

Holiday Highlights
Almeria
26 – 31 January 2012

Guide: Mark Denman

Guests: Keith Stedman, Joan & David Vickers, Sue & John Harrison and David Turner

Day 1: We meet at the crack of dawn at Gatwick Airport, save for John and Sue who are flying from Manchester and after the usual joys of 'check-in' we're soon winging our way south to sunny Spain. With the towering Sierra Nevada to our left and the shining Mediterranean to our right we make our way up the coast seeing a few birds as we go, including Yellow-legged Gulls, Spotless Starlings, Cattle Egrets and Kestrels, but only Keith is lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a Black Wheatear.

After settling into our hotel we all meet up for a little pre-dinner birding. At our local Salinas the first birds we notice are the Crag Martins that are hawking over the reed-beds. Amongst the big numbers of Common Coot we find quite a few Red-crested Pochard and some distant Common Pochard. Black-necked and Little Grebes are in good numbers but are not easy to scope as they are feeding very actively! John finds a nice little party of Serin in the scrub below us and we enjoy a nice bright male singing his impossibly fast song. There seem to be Chiffchaffs wherever you look and a couple of skulking Sardinian Warblers scold from the undergrowth. Audouin's and Slender-billed Gulls are a nice find but a little distant, so we decide to go for a little walk.

On a little pond hidden amongst the reeds the first bird we set eyes on is the rare Red-knobbed Coot which is most obliging as it poses for a few photographs. Another rare denizen of Southern Spain, the White-headed Duck is here also amongst the more common Shoveler and Teal. A Cetti's Warbler shows briefly and Keith spots a little party of Black-winged Stilts that land on a nearby pond so we head off to investigate, flushing Green Sandpiper and Common Snipe as we go. Several Stilts eventually show really well and we're very pleased to find Greenshank, Spotted Redshank and Common Redshank together giving us a nice opportunity to compare these handsome waders. A little party of Reed Buntings make their way through the scrub and walking back to the van we get great views of a male Ruff that lands right in front of us and a Zitting Cisticola that shows briefly before disappearing into the tangled undergrowth. It's been a great first session and we head back to the hotel for dinner and some rest after what has been a very long day!

Day 2: It's a lovely sunny day which pleases us greatly as the forecast was for rain! so after breakfast we decide to head to the other side of the Salinas as the light will be behind us. There are lots of Shoveler and Teal and we add to our wader list with Dunlin

and Kentish Plover. An extremely obliging Little Stint drops onto some mud very close to us and we also find Common Snipe and a couple of Black-tailed Godwits. A perched Kingfisher is nice, lingering long enough for all of us to admire it through the scopes and Keith spots a Great Egret flying past, quite an uncommon bird here. A fly past by some Greater Flamingos is very popular, they really are at their best in flight, and we also find some more waders in the shape of Avocet, Grey and Ringed Plover.

Driving to the next causeway we see our first Marsh Harriers, four of them and on setting up the scopes we find a party of fourteen Black-necked Grebes and eight White-headed Duck. A little group of Penduline Tits call from the thick reed-beds, but try as we might we just can't see them. Much more obliging here is a 1st winter Slender-billed Gull that shows very well and after admiring a couple of closer Marsh Harriers we head back to the hotel for a comfort stop before heading towards Cabo de Gata in search of what is probably the most sought after bird of the holiday!

We pass a couple of Iberian Grey Shrikes on the journey before arriving at the coast, and a little strip of land that has been very good for Trumpeter Finch in the past. We've not been searching long when a couple of chunky looking Finches fly overhead, landing on a nearby fence. Trumpeter Finches they most certainly are and we get great scope views before edging forward for a better look. They are feeding on the ground amongst a little party of Crested Larks and we're even treated to a little of the song when a third bird lands just a few yards away - great stuff!

Whilst looking at a party of Razorbills on the sea we spot a pod of at least six Bottlenose Dolphins that are passing by, a most pleasing bonus!

