

Rain in Spain, 1-4 November 2006

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With the temperatures already sub-zero in Lithuania, it really seemed the apt time to trade a bit of the cold for a dash of warmth and, at the same time, partake in some first class birding and do my best to finally bump into another of those all-time classic birds - Great Bustard. As for where, the choice was simple - destination Valencia, Spain. Here, as the autumn creeps in, not only do the Great Bustards gather in big flocks, but so too do many other birds of the plains, such as Stone Curlews and Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. On top of that, there's a fair mouth-watering mix of winterers and residents, including Griffon Vultures, to make this one good destination for an autumn or winter break. Add to that, there is a secret weapon lurking an hour's drive south of Valencia, a weapon in the birding armoury that almost guarantees success whatever the target!

Day One

So, leaving the first flurries of snow behind, I arrived in Valencia at midday and, ah fantastic, sun and about 25 C! Brilliant, chucked on a tee-shirt, jumped in a hire car and began the 'quick' journey down to the small town of Oliva about an 70 km south. Hadn't really planned any birding as such on this first day, but a quick stop at the vast Albufera marshes. (just 15 minutes or so from the airport) led to the first feast for the eyes - literally hundreds of Little and Cattle Egrets scattered across endless rice paddies, a very nice start. A Great White Egret, less common in Spain, was also nice. However, for me, the main attraction was another bird that was to prove very common over the next days - Spotless Starlings. Very charismatic birds, they were all over the place - on the wires, in the villages and in the paddies too, often occurring in big mixed flocks with Common Starlings. At my next stop, one that entailed the wrath of irate Spanish drivers who didn't seem to appreciate birders stopping by the roadside, the rewards were terns - about 20 Sandwich Tern, at least eight Whiskered Terns and a late Common Tern. Then spotted a traffic policeman and decided it was time to head on. Another quick stop just further up added 160 Red-crested Pochards to the day's tally, but I failed to find anything vaguely red-knobbed amongst the Common Coots!

Albufera is a massive place and it should deserve a better exploration, but I really wanted to push on, so I decided to cut cross-country over to the mountains and then take the scenic (and much longer!) route to Oliva. Almost immediately needed to make a stop to check out some overhead raptors - two Common Buzzards, but the third a Honey Buzzard, very late to still be in this part of the world. Yet again the Spanish drivers didn't seem to welcome my occasional roadside stops, but I did. Amongst the common birds of the scrub, soon found the first Sardinian Warblers and a little later a Dartford Warbler too. However, the whole day long, it seemed that every second bird was a Robin! They were everywhere! Also plenty of Black Redstarts and Blackcaps too.

By now, the day was approaching its end and I still had one spot to squeeze in - a site that could get me my first 'special' of the trip. So, down through the stunning Vall de Gallinera (itself a top birding spot) and then, with just a half hour of light left, I pulled in at the very nice Pago Marsh. Decided upon a track at random and set out for a quick walk - quite a few Cetti's Warblers about, then some Penduline Tits too. And then my target - a Moustached Warbler wiggling its way up a stalk and then singing in full view. Very nice, thank you. A Hoopoe flitted over too, but didn't see the Squaccos and Little Bitterns I expected. Later found out why I didn't see any - they are summer visitors!!!

As dusk descended, I drove the few kilometres into Oliva and checked into the best accommodation in town, for more reasons than a comfy bed. All will become clear, the next day was to be my hunt for Great Bustard…

Day Two

Great Bustard day, so I had planned. Could hardly fail, as my comfy abode was actually that of Jules Sykes's guesthouse and it was the good man himself that was to be my secret weapon in the search for the bustard. So, tucked into our breakfast, then off we set, up and over the sierras and onto the great plains that stretch ever on to Albecete and beyond. Somewhere along the route, Jules mentioned he 'had never failed to find Great Bustard yet', so now his honour was definitely at stake. An hour's drive and we were there - first a coffee and a chance to meet a few others, I was to be a guest at a Costa Blanca Birdclub outing!

