



## TRIP REPORT: The 'I can't believe this is happening at last!!!' Tip Top Tour Salamanca May – June 2021

This tour was due to take place in April 2020. No need to explain why it didn't happen, but it was postponed to May 2021, then cancelled due to travel restrictions, and then finally reprogrammed at a few days' notice at the end of May when Spain was suddenly opened to British tourists. Needless to say our clients and ourselves had been fully vaccinated before the start of the trip, we wore face-masks in enclosed spaces and we and all the hotels kept to stringent anti-COVID health and safety regulations.

**Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> May** Our clients, D and D arrived at the first destination, **Hotel Rural Salvatierra**, overlooking the Santa Teresa reservoir and the Bejar and Gredos mountains beyond, where we met up with them and dined together.

### Friday 28<sup>th</sup> May

#### Entresierras. Upper Tormes river & Berrocal.

Riverside, open woodland, stony pasture, scrub.

First thing after breakfast we drove up the hill overlooking the village and reservoir and walked between scrub and farmland. We saw Crested, Thekla, Calandra larks and Woodlark, Bee-eater and Hoopoe, and heard the Golden oriole sing. We had good views of Cuckoo and Great spotted cuckoo, Woodchat shrike, Corn bunting, Rock sparrow, Red and Black kite and white Booted eagle, and also a Speckled brown butterfly *Pararge aegeria*.

Later we drove upstream of the river Tormes to the medieval village of Puente del Congosto. Despite our shock at finding that several trees had been chopped down near the river (possibly to make way for scaffolding as the medieval bridge is being restored), we had good sightings of both male and female Blue rockthrush, Crag martin, Serin, White wagtail, Nuthatch and the White stork family on the church tower.



Thekla lark photo BISWW



Female Blue rockthrush photo BISWW



Black-eared wheatear photo BISWW

After a picnic lunch by the river where we saw Golden oriole, we drove to an area of mixed farmland and open woodland, and as hoped for we found Iberian grey shrike, Iberian magpie, Griffon vulture and Ocelated lizard *Timon lepidus*. Here also were good numbers of Corn bunting and Woodchat shrike.

Stopping briefly in our village we showed off our resident Spanish sparrows, currently nesting in the gutter of our house, and other residents such as Linnet, Goldfinch, Serin and Barn swallow.

We went on to the village of Berrocal, where the stony slate landscape provides an ideal habitat for both Northern and Black-eared wheatears, both of which we saw. A group of more than 30 ravens caught our attention, not particularly unkind but very entertaining. Here we saw Turtle dove, Booted eagle and Hobby, and as we were heading back we stopped to watch a pair of Stone curlew, one of which headed our way and landed on a rocky outcrop not twenty yards from the vehicle, allowing us great views. We also stopped to watch Lesser kestrel on our way back to the hotel.

### Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> May

#### Campo de Peñaranda. Cereal steppelands and lagoons.

A brief stop by the reservoir dam to watch House martin (they nest on the dam wall), Woodchat shrike, Woodlark, Cuckoo and Hoopoe.

We drove on to an area of cereal crops in where we saw Iberian yellow wagtail, Lesser kestrel, Black and Red kite, Buzzard, Corn bunting, Hobby and Black-winged stilt in some flooded gravel pits, but sadly no sign of the local

Montagu's harrier. We drove northeast, stopping to photograph a colony of storks on an old factory building, and from a ridge watched groups of male Great bustard just visible in the valley below, shimmering with heat haze as temperatures rose. The lekking season was over but some were still displaying a little. Here were Bee-eater, Iberian yellow wagtail, Stonechat, Spotless starling and Short-toed lark camouflaged against the brown earth, with Black Kite, Booted eagle and Marsh harrier above, and a Short-toed eagle resting on the ground by a pond. Lots of Griffon vultures present in the background. We tried in vain to find some Little bustard: seen occasionally in the area, but after several false alarms (ravens playing hide and seek and jumping up and down behind long grass as if they knew what we'd come for and were having a laugh at our expense!) we decided it was time for some lunch in the shade. We drove to the small reservoir of Azud de Riobos, stopping to watch Lesser kestrel around an abandoned church tower taken over by Jackdaws, and set up our picnic in a pine plantation.