We decide to have lunch up at the lighthouse, making our way up the winding coast road. A brief search for a female Blue Rock Thrush on a wire leads to our first Black Wheatear of the day and we see at least three more whilst munching our sandwiches! After lunch we go for a stroll round the rocky peninsula and the first birds we encounter are Black Redstarts, they seem to be everywhere! Amongst the flocks of Linnet we find several more Trumpeter Finches and a couple of very showy Black Wheatear that look great in the sunshine. A couple of Red-legged Partridge on a distant ridge are a good find, and a quick sea-watch produces a few passing Balearic Shearwaters. We manage to relocate the Blue Rock Thrush, but it's rather distant and gets chased off by a Black Wheatear before everyone manages to look in the scope! Much more obliging are a little group of Thekla Larks that are feeding on a scrubby hillside and we are able to pick out the differences that separate them from the Crested Larks that we were seeing earlier.

Driving back towards the Salinas we spot a large group of Gulls and stop to investigate. There are huge numbers of Lesser Black-backed and Yellow-legged Gulls here and we're pleased to find a big group of Audouins, about 180 birds and on closer scrutiny we spot a single adult Mediterranean Gull amongst them. At the

first hide we stop at we're greeted by a very large flock of Serin and Greenfinches that look and sound very impressive, but the view from the hide is rather quiet save for a few Flamingos so we decide to try a little further along the beach.

Back at the van a few Greenfinches are drinking at a small puddle and we're amazed when a Little Stint drops in and joins them - it doesn't look much bigger than the Finches! A few Sanderling are scurrying along the tide-line and we see a few more distant Shearwaters before heading to another hide overlooking the Salinas. Out in the scrub we soon locate a couple of Stone Curlew and Dave points out a group of Curlew that are flying around, seemingly unsure where to land. A Dartford Warbler puts in a brief show but only Mark and Sue manage to glimpse the female Bluethroat that flits in the undergrowth. Far easier to see is the Iberian Grey Shrike that is hunting close by and we add Corn Bunting to our list when five birds fly over our heads.

On the way back to the hotel we make a brief detour to look for a Desert Wheatear that had been present in the area and although the Wheatear fails to show we all enjoy the beautiful late afternoon sunshine and the splendid Hoopoe that David finds for us. A great first full day!

Day 3: It's another lovely day and we wake to the snow capped Sierra Nevada to the west. After another substantial breakfast we head out to the near Salinas, our local patch! There seem to be a lot more White-headed Duck and Black-necked Grebe today and the scanning of the edges of the reed-beds produces at least three Purple Swamp Hens (aka the big Purple Chicken!) Penduline Tits are calling from the reeds and this time we're in luck as everyone manages to get good views of these lovely little birds as they make their way past us. Red-knobbed Coot and White-headed Duck pose well for the photographers and Dave finds a much closer Swamp Hen that that looks great in the scope.

Driving the bumpy track towards the sea we pass Salinas that are covered in Shoveler and Red Crested Pochard and a quick sea-watch produces a few Gannets that are passing by far off shore. A Cattle Egret lands right next to the van before we clamber out and go for a walk in the scrubby desert area. Apart from a few Meadow Pipits and Skylark we don't find much here, though Keith and Sue are lucky enough to see a Stone Curlew in flight.

After a quick stop at our hotel we head for Canada Las Norias, an oasis for birds in the middle of a sea of plastic! Two large pits were dug to provide soil for the greenhouses and with extensive reed-beds and mud along with big areas of water this has become an excellent, if not too photogenic place to go bird-watching. We've scarcely been out of the van for a minute when we notice two large raptors above us, a Marsh Harrier and a superb pale Booted Eagle, wow, what a start! Joan then points out a juvenile Night Heron that is sitting high in a tree and we find at least four Squacco Herons, which along with the Booted Eagle is a real bonus. Walking

along the side of the water we flush at least two Snipe and get great views of White-headed Duck and add Wigeon and Gadwall to our list. The reeds seem to be alive with Chiffchaffs and Crag Martins are hawking over the water, looking lovely when they fan their tails revealing their spots!

Back at the van Dave finds our third surprise bird here in the shape of a handsome Glossy Ibis amongst a group of Coot. As so often happens, one good bird leads to another and we start finding quite a few waders. There are Dunlin and Little Stint here along with Little Ringed Plover and close scrutiny of the Stints reveals a Temmink's Stint that looks for all the world like a little mouse as it scurries in and out of the vegetation. Other new birds here include Common Starling, Jackdaw, Common Sandpiper and Grey Wagtail and we get our best view yet of Swamp Hen when a couple of birds come out of the reeds and feed in the open for about 20 minutes.

