

QUEST for CRANES in SPAIN 5th– 12th November 2007

Sally and I flew EasyJet from Bristol to Malaga and then drove to **La Cazalla** – a



delightful
farmhouse,
imaginatively
rebuilt as a small



hotel with Moorish influences 3 kms from
Ronda (www.lacazalladeronda.com)

Owned by **Maria Ruiz** and her son **Rodrigo**, it is strategically situated in its own grounds at the head of a winding canyon. La Cazalla was ideally placed to see something of the nearby ‘white villages’ of Andalucia and bird-watching. The orchards and small vineyard was alive with birds; **Blackbirds, Robins** – all very ‘wild’ and unlike their approachable British counterparts – were feeding on small over-ripe grapes and *Arbutus* fruits, as were **Blackcaps**, and a family of **Black Redstarts** (see below).



A good selection of species were noted over the course of the three days that we spent there – including **Redwing** (a long way South for this Scandinavian thrush), **Siskins, Goldfinches, Jay, Willow Warblers/Chiff-chaffs, Serins, Stonechats** and **Sardinian Warblers** (above right). **Griffon Vultures** wheeled in the sky, and **Crag Martins** frequented the cliffs. They were also numerous in Ronda’s spectacular gorge which runs through the town, and there were at least a dozen or more **Red-billed Choughs** basking

in the sun and making occasional forays into the air. As ever, it was a pleasure to see (and hear!) **House Sparrows** in the towns and villages as they used to in much of the UK.

Although much of the landscape is dominated by evergreen oaks and olive trees, the foliage of the scattered deciduous ones were in splendid Autumnal colours – especially the Poplars.



Casa Blanca also had a grove of Persimmon Trees (below) – the first time that we had ever encountered them. Of far-Eastern origin, these were introduced to Spain in the early 1800s, and their fruit were deliciously sweet – rich in glucose. Sally was very interested in them because their juice is used in dying with indigo by the Chinese.



Above: a **Persimmon** in Autumn colouring and a ripe fruit on the left.

Robin: Like on so much of the Continent, Robins are not the trusting birds like the ones that share our gardens with us in the UK but are very wary. This individual might have migrated from Scandinavia. The upper parts are a lighter brown than those of British Robins.



On the 7th November, we drove to **Zahara**, a spectacular hilltop village to the North of Ronda with stunning views over the surrounding countryside.



En route, **larks, finches** and flocks of **Spotless Starlings** were much in evidence, and **Red Kites, Buzzards, Kestrels** and **Griffon Vultures** noted. From Sally's vantage point overlooking the village, one could see **Black Redstarts, Vultures, Crag Martins, Jackdaws** and **Red-billed Choughs**. **House Sparrows** were plentiful.

On the way back to **Ronda** via **Grazalema**, we encountered a large stand of **Cork Oak** from which the bark had recently been removed.



Left: A swathe of bark has been removed, thus showing the thickness of the cork. It will a decade or two before another sheet can be removed . The



bark of this species is a natural defence against the living tissue underneath being damaged by fire.

