No sign of a Spanish sun however, the day looking distinctively cool and overcast. Still, a couple of Red-rumped Swallows swooped about, Iberian Green Woodpeckers were much in evidence and Crested Tits appeared to be nesting just in front, all was just fine. A Spanish guy arrived, so too some Belgians, all fellow Lynx spotters ...and the news was good, several animals had been seen in previous days, a pair strolling right across the road at this precise spot. Time ticked by, no Magpies in alarm, no Lynx strolling by. Griffon Vultures took to the air, two Black Vultures in their midst. On the mammal front, a female Wild Boar came snorting in, six minute piglets in tow, little stripey affairs all too happy to suckle and sleep. Two more Wild Boar nearby, plus the result of extensive searching the first herd of Moufflon of the day, five animals on a distant slope.

Late morning approached, a few drops of rain. The Belgians departed to look for bats. Hmm, thought I, a good time to nip back to the hotel to pick up a friend still sleeping. Oops, mistake, two Lynx came strolling up the valley five minutes after I

left, sat themselves on the rocks directly opposite and gave the lone Spanish observer fine views! One hour later, long after the Lynx had departed, I was back. A Southern Grey Shrike hardly compensated for the miss, nor did the numerous Sardinian Warblers or the obliging Hawfinch.

Spotted more Moufflon, a herd of eight this time, some mighty fine males amongst them, but then it began to rain. T'was now about 3 p.m. and the rain was becoming steadily heavier - not a problem for the Lynx I was assured, but it was rather yuk for me. A snooze in the car, then we gave up and went to McDonald's!!!

By evening the rain had given way, a fine damp night in prospect - perfect conditions for amphibians. Leaving Andujar town, to the Rio Jandula we went, arriving as day turned to night, the poop-poop-poop-poop of a Scops Owl echoing from nearby oaks, a deep hooo hooo of an Eagle Owl also adding to the atmosphere. However, it was to the little critters of the night that I turned my attention - a Spanish herpetologist pointed out the distinctive call of a Stripeless Tree Frog, also adding hints on how to find them. Right little buggers to see they are, they immediately stop calling at the first sign of light or approach. A half hour of careful listening and searching revealed zilch, I knew where the animal was to within a metre or so, but simply could not locate it. Found three splendid Natterjack Toads nearby, a weird call they have, then returned to the hunt for Stripeless Tree Frogs. New strategy, I waited till I got an approximate locality, then flooded the ditch with light and searched on my knees. And eventually it paid off, a stunning little frog, almost fluorescent green, there it was crouching on the ground right at the water's edge. Once located, it then fortunately hopped off in the correct direction, allowing me a few photographs.

Mid-evening, time to retire. Just up the road, a Garden Dormouse scampering along, a fine end to day one.

12 March. Andujar & Extremadura.

A repeat dosage of the previous days's effort, out from the hotel pre-dawn and in position at the vantage point as the first hints of daybreak lit the slopes. Rolling banks of mist and fog sitting in the vales, a brightness to the sky suggesting a nice day ahead. Red Deer ambled across the hillsides, Crested Tits churred, Serins resumed the choral backdrop, day two of the hunt for Lynx was under way.

The Belgians arrived, another Spanish guy too, a lot of careful scanning ...particularly on the slope directly behind us - a Lynx had been calling, the voice carrying, but pinpointing it rather harder. And then one sharp-eyed guy spotted it, sat atop a boulder surveying the world, one splendid Iberian Lynx in all its glory. And what a glorious animal it really was, just relaxing there for all to enjoy. Much admiration to follow, the animal sitting right out in view for 20 minutes as if the star of a documentary film, a Little Owl even dropping down to mob the stately animal. And then a bank of fog rolled in, obliterating views. Would the Lynx stay put? Would it disappear under the cover of the fog? Half an hour we waited and then we had the answer - as the valley cleared to once again reveal the outcrop, there stood an empty rock, the Lynx having wandered off.

My seventh Iberian Lynx in a year, I was most content, so taking advantage of the early hour, we decided to depart and head across to Extremadura for a complete change in setting and fauna. Rock Sparrows and another Little Owl before departure, assorted flocks of Azure-winged Magpies en route, the drive was relatively long, but by mid-afternoon we had arrived in the quaint city of Trujillo, a walled town with flocks of Lesser Kestrels overhead and vast grasslands stretching off in all directions. Bright sunshine now, so quickly booked a hotel, then headed off to explore.

A fantastic evening to follow, the steppes buzzing with song and birds flitting in all directions. Incredible numbers of Corn Buntings, virtually every second post sporting a bird. Also White Storks, Hoopoes and Crested Larks in no short supply. Leaving Trujillo, I took a quiet back road to Santa Marta de Magasca, immediately Red and Black Kites overhead, a couple of Griffon Vultures, the first Montagu's Harrier of the evening and several Common Buzzards, but about ten kilometres along, the goings got even better - a loud kik kik kik kik and there they were, three superb Great Spotted Cuckoos chasing each other around, a White Stork as a backdrop, Hoopoes calling off yonder, just splendid. Another few kilometres and the shrubs gave way to vast plains, Calandra Larks appeared in flocks, Lesser Kestrels two'a'penny and a Short-toed Eagle drifted over.