We're saving the best for last though when Keith suddenly announces that he has seen a male Bluethroat just 30 yards in front of us! As so often happens with Bluethroat though it slips away very quickly before anyone else manages to see it, but with the possibility of it returning, and so many other good birds to look at we're in no hurry to go anywhere! About half an hour later there is another sighting of the Bluethroat and yes, it's Keith again! With time marching on we decide to move on, but just as we are about to get in the van the Bluethroat comes out for a third time, this time staying in the open for a good five minutes, allowing us all scope views much to everyone's relief, especially Keith!!

We just have time for a final session at our local patch where we relocate the Great Egret almost immediately. The Greater Flamingos look wonderful in the late afternoon sunshine and we find quite a few Audouin's Gulls on the far bank, but even better is the lovely adult Slender-billed Gull that Sue finds, our best view yet of this beautiful Gull. The plaintive calls of Penduline Tit come from deep in the reeds and a couple of Marsh Harriers drift effortlessly past as our day comes to a close, another memorable day in Almeria.

Day 4: There isn't a cloud in the sky as we head for the hills and a complete change of scenery. The plan is to drive round to the back of the Sierra Nevada mountains and then come back over one of the high passes. We see both Raven and Chough as we drive and a road victim in the shape of a Spanish Ibex. The first thing we notice at our first stop is how cold the air is, but this is soon forgotten when we find a Calandra Lark sitting in the middle of a field. There are lots of wintering Skylark and Meadow Pipit and little flocks of Goldfinch moving amongst the thistles. A little further along the road we see a party of Chough in a ploughed field and make another stop to check for Black Wheatear. A pair of said Wheatears show really well and we're thrilled when Sue brilliantly picks out a Little Owl sitting amongst some boulders - great stuff!

The views as we make our way to the top are quite breathtaking but we can't help noticing the rather large number of cars coming back down the road. We make a stop not too far from the top along with hundreds of other cars, on Mark's two previous trips he's never seen anyone here before! There are Chaffinches along with Blue and Great Tit, but we are turned back when we try to go any further which we assume is because of the road conditions. A quick look at the map has us doubling back and finding another route which we hope will be a little quieter!

We're soon climbing into the hills again and make an impromptu stop when we find a lovely little group of Spanish Ibex on a rocky outcrop. John counts at least twelve of these handsome animals and we catch glimpses of a Dartford Warbler that is close by. It's a beautiful spot and we decide to have lunch here, though sandwiches go flying when two Golden Eagles appear above us, an adult and a young bird that shows lots of white in wing and tail. After a lot of winding roads and a battle with the 'satnav' we eventually find ourselves near the top, pausing briefly to admire a couple of Rock Buntings and another Golden Eagle. When we finally reach our destination it becomes apparent that the reason for being turned back was nothing to do with the roads but simply the sheer number of people up here!

After a welcome cup of coffee we decide to go for a walk in the snow. A female Crossbill shows briefly as we make our way into the forest and it doesn't take too long to get away from the madding crowd. Coal, Blue and Great Tit call from the conifers and we get super scope views of a lovely brick red male Crossbill that sits proudly at the top of a very close pine. Other birds here include lots of Chaffinches and Goldfinches and a couple of Siskin, one of which is singing, but pride of place goes to a smashing Crested Tit that is feeding close by - Cresties, Crossbills and snow - we could almost be in Scotland!! It's been a very eventful day to say the least and as we head back towards Roquetas we enjoy the beautiful sunset over the mountains as our thoughts turn to dinner.