The birding began. Within just a few minutes, we made a first stop - a locality that sometimes produces a Rock Sparrow or two. None today, just Tree Sparrows, but we hadn't been there more than a few minutes when a Merlin came

storming through, flushing up Crested Larks by the dozen. Black Redstarts also decorated the tops of old buildings, as did a Southern Grey Shrike and plenty of Spotless Starlings, still a very nice bird. With a lot of country to cover, we pushed on, but it couldn't have been many kilometres more when I spotted some heads poking up from a field alongside …stop, I shouted. We did, got out the scopes and there was a Stone Curlew …and quite a few more too! A quick scan and I was amazed - it was a flock of no less than 58 Stone Curlews!!! Totally stunning birds and totally stunning numbers! Two of the big advantages of a trip this time of year is that many of the birds have congregated into flocks and also that the crops have been cut, leaving the birds easy to see. With this first ‘good bird’ bagged, I was optimistic for the bustards too.

A little further along, we began a slow drive alongside a hillslope covered in the most scant of vegetation, eyes were peeled. Not in the best bustard country yet, but there was another special to be found here - and soon we found it. Jules had certainly chosen a good route for sat in the field opposite were two Black-bellied Sandgrouse quite close, very nice. Whilst watching them, we then noticed another pair a bit further off, so already four logged. Up the slope we trundled with our eyes ready for the chance of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse too. At the top, we found yet more blobs in the field worthy of check - got the scopes out and had a look …16 more Black-bellied Sandgrouse! Didn't see any Pin-tailed, but did find another five Black-bellied during the day, so a real good number of them.

By now, it was getting time for something bigger, preferably something weighing upward of 15 kg and standing a metre tall! First, we went to a vantage point and scanned the surrounding plains - stunning views stretching many kilometres, but not a bird, neither the big one or any Rock Sparrows, also possible there. Hmm, I thought, but it was still early. Off round the corner, a couple of kilometres more and we stopped for another scan - fantastic habitat spread in front of us, but still I saw no sign of something big striding across, but then the lady in the back suggested we might look in the field behind us! And what was she looking at? Ah yes, three Great Bustards! Three Great Bustards! Fantastic, a big male in all his finery and two females, equally impressive as well. We looked at them, they looked at us. We looked at them a bit more, they decided to walk over the brow of the hill! A bit antisocial that I thought, so we drove over the hill to have another look …and then there was a ‘wow’ from me, not just the three Great Bustards, but a flock of 18 more! Brilliant, ten minutes before I hadn't seen any and now I was watching 21! Well, with those well and truly appreciated, we drove on and soon passed through a little village and out into another area of open country. Stopping to check small stone buildings soon paid providence - as well as more Spotless Starlings and dozens of House Sparrows, we soon found three Rock Sparrows, the first time I've seen these for quite some time. Then, oo er, what are they? We stopped and they were - yet more Great Bustards! In fact another flock of 18. A bit more distant this time, but still I got out my camera to grab a bit of posterity. Now I could really say I have well and truly seen Great Bustard! Up the next hill, larks exploded from everywhere - a few Crested Larks as everywhere, but the vast majority were Calandra Larks, sporting their smart dark underwings. At least 600 swirled about I would say, plus too a few migrant Skylarks. Somewhere about here, Jules called out another seven Great Bustards, but I didn't see them, I was too busy scanning distant dots! Also found another eight Rock Sparrows, then retired to a nearby village for a late lunch. Spotless Starlings through the window as we dined.

After lunch, there was time for a quick visit to a nearby pool - though nearly empty due to the lack of rain, it still held a few bits and bobs - a scatter of waders including Kentish Plovers and Little Stints, a couple of Marsh Harriers winging it over and, a surprise for the locality I am told, a party of 23 Cranes. All very nice. Then it began to rain! Spain needed it, but I didn't. En route back, we saw the Great Bustards again, but also added one final surprise - with not an iota of standing water within kilometres, an Osprey! Obviously a migrant, he had intentions further south no doubt, so we left him to head his way, we headed ours. So ended a fantastic second day, the many great birds found in no small part thanks to Jules …his honour remains intact.