This was bustard and sandgrouse country, so plenty of stops for scans, one more Great Spotted Cuckoo seen (prancing around in an open field), one Merlin flushing flocks of Golden Plover and then the biggest prize of the evening, a chance stop to watch a Southern Grey Shrike turned into a real spectacle when several heads were noticed in the grass just beyond the road - Little Bustards! Got the scope out, an incredible 34 Little Bustards strolled through the vegetation, stately males amongst them. Another birder stopped, the bustards decided this was too many, flushing a hundred metres or so up the slope, still classic views, an excellent finale to the day.

Dangerously low on fuel, we took a wrong turning at Santa Marta and then gambled on a 20 km loop back to Trujillo. Half expecting to run out of petrol at any moment, this did not detract from the evening's enjoyment - amongst the many birds, flocks of Spanish Sparrows, yet another Great Spotted Cuckoo, plus White Storks nesting in large colonies. Limping back into Trujillo, the car having gallantly survived, we topped up the tank and then wandered off into the historic heart of this hilltop town, Spotless Starlings streaming into roost, White Storks returning to nests, a small restaurant we found, end of another fine day.

13 March. Extremadura.

Dawn, back to the grasslands north and west of Trujillo. Started near the city of Caceres, taking a small road to Embalse de Caceres - a very good decision, not only umpteen Corn Buntings, a large colony of Spanish Sparrows and several Thekla Larks, but also eleven magnificent Great Bustards plodding an arid slope, the males in partial display, the females seemingly unimpressed, merely feeding adjacent. T'was just 8.00 a.m. and this, the key bird of the plains had already revealed itself, very pleasing indeed.

The next few hours were a pleasant meander along the lanes from Caceres back towards Santa Marta. Another group of Great Bustards en route, plenty of Lesser Kestrels and at one stop, a posse of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse wheeling about, all the birds I had hoped to encounter. Skies were becoming distinctively unfriendly, heavy cloud edging in, but still the birding remained good - Black Kites overhead, a few Griffon Vultures, several Short-toed Larks, heaps and heaps of Hoopoes. At 11 a.m. I was back in Trujillo and shortly after departing to the north, next stop Monfrague.

Just north of Trujillo, two Great Bustards flew over the road, then some kilometres further a swirl of vultures included both Black and Egyptian Vultures amongst the dominant Griffons. A quick coffee and then to the stupendous Monfrague, one of the true wonders of Europe. Atop the Castillo, you can do little but gawp in awe, magnificent landscapes, but more amazing still, the fly-bys of vultures - hundreds of soaring Griffons, all at the eye level, a stone's throw distant, eye-to-eye with impressive giants, unbeatable. A Black Vulture drifted by, an Egyptian Vulture too.

A wait would normally reveal a Spanish Imperial Eagle too, but then it began to rain, rather heavily! And with the rain, down came the vultures, the skies emptying and rock outcrops everywhere becoming draped with bedraggled vultures! We sought shelter in the car, headed up to Villarreal de San Carlos for lunch, then toured across to the east of the park for some in-rain birding. Would have said yuk, but just as the rain let up, the wildlife highlights rocketed - first a Black Stork sitting on a nest (apparently a 20-year old bird, the oldest known Black Stork in Europe!) and then, just a kilometre or so further, a super Eagle Owl also sitting on a nest ledge, the bird clearly seen peering out, sometimes half sleepy, a little more alert when being mobbed by a Black Redstart. And if that wasn't enough, suddenly an Otter appeared in the river, cruising up and down for some 20 minutes, catching fish and not seemingly fussed at all by either our presence or the rain still falling.

4 p.m., another two Black Storks seen, so too a Cirl Bunting and Blue Rock Thrush, but then suddenly the rain intensified. Sod this, thought we, let's go.

Started to drive towards Madrid but then found we still had quite some daylight left ...just enough time to make an unscheduled stop at Calera y Chozas. The rain stopped, so round the agricultural plains we wandered. And what a fine end to the day it proved - not only five more Great Bustards, but also also a small flock of Black-bellied Sandgrouse and, at a stop for some croaking frogs, a very nice flock of 11 Little Bustards.

As dusk descended, we continued on our way, hitting Madrid just in time to see the madcap drivers returning to the capital after a weekend out. Found a hotel, the trip over ...or almost so!

14 March. Madrid.

8.30 a.m., taxiing down the runway for our flight back to northern Europe. And there out the window, one new mammal for the trip - two Iberian Hares prancing around on the turf!