Day 5: As the beautiful sunset and red sky of last night promised our final day dawns cloudless and after breakfast we head north towards the Amolderas desert. We've only been out of the van seconds when a Black-bellied Sandgrouse flies over our heads, soon followed by three more that look fantastic against the blue sky - what an incredible start to the day! We take a walk in this unique habitat that constitutes the only official desert in Europe and soon start seeing lots of birds. Once again there are many Skylarks and Meadow Pipits here and it doesn't take us long to find another of our main target birds - Lesser Short-toed Lark. There is a flock of at least fifteen of these desert dwellers and with so many Skylarks present it gives us a good opportunity to pick out the salient features that separate these two Larks. One of the other very common birds here is Dartford Warbler and we get good views of these skulking 'sylvias' much to the delight of Dave who has never seen one before. David finds another Hoopoe sitting on wall back near the van and we then head a couple of miles up the road to the excellent new visitor centre.

The warm sunshine is encouraging a few butterflies onto the wing, most notably the delicate little Green-striped White that David points out to us, and the visitor centre is terrific with lots of information on the surrounding flora and fauna, so with places to sit and habitat to scan this seems to be a good spot for lunch. A couple of disappointingly distant Bonelli's Eagles are quickly forgotten when Keith spots a third bird, a sub-adult very close and we get great views as it passes by and even starts its switchback display!

We can't resist another visit to see the nearby Trumpeter Finches but this time they are extremely elusive, although we are entertained by a local goat farmer who regales us with tales of the high seas - well, we think that is what he was talking about! Joan finally locates a couple of Trumpeters but they fly off before we can scope them, so with time marching on we head back for our final session of the holiday back at the plastic of Las Norias!

The Glossy Ibis is still present along with all of the other waders, although the Temminck's Stint will elude us today. Joan finds the four Squacco Herons sitting close by and they show really well for the next hour or so, along with Black-winged Stilt and Ruff. The Bluethroat, a nice adult white spot male shows very well again and David even manages to get a picture which is great as it's a new bird for him. There seem to be even more Chiffchaffs today and two adult Night Herons are a nice bonus but only Dave sees the Booted Eagle this time as it soars high above. As our holiday draws to a close we enjoy our final bird of the day, 'the big purple chicken' as it swims along the side of the far bank, a brilliant end to another great few days in this unique part of Spain.

Species of the trip is just clinched by Bluethroat, with other votes going to Trumpeter Finch, Spanish Ibex and White-headed Duck. Place of the trip is more straightforward with four votes for the incredible haul of birds we had at Las Norias, and as ever magic moments were as plentiful as there were people with flying Flamingos, Bonelli's Eagle, Trumpeter Finch, Chiffchaffs, Lapwing and Spanish Ibex.

BIRDS

Little Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Black-necked Grebe
Balearic Shearwater
Gannet
Cormorant
Black-crowned Night Heron
Cattle Egret
Little Egret
Great Egret
Squacco Heron
Grey Heron
Greater Flamingo
Shelduck
Wigeon
Gadwall
Teal
Mallard
Shoveler
Red-crested Pochard
Pochard
White-headed Duck
Marsh Harrier
Golden Eagle
Booted Eagle
Bonelli's Eagle
kestrel
Red-legged Partridge
Water Rail(heard)
Moorhen
Purple Gallinule
Coot
Red-knobbed Coot
Black-winged Stilt
Avocet
Stone Curlew
Little Ringed Plover
Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover
Grey Plover
Lapwing
Sanderling
Little Stint
Temmink's Stint
Dunlin
Ruff
Snipe
Black-tailed Godwit
Glossy Ibis
Curlew
Spotted Redshank

Common Redshank
Greenshank
Green Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Turnstone
Mediterranean Gull
Black-headed Gull
Slender-billed Gull
Audouin's Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
Yellow-legged Gull
Sandwich Tern
Razorbill
Black-bellied Sandgrouse
Wood Pigeon
Feral Pigeon
Collared Dove
Little Owl
Kingfisher
Hoopoe
Calandra Lark
Lesser Short-toed Lark
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Skylark
Crag Martin
Meadow Pipit
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Robin
Bluethroat
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Black Wheatear
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Zitting Cisticola
Dartford Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Chiffchaff
Crested Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Penduline Tit
Iberian Grey Shrike
Magpie
Chough
Jackdaw
Carrion Crow

Raven
Starling
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Common Crossbill
Trumpeter Finch
Rock Bunting
Reed Bunting
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Rabbit
Brown Hare
Spanish Ibex
Bottlenose Dolphin

BUTTERFLIES

Small White
Green striped White