Iberian yellow wagtail Photo BISWW



Squacco heron Photo BISWW

After lunch we birded from the banks of the reservoir, watching Black-winged stilt, Whiskered tern, Black tern, Montagu's harrier (at last), Squacco heron, Black-tailed godwits, Great crested grebe, Little grebe, Black-headed gull, Little plover, Common sandpiper, Grey heron (with chicks) and Shoveler amongst others.

### Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> May

#### Sierras de Bejar & Francia Biosphere reserve, Sangusin & Alagon valleys.

Meadow, Atlantic & Mediterranean forest.

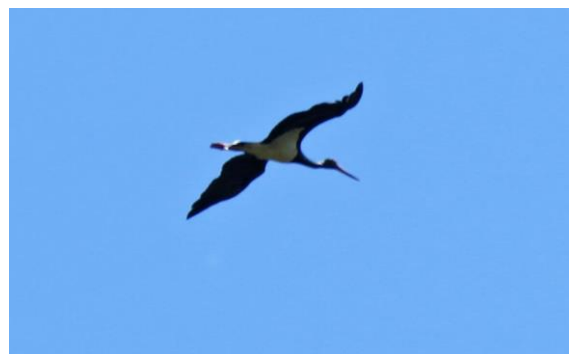
We headed south west to the valley of the Sangusin river. After stopping on the way to look for Tongue orchid *Serapias lingua* growing around a damp granite meadow, seeing Iberian Long-tailed tits and spotting a family of Spectacled warblers, we proceeded to the bridge over the river Sangusin from where we watched groups of Spanish pond turtles basking in the sunlight on rocks in the river, as well as Serin, Cuckoo and Black kite. As we were getting in the van we saw a Black stork circling overhead, so we scrambled out again to get a better look before it disappeared.

We headed upstream where we were watched Bee-eaters and their companion squatters the Rock sparrows, who take advantage of the bee-eaters' late arrival to take over their nesting holes. Several stops and walks amongst the Spanish ash and oak trees were rewarded with sightings of Wryneck, Cuckoo, and Golden oriole, amongst other all year residents such as Iberian magpie, Short-toed tree-creeper and Woodlark.

On reaching a hillside overlooking the river, we set up the scopes in case the Black stork should reappear. Whilst D and I headed to check out the old mill, supposedly open to the public but actually locked, Alfonso and D were lucky enough to see the Black stork wandering into view in the valley below.



Tongue orchid *Serapias lingua* Photo D.L.



Black stork Photo BISWW

We had our picnic under the welcome shade of a Montpelier maple, and then headed west to the village of Pinedas where we were surprised to see a Blue Rockthrush drinking in the water troughs. From here we descended the hill to a track overlooking the confluence of the rivers Alagon and Sangusin. Nightingale, Booted eagle, Sparrowhawk, Griffon vulture and Alpine swift were all seen here.



Bee-eater Photo BISWW



Blue rockthrush Photo BISWW

We headed next to our destination at **Hotel Porta Coeli** near San Martin del Castañar, where we dined on the terrace with wonderful views of the Sierra and Red-rumped swallows, which nest under the eaves.

### Monday 31<sup>st</sup> May

**Batuecas NP, Sierras de Francia** Mountain, scrub and mixed forest.

We had a short morning walk amongst the brooms and cistus open moorland above the village of San Martin. Here we found Marsh fritillary *Eurodryas aurinia beckeri* and Brown Argus *Aricia agestis cramera* butterflies, as well as the Algerian wall lizard *Psammodromus algirus*, various Dartford or 'dart-off' warblers and Ravens.

We headed to the Batuecas Natural Park and the Portillo mountain pass, with views back over the Sierra and beyond out towards the Hurdes region of Extremadura, and here were large swathes of beautiful yellow Carpaza rock rose *Halimium lasianthum* subsp. *allysoides*. We then descended towards the Batuecas river, stopping to observe a gorgeous male Spanish Ibex resting on top of a rock. In the Batuecas valley, we walked along the riverside boardwalk with sightings of Firecrest, Western orphean and Sardinian warblers, and Southern Beautiful demoiselle damselfly *Calopteryx virgo meridionalis*.

After briefly entering Extremadura to skirt around the south of the Sierra de Francia, we headed to some granite picnic tables in a pine forest by the Alagon river, where we restored our energy levels before walking along the river edge. Here we saw many Coal tits, Golden oriole, Turtle dove, White wagtail and Cirl bunting.