Day Three

And boy did the heavens open! Torrential rain at dawn and, peering out into the gloom, there was little to suggest it was about to change. Still today was due to be spent down in the Alicante area, some hundred kilometres to the south, so (ever the optimist) I thought perhaps it might be brighter down there. Bucketed down all the way and the only change on arrival was that the rain was now horizontal rather than vertical! Ah heck, least it was still warm, so what to do? Nowt for it, but to don an umbrella and battle it out. Armed with good directions from Jules, my first stop was the excellent Clot de Galvany, a small wetland sandwiched between developments on the outskirts of Alicante. Mercifully there was a small hide there to shelter from the worst of the weather, but having peeked out of the shutters for a while and realised the birds I was hoping for weren't there, I decided to brave the elements and take a wander. Good move …very soon I was looking out from my umbrella at some very special birds - a pod of White-headed Ducks, four males and perhaps five females. Very nice indeed. Though the population has risen considerably since the days when just a couple of dozen survived in Spain, this is still a threatened bird, so the extreme dampness was forgotten for some moments whilst I enjoyed the sights before me. Then I noticed another rather nice bird too - there standing on the edge of the reeds was a Purple Gallinule, complete with Moorhens alongside to further emphasise its stonking size! Now that fellow was not so far away, so hiked up the camera to 1600 ISO to compensate the dire light and clicked a few snaps away. Then a second plodded out and joined the first! Not too bad results all things considering. With the two main targets of

the reserve already seen, I thought it time to retreat to the car, though not before bumping into a soggy Wryneck, a couple of windswept Black Redstarts and bedraggled gathering of 15 Cranes, the latter also a surprise for this spot!

Well, I then thought it time to duck into Santa Pola town and seek out a coffee bar - drove through a few flooded streets and found a perfect place, right on the beach front and with tables affording a fine view down the coast. Sat and sipped a rather nice coffee and scanned the beach in front - a few Sanderling and Turnstone, but better still quite a range of gulls. Plenty of Yellow-legged Gulls, quite a few Black-headed Gulls, but the top of the lot, a perfect compliment to the coffee, several very fine Audouin's Gulls too, both adults and immatures. Ah, the easy way to do a bit of birding! Before coffee's end I had also added a Slender-billed Gull to the collection and, leaving the café, I happened to glance upwards and there roosting on all the balconies were several dozen Crag Martins &apologies to the lady who looked out of the window just as I put my binoculars up!

So far the day, despite the weather, had been one of considerable success, so I pressed on. Just beyond Santa Pola are extensive salt pans and these just had to be workable from the car, thus birdable regardless of what the weather might throw at me. Forgot about the irate Spanish drivers who didn't take kindly to birders stopping wherever they might fancy - and the first stop I confess did require me to reverse back a bit to avoid causing a potential pile up! Having finally pulled off the road, there was a view just excellent - a massive flock of gulls and not just boring gulls (should you be so inclined to term them) but rosy pink beauties! With a reasonable number of other species present too, out sat at least 150 Slender-billed Gulls in front of me, right little corks even in the drabness of a drizzly day! Motored on via a succession of pools, many chock a bloc with Greater Flamingos, others with Avocets and Black-winged Stilts.

Did quite fancy taking a walk, but the rain somehow made the car seem rather more appetising, so that's how it stayed - added various more waders, then decided on a visit to the nearby Parque Natural del Hondo. Bad move! First couldn't find it and spent the best part of an hour cursing the Spanish for their sense of humour when it comes to a lack of road signs, then really should have started to curse when I turned onto a sand road only to find it had turned into a quagmire and my car sunk down and got terribly stuck! Big apologies to Hertz for turning their car into something approaching a mud-splattered tank, but it wasn't half an adventure getting it out of that sludge! Eventually a whole gang of friendly Spaniards arrived in a big van, attached a tow rope and began to pull - car shot backwards into deeper mud, slid sideways and then they had the great idea to try to pull it up the nearby embankment. With me still sat inside, suddenly the car lurched off backwards, straight through a bush and then up the slope and before I knew it I was looking at mud through the passenger window and the car was on the verge of turning over! Eeks, fortunately the Spaniards noticed too and amid quite a bit of shouting, they managed to persuade the van driver to stop just in time. Didn't fancy taking a squashed sardine can back to Hertz, so was quite happy when they decided to pull me the other way and out up onto the road. Ten minutes later, I, the car and two tons of Spanish mud were happily proceeding along the road and towards del Hondo again. Still raining! Finally found the reserve and discovered it would close in ten minutes &ah total rats, turned around and decided it was time to call the day quits. Just then an Osprey flew over!

Day Four

It couldn't rain for another day! That's what I thought and that's what Jules thought, but it certainly tried! This morning saw Jules and I heading off to a headland just a few kilometres south of his place. Passing through the small town of Denia, Jules enquired if I might fancy a Monk Parakeet? Did I half! A piece of exotica maybe, but an exotica with a established self-sustaining population! So eyes peeled as we drove through the leafy suburbia and sure enough three birds promptly flew across the road and landed in a date palm. Nice views as they devoured a few dates, then back into the car for the short drive to Cap de Sant Antoni.