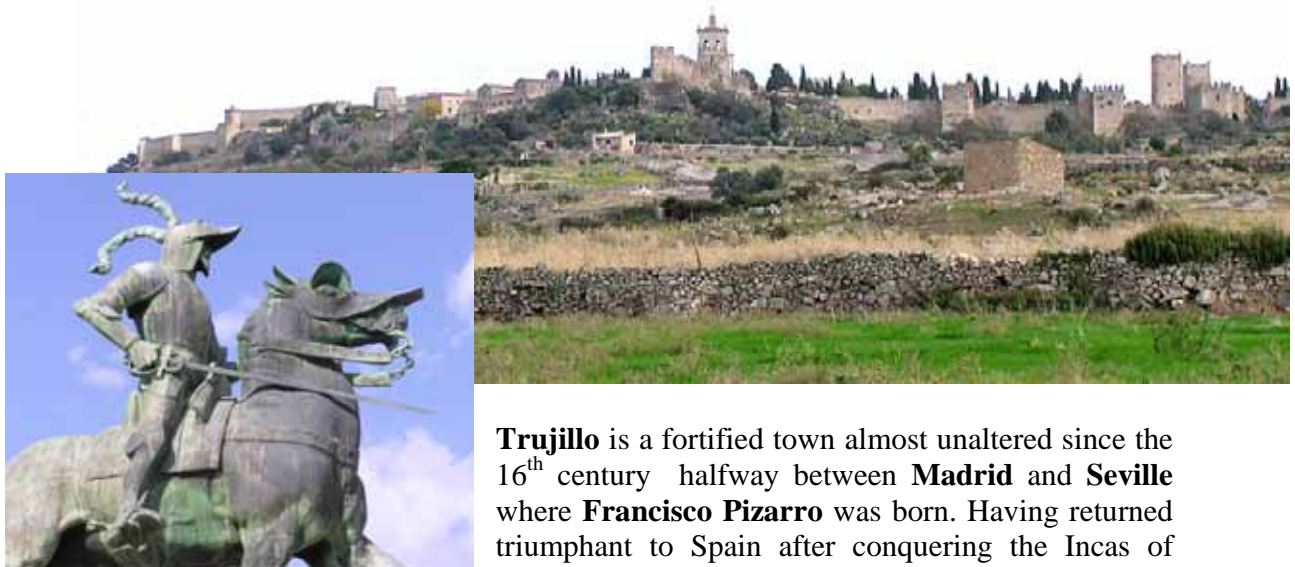


Sheets of cork awaiting processing. Originally, the bark was used to make bee hives, but now it's for making wine corks.



On the 8th November, we drove 435 kms North to **El Recuerdo**, in the hamlet of **San Clemente** 11 kms from **Trujillo** in the heart of **Extremadura**. This was to be our second visit to the abode of *Martin Kelsey OBE* and

his wife *Claudia Camacho* who, apart from hosting general visitors, welcome those who are especially interested in the fascinating natural history of the area. Martin himself is an experienced ornithologist – see www.birdingextramadura.com



Trujillo is a fortified town almost unaltered since the 16th century halfway between **Madrid** and **Seville** where **Francisco Pizarro** was born. Having returned triumphant to Spain after conquering the Incas of Peru, he and his fellow *conquistadores* were awarded great tracts of land in **Extremadura**. Many of these great estates are still in existence



and this is partly the why the extraordinary habitat of the *dehesa* which covers much of **Extremadura** remains unchanged (see above). It is much like evergreen oak savannah; the land is fundamentally poor and so the area beneath the trees is grazed, cultivated, and made fallow on a 4-yearly rotation. This low level ‘farming’ allows a huge variety of native plants and animals to thrive. For instance, fallen acorns are food for both pigs and birds, and that is why an estimated **48-70,000 Cranes** fly from their nesting grounds Northern Europe to winter here.



We came across this group near the road on the way back from **Monfrague National Park** about 3 miles outside Trujillo.



Many were feeding beneath the trees – presumably on acorns, but those below seem to be picking over animal dung.

Figs, cattle, sheep and horses could be seen in the dehesa – many of these are shipped to higher and cooler altitudes during the scorching summer. The daytime temp. was around 22 degs C, falling to 5-8 degs at characteristic of these oak forests is the **Azure-winged Magpie** – no decent photograph of this species was obtained. Better luck next April!

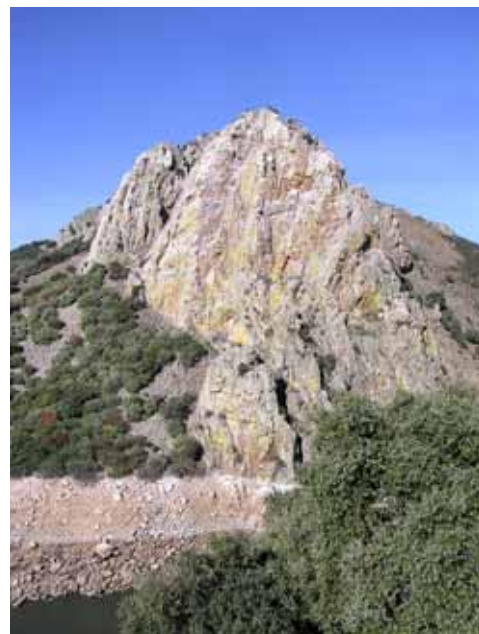


Park Natural de Monfrague

We visited the park on November 10th with the objective of photographing **Griffon Vultures**, of which there is a gratifyingly good population in the park. Indeed, over much of Southern Spain, these valuable carrion feeders can be seen soaring in thermals due to the fact that dead stock is left – or at least, not discovered - before these birds manage to find them – much to the disgust of the Brussels beurocrats!



During the course of the day when a stiff breeze was blowing. We counted over 40 vultures soaring in the lift over the ridges – one **Black Vulture** (see page 10) – the remainder being **Griffons**.



The birds which were stationed around the mighty edifice of rock (*Pena Falcon*) which guards the entrance to the park were flying too high for photography, but in the end, we found spot (*Mirador de la Higerilla*) where vultures were gliding along a ridge and we could 'look'em in the eye'.



From this viewpoint, we had an excellent display of gliding and soaring with the birds passing us at a range of 20-30 yards.

A couple of mornings were spent on the steppe-like plains on the way to *Santa Marta de Magascar*. As usual, there were flocks of **Skylarks**, **Crested larks** (below left) arose from in front of our car, **Meadow Pipits** were in evidence. Perched on the wire fences were Stonechats, the odd **Great Grey Shrike** (below) **Spanish Sparrows** and a small flock of **Serins**. Two parties of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** flew quickly by.