*Halimium lasianthum* ssp. *Allysoides*



Spanish Ibex *Capra pyrenaica* ssp. *victoriae*



Algerian wall lizard Photos BISWW

The afternoon was turning wet as we arrived at the medieval walled village of Miranda del Castañar, which we were able to visit after a short downpour and a much appreciated ice-cream, eaten as we sheltered in the van. Here in the narrow cobbled streets with half-timbered houses and balconies almost touching, Common Swift, Crag martin, Barn and Red-rumped swallow are all present alongside the resident Black redstart and House sparrows. On a good day the views from the village walls over the Sierra would most likely have given us Black and Egyptian vulture, but

the rain forced our retreat back to the hotel, where after a rest we had a delicious and entertaining supper 'behind a waterfall' as the rain came down in a curtain beyond the terrace roof.



## Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> June

### Sierra de Francia. Peña de Francia.

Mountain, Atlantic & Mediterranean forest, Mediterranean maqui.

We woke to a sea of fog, which might have been local or far reaching. We decided to stick to our course and headed for the high peak of the Peña de Francia, 1727m above sea level, with its monastery and an underground chapel dedicated to a small wooden figure of the Virgin Mary found in a cave beneath. We hoped we might get clear skies overlooking an ocean of whiteness, having once experienced this marvel. In the event the fog was everywhere, and although very atmospheric it limited our birding capacities to muffled birdsong and lots of guesswork. We were however able to hear and see Crag martin, Rock bunting, Wheatear, Linnet, Raven and Black redstart, and further downhill amongst the trees and a sudden lifting of the mist we saw Western Bonelli's warbler, Coal tit and Robin, and heard Iberian pied flycatcher.



Ladybirds in the fog. Photo D. L.



Western bonelli's warbler Photo BISWW

We drove down the other side of the Peña, out of the fog and past mountainsides of scree, to the fossil rich village of Monsagro. On arrival we saw a pair of Egyptian vulture. Here the houses are built with local stone covered in the fossilized tracks of Trilobites, known as Crucianas, from the Cambrian period. This has been made into a small tourist attraction, with a fossil trail and a visitor centre dedicated to ancient seas, as all this area was once under water. The village also has some interesting circular terracing which served for growing crops and as a threshing area after harvesting. Here we saw Black kite, Griffon vulture, White wagtail, Serin, Black redstart, Red-rumped swallow, Barn swallow and House martin.

After a picnic in the valley below, we headed next for a short visit to the walled fortress town of Ciudad Rodrigo. We then continued to our next port of call, the **Hotel Mesa del Conde** in San Felices, another medieval village with castle in the Arribes Natural Park. We had an excellent dinner in the hotel gardens, with a welcome breeze after a very hot day.



'Eras': circular threshing grounds of Monsagro



'Crucianas': Fossilized trilobite trails

**Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> June**

**Arribes del Duero.** Canyons, Mediterranean maqui.

We began by visiting the outlying area of the village, walking along tracks by allotments and fruit orchards. Nightingale, Collared and Turtle doves, Serin, Hawfinch, Greenfinch, Blackcap, Sardinian and Melodious warblers, Spotless starling, Corn and Cirl buntings, Woodchat shrike, Iberian magpie, Black and Red kite gave for an entertaining mornings' observations.

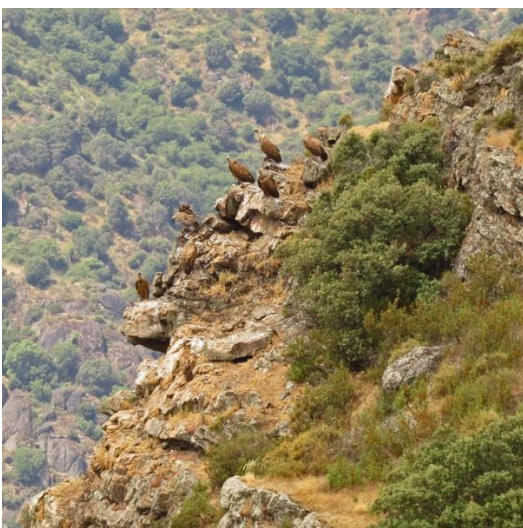


Serin Photo BISWW



Woodchat shrike Photo BISWW

From here we headed to a viewpoint overlooking the confluence of the Camaces and Huebra rivers. We stopped on a bridge over the Camaces to watch White and Grey wagtail, Crag martin and Red-rumped swallow, and a very strange white creature, the Myrmecophilous silverfish *Proateturina pseudolepisma* which D spotted and which parasitizes ants. On reaching the viewpoint we were in luck: no sooner had we got out of the van than we saw a pair of Egyptian vulture. There were plenty of Griffon vulture too, as they have large colonies around here. But the stars of the morning were the pair of Bonelli's eagle that appeared and stayed for some time, giving us great views. We also saw Blue rockthrush on a ledge over a waterfall, and Dartford and Sardinian warblers here.