Nice headland ...if you could stand stand and admire it! What blithering idiots go to an exposed headland when the rain and wind are still battering!!! Well, I confess it was my idea and Jules, a totally good guy, enthusiastically offered to join me - the idea was to find the resident Black Wheatears and Blue Rock Thrushes. Got out of the car and staggered into the wind &quickly realised no self-respecting wheatear of any description would be sitting out in such conditions, but it didn't seem to bother the local Peregrines, two of which hung in the sky overhead. Now, being committed birders (to lack a better description), we thought it only right to give the area a good walk - nothing on the exposed side of the headland, bar a Black Redstart braving it out, but we soon found a Blue Rock Thrush on the slightly more sheltered southern side. Lots of Song Thrushes about too, clearly a fall of migrants had been dumped on the headland. Still no Black Wheatear, so I left Jules for a while and returned to the exposed side - not the best move I made that morning, though I found another Blue Rock Thrush, he found a Ring Ouzel, a very good bird for this part of Spain. Offshore, a couple of Gannets winged their way past and a little gathering of Shags of the Mediterranean race gathered below (rather nice birds with white wing patches).

Enough of this, time to head back, though Jules suggested a quick visit to Pego Marsh on the way back. Good idea, I agreed. As we arrived, I said 'Oo, Ruddy Shelduck!' 'What? Where?' he said, with a hint in his voice that suggested this was not an everyday bird on the marsh. 'Don't know' I said, 'my binoculars have misted over, need to get out of the car!'. 'Got it' he said and indeed he had, it was still flying across the marsh! A Spanish rarity and the first he'd seen in the country, we saw it again a little later, but it was decidedly on the wary side and was not about to let us get anywhere near. Yet more Cranes too - the third

flock in three days, today there were 30 stood out in front of us. The rain was, at last, beginning to let up, so a quick walk was in order - a couple of Kingfishers later, plus a few Audouin's Gulls, a Water Pipit, two Bluethroats and an occasional Fan-tailed Warbler, and we could retire back to his guesthouse for a well deserved coffee!

A little later the rain finally stopped and off out I went again; for the finale! However, my conscience had got the better of me, or rather my fear of Hertz charging me extra, so I actually cleaned the car, something totally alien to me, as will anybody know who has seen my car!

Anyhow, after such an event, there was only one thing to do - some therapeutic birding! So, it was time to say farewell to Jules and begin the journey back to the airport. Miraculously, the weather seemed to be marking my departure with a turn for the better, so I headed for the fantastic Vall de Gallinera. Wound my way up this gorge with frequent stops to scan for raptors - clearly they had yet to dry out, but the valley was productive - a lot of Chaffinches on the move, a few Serins knocking about too, but the voice I had hoped for suddenly echoed across the valley - chooww. Spun round and there flying just level with me was a fine Chough, always a good bird to see. Also two Thekla Larks here. A bit further up the valley encountered eight Corn Bunting and also two Cirl Buntings nearby.

Before leaving Spain, I had one more place to visit - again clutching the directions that Jules had kindly provided me, I began to wind up the little tracks that climb the hills above Alcoy, through the pine woodlands and into an open area, then just as I began to ponder if I was still going the right way, I looked up and saw a cloud of birds in the sky ahead. Big birds and, without a doubt, the birds I was heading to see. Encouraged I trundled on and parked the car, hiked up to the top of the small mountain and then sat and enjoyed - at least 40 Griffon Vultures hung on the skies around, with more sat on a rock pinnacle adjacent. Fantastic birds. The area is the centre for a reintroduction project, bringing birds from the Pyrenees to repopulate the Sierras that hug the Spanish east coast. So far, it has been hugely successful, with not only the introduced birds doing well, but also additional birds attracted in by the free handouts of food on offer. So, as I watched, both wing-tagged birds and the additional migrants soared low overhead, very nice. In all, it was a very good destination - two Iberian Green Woodpecker also yodelled away, several Crested Tits flitted amongst the pines and at least 20 Serins also popped up here and there. Plus too Magpies and Ravens checking out the vultures.

With that, I headed off to Valencia for my flight to the UK. Coffee time in London, then onward to Lithuania.