Lapwings were scattered in the fields. We saw through the heat shimmer a distant group of about 25 **Little Bustards** resting amid thistles almost as high as they were. On the 9th November, we were lucky in seeing at fairly close quarters a flock of about 25 **Great Bustards**. There is an estimated population of between 5 and 6000 inxtremadura.



Although we stayed in the car, they slowly drifted away from us in a stately walk and disappeared over the hill. The following day, we only saw a solitary bird in flight.



These were very large birds and seemed to be cocks – known to weigh in at up to 16 + kgms a time, and the heaviest of flying birds. Their flight looks very laboured but once under way, the progress seem to be very purposeful.



Although these bustards are resident here in Spain, in parts of their range, including the birds that used to nest in England until the mid 1840s, they migrate south during the winter. Below is a group of hens.



This area also has an impressive population of **Corn Buntings** (below) – a species that was so common in Essex 50 years ago that one barely bothered to raise one’s binoculars to observe them. How times change! It was a pleasure to see so many and to hear their jangling songs, usually delivered from the fence posts or barbed wire.



Every afternoon we drove down to the rice growing area close to *Madrigalejo*. The objective was to watch the **Cranes** feeding and assembling before they flew off to roost. The road from *Zorita* always proved interesting because of the birds that used the telegraph/electricity poles as perching posts. There were generally **Buzzards**, **Kestrels**, and the odd **Red Kite** (right) – an estimated 7000 birds winter here, most of them are migrants from northern Europe.



We also came across a **Black Vulture**. About 900 pairs live in *Extremadura*.



In the rice fields impressive flocks of **Spanish Sparrows** were feeding on the ripe grains and in the stubble remaining after the harvesters had reaped the crop. A **Merlin** was spotted with possibly a sparrow in its talons.



Spanish Sparrows – the 2 males are in winter plumage.



There were probably **House Sparrows** among them. One **Tree Sparrow** was photographed – it was only discovered when I reviewed that day's results during the evening.

We noted a **Black-shouldered Kite**, and lots of **Marsh Harriers** quartered the rice paddies.

1-3 **Hen Harriers** were generally seen on each visit including a cock bird. The hen on the left regularly patrolled in front of the observation tower overlooking the rice paddies beyond *Madrigalejo*. We visited this on our final afternoon on November



11th. An adult cock was also seen along with several **Marsh Harriers**.

Just after sunset at about 18.00hrs, we counted over **55 Marsh Harriers** in the air at the same time which had flown in from all quarters to roost in the middle of a field of uncut rice. The photograph below has at least 27 birds circling before one by one they dropped into the vegetation. This was the time when **Cetti's Warblers** briefly sing, while the **Fan-tailed Warblers** had fallen silent



Combine harvesters were at work and the disturbance that they caused gave numerous **Cattle Egrets** and **White Storks** opportunities for easy meals – I guess the machinery disturbed insects, and maybe crayfish in the flooded parts which would have been more to the taste of the storks. About 12,000 **White Storks** nest in *Extremadura*.



A high proportion of the nesting population – perhaps two thirds-over winter.





The **Cattle Egrets** followed the harvester more closely than the **Storks**.





Above: A pre-roost gathering in a field of maize.

The great spectacle that we had travelled to *Extremadura* to see was the evening flights of the **Cranes** to their roosts. We were generally in position by about 17.00hrs but the flocks did not seem to make much of a move before 17.30 hrs, and some skeins were still on the move by the time it was dark at 18.30, by which time, the **Little Owls** had popped out of their day-time sleeping quarters.





Five-thirty lift-off after a crescendo of bugling.

Skein after Skein passed overhead – often in an untidy V formation – against an increasingly dramatic sky.







This is a record chiefly of the photographic highlights of the trip. We recorded about 81 species of birds during the week, and that is without really trying. We also did not visit all of the possible habitats in Extremadura which would have yielded may be another 20 or more. For instance, we paid a brief visit to a small rather steep-sided reservoir close to where the Crane watch towers are located, and noted a pair of **Greater Egrets**, **Red-crested Pochard**, **Coot**, **Great-crested Grebe**, **Cormnorant**, **Little Stint** and **Green Sandpiper**. Even in the grounds of **El Recuerdo** you can see **Azure-winged Magpies**, **Hoopoe**, **Cirl Bunting**, and in the Summer, **Red-rumped Swallows**.

We were here last June when the storks were nesting (see below) and we will be back again at the end of April in 2008 when the flowers will be out ,and butterflies on the wing. Most of the Cranes will have returned to Scandinavia but the Summer visitors will be in full song and busy breeding.





Photographs by John Sparks

All but two or three of the photographs were taken on a Canon 30D with a Canon 300mm f 2.8 lens occasionally using a X 1.3 and X 2