Griffon vulture colony Photo BISWW



Bonelli's eagle Photo BISWW



Blue rockthrush

Next we went to a hide close by to a 'muladar': a place where cattle carcasses are left for the vultures. The hide was actually closed because of COVID restrictions but nevertheless we got good views of Egyptian and Griffon vulture as well as Peregrine falcon.

All of this gave us a healthy appetite so we ate our picnic down by the Duero river: a beautiful shady spot under weeping willows kept us reasonably cool.

After lunch we visited another viewpoint, with fantastic views of the Duero and a forest of Hackberry trees or Almez: a sacred Mediterranean tree. Griffon vulture and a very acrobatic Red-rumped swallow which seemed to just hang in the air kept us here for a while. We also saw an interesting tiny, delicate Broomrape: possibly *Phelipanche cernua*, and a lovely Coma *Polygonia-C album* butterfly.



*Proatelerina pseudolepisma*



*Phelipanche cernua??*



Egyptian vulture Photos BISWW

On the way back to the hotel we stopped at a pre-Roman Castro. This iron-age hillfort with its field of deterrent vertical pointy stones to ward off invading marauders on horseback is the work of the Veton people, who populated the area for several thousand years and were responsible for the granite carvings of large boars and bulls scattered around Salamanca, Avila and Zamora, as well as parts of Portugal. My ancestors! Here we saw Booted eagle and Dartford warbler as well as Brown argus and Small skipper *Thymelicus sylvestris*. Stopping at a bridge over the Huebra we saw European pond turtle.

We retired back to the hotel for our last night here and another lovely meal in the gardens.



Brown argus *Aricia agestis cramera* Photo D.L.



Saldeana castro Photo BISWW

### Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> June

**Campo charro.** Lagoons, dehesa, river valleys.

After a short early walk between orchards, with Turtle dove, Woodchat shrike, Western orphea warbler and Stonechat, we headed to Siega Verde – a Palaeolithic site with rock engravings in the River Agueda valley, where we left D in the hands of the local guide while we went to do some exploring in the area, getting good views of Turtle dove, Serin and Nightingale.

We headed east stopping at the bridge over the Yeltes river, with many Crag martins, then on to a lagoon where Great crested grebe nested on miniature floating islands of weeds. It was a bit disappointing and the heat didn't help: there were Great egret, Marsh harrier and Black kite, Gadwall and the ubiquitous Mallard. After lunch under

the shade of a generous Holm oak we had a look at another lagoon but again, rather disappointing: 6 Spoonbills the most interesting thing there.



Spoonbills



Black kite



*Cistus albidus* Photos BISWW

Before returning to Salvatierra we decided to head up a wooded hill to look for Black Vulture which had, strangely, so far eluded us, but the high wind didn't help so apart from some Griffons vultures and a lovely Grey-leaved cistus *Cistus albidus* – which is pink – and some wonderful views across to the mountains in the south, there wasn't much new.

**Friday 4th June** On the Friday we had a days' rest but the Black vulture finally materialised for D and D who saw it along with a Griffon vulture for comparison, on their walk near Salvatierra.

#### **Saturday 5th June**

**Sierra de Béjar.** Mountain pasture, mixed forest.

In the morning we drove up the Sierra de Bejar mountain where we hoped to find Bluethroat. On the way up we stopped to watch a beautiful male Rockthrush and some Ortolan buntings. At the top there were Water pipit, Dunnock, Wheatear and some very vociferous Whitethroats but no sign of the Bluethroat.



Red rockthrush



Ortolan bunting



Dunnock Photos BISWW

We drove on to the lovely mountain village of Candelario, through its narrow streets with water channels for the snow melt to run down. Here we stopped to discern a few Pallid swifts among the rest of the Swifts which nest in the village. We then drove to the woodland on the mountain side where we were able to see and hear the Iberian subspecies of Pied flycatcher, Western bonelli's warbler, Iberian chiffchaff, Whitethroat and other resident forest birds, before the weather began to cloud over and look rather menacing.

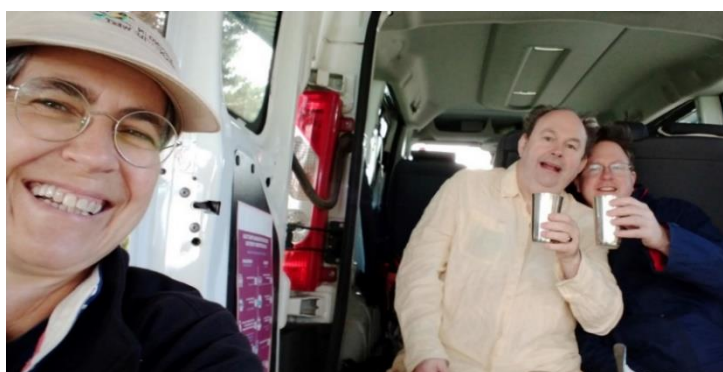
It seemed like a good time to seek shelter and so we picnicked under a very handy carport halfway up the mountain with views of the mountainside and pine forest. After lunch the sun came out so we headed up to the top of the mountain, stopping on the way up to look at Robust marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza elata* and Elegant toadflax *Linaria elegans*. From here we saw singing skylarks, Ortolan and Rock bunting. As we hadn't seen the Bluethroat we went back to the first spot to try for it, but apart from D briefly glimpsing it we saw the same birds as in the morning plus Yellow wagtail, Crag martin, Griffon vulture and Booted eagle.



Iberian Pied flycatcher



Robust marsh orchid



### Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> June

#### Trujillo and Monfragüe National Park. Plains, scrub, cliffs.

Our quest continued for the Little bustard so as promised we had an early start and drove two hours south to Extremadura and the plains of Trujillo, with a very good description of where to look for it from our expert colleague Martin Kelsey. But it wasn't to be. We did however get some great views of several small flocks of Pintailed sandgrouse, calling as they flew by.

Further west we saw Rollers and Lesser kestrel at nesting boxes, some taken over by Jackdaws, but as the heat was ever more oppressive we finally drove north to Monfragüe and had a picnic in the shade before stopping at the various official birding viewpoints there. Too many people and too much heat deterred us from attempting to spot Black stork nesting sites amongst the Griffon vultures, but we did later see Egyptian vulture and had a good view of a wild boar drinking at the edge of a reservoir.



Rollers



Looking out for Little bustard Photos BISWW

This should have been our last day, but D and D asked if we would be willing to go back up the mountain and try again for Bluethroat the following morning, so that's what we did.

### Monday 7<sup>th</sup> June Sierra de Béjar.

After waiting and near despairing, a Red legged partridge calling from a rock caught Alfonso's eye, and turning the telescope towards it, lo and behold, just behind he discerned the silhouette of a singing male Bluethroat. We walked in file along and from a safe distance had a good look at it as it sang away and showed its beautiful colouring.



Bluethroat



Female Red rockthrush Photos BISWW

On the way back down the mountain we had great views of a female Rockthrush perched on a road sign.

Thus ended the **Tip Top Tour**.

Species seen on the tour.

<b>Birds:</b>		
Northern Shoveler Gadwall Mallard Common Quail (heard) Red-legged Partridge Little Grebe Great Crested Grebe Rock Pigeon Common Wood-Pigeon European Turtle-Dove Eurasian Collared-Dove Pin-tailed Sandgrouse * Great Bustard Great Spotted Cuckoo Common Cuckoo Alpine Swift Common Swift Pallid Swift Eurasian Moorhen Eurasian Coot Eurasian Thick-knee Black-winged Stilt Northern Lapwing Little Ringed Plover Black-tailed Godwit Common Sandpiper Black-headed Gull Lesser Black-backed Gull Black Tern Whiskered Tern Black Stork White Stork Great Cormorant Gray Heron Great Egret Little Egret Squacco Heron Eurasian Spoonbill Egyptian Vulture Black Vulture Eurasian Griffon Vulture Short-toed Snake-Eagle Booted Eagle Bonelli's Eagle Eurasian Marsh-Harrier Hen Harrier Montagu's Harrier	Eurasian Sparrowhawk Northern Goshawk Red Kite Black Kite Common Buzzard Little Owl Eurasian Hoopoe Common Kingfisher European Bee-eater European Roller* Eurasian Wryneck Great Spotted Woodpecker Lesser Spotted Woodpecker Lesser Kestrel Eurasian Kestrel Eurasian Hobby Peregrine Falcon Eurasian Golden Oriole Iberian Grey Shrike Woodchat Shrike Eurasian Jay Iberian Magpie Eurasian Magpie Eurasian Jackdaw Carrion Crow Common Raven Coal Tit Eurasian Blue Tit Great Tit Greater Short-toed Lark Calandra Lark Lesser Short-toed Lark Wood Lark Eurasian Skylark Thekla's Lark Crested Lark Long-tailed Tit Iberian Melodious Warbler Eurasian Crag-Martin Barn Swallow Red-rumped Swallow Common House-Martin Western Bonelli's Warbler Common Chiffchaff Cetti's Warbler Eurasian Blackcap Western Orphean Warbler	Subalpine Warbler Sardinian Warbler Greater Whitethroat Spectacled Warbler Dartford Warbler Goldcrest Common Firecrest Eurasian Nuthatch Short-toed Treecreeper Eurasian Wren Spotless Starling Mistle Thrush Song Thrush Eurasian Blackbird Spotted Flycatcher European Robin Common Nightingale Bluethroat European Pied Flycatcher Iberian Common Redstart Black Redstart Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush Blue Rock-Thrush European Stonechat Northern Wheatear Black-eared Wheatear Dunnock House Sparrow Spanish Sparrow Rock Sparrow Gray Wagtail Western Yellow Wagtail Iberian White Wagtail Water Pipit Common Chaffinch Hawfinch European Greenfinch Eurasian Linnet European Goldfinch European Serin Corn Bunting Rock Bunting Cirl Bunting Ortolan Bunting <b>138 species of which:</b> <b>136 in Salamanca</b> <b>*2 only in Extremadura</b>

Other species seen:

<b>Butterflies</b>
Speckled brown butterfly <i>Pararge aegeria</i> . Marsh fritillary <i>Eurodryas aurinia beckeri</i> Brown Argus <i>Aricia agestis cramera</i> Coma <i>Polygonia-C album</i> Small skipper <i>Thymelicus sylvestris</i> .
<b>Other invertebrates</b>
Southern Beautiful demoiselle damselfly <i>Calopteryx virgo meridionalis</i> . Myrmecophilous silverfish <i>Proatelerina pseudolepisma</i> Red-striped oil beetle <i>Berberomeloe majalis</i> Mammoth wasp <i>Megascolia maculata</i> Mammoth wasp <i>Megascolia bidens</i>
<b>Reptiles</b>
Ocelated lizard <i>Timon lepidus</i> Algerian wall lizard <i>Psammodromus algirus</i> Spanish pond turtle <i>Mauremys leprosa</i> European pond turtle <i>Emys orbicularis</i>
<b>Mammals</b>
Spanish ibex Iberian hare Wild boar Red deer Roe deer
<b>Plants</b>
Tongue orchid <i>Serapias lingua</i> Carpaza rock rose <i>Halimium lasianthum</i> subsp. <i>Allysoides</i> Elegant toadflax <i>Linaria elegans</i> Broomrape <i>Phelipanche cernua</i> Grey-leaved cistus <i>Cistus albidus</i> Gum rockrose <i>Cistus ladanifer</i> Elegant toadflax <i>Linaria elegans</i> Robust marsh orchid <i>Dactylorhiza elata</i> Strawberry tree <i>Arbutus unedo</i> Terebinth <i>Pistacia terebinthus</i> Mastic tree <i>Pistacia lentiscus</i> Holm oak <i>Quercus ilex</i> Portuguese oak <i>Quercus faginea</i> Pyrenean oak <i>Quercus pyrenaica</i> Narrow-leaved ash <i>Fraxinus angustifolia</i> Montpellier maple <i>Acer monspessulanum</i> Mediterranean hackberry or Nettle tree <i>Celtis australis</i>

Written by Vega Bermejo of Birding in Spain's Wild West