

Led by Keith Bensusan with Stephen Daly

report & pics Theresa Leverton

The first GONHS outing of this year took us to La Janda, nr. Tarifa, *the* place to visit during the winter to see large numbers of Common Cranes and White Storks gathered together as well as a myriad of other wintering and passage birds that are attracted to this rich, open and often wet agricultural site. This trip was a little different to our usual outings as we were accompanied and guided by Stephen Daly of Andalucian Guides. Stephen is a professional guide who knows this locality inside out, is very aware of what may be around at any given time and where best to find it. He also has privileged access to areas that are on private land and usually closed off, so although many of us on the trip have visited the area many times before, we were able to view parts of the site that were fresh to us.

A large group of members (21 of us), met up with Stephen at the Apollo XI venta, conveniently located a short way from the entrance to the La Janda site. After coffee and breakfast there was a little shuffling around to find everyone a seat in a 4X4, as the tracks around the site are weather-worn and not particularly friendly to 'normal' cars. We set off as a convoy of 6 cars, which was to evoke quite a bit of curiosity amongst other road users throughout the day.

We began our birding quest on land belong to *el Cortijo de Haba*, scanning the ploughed fields either side of a track. It was cold and quite misty there, but there were birds to be seen, albeit mostly distantly; we saw our first Common Cranes flying and quite a few Cormorants crossing back and forth. There were Storks, Cattle and Little Egrets present, a Buzzard hunched up on a distant fence, Red-legged Partridge at the field's edge, Corn Buntings and Stonechats. We could hear Larks in the bare muddy fields, most likely Crested, but their superb camouflage made them difficult to pick out and although there was movement amongst them flights were low and short and not at all helpful to us.

We drove on to the La Janda site and turned in to be greeted by mist that shrouded the land to either side of us.



The first birds we picked out were Lapwings that were flying around despite the reduced visibility and landed in the grassy field to our left. A Cattle Egret stood in the damp field, feathers fluffed out and looking quite fed up. The sun slowly gained in strength and began to burn off the mist and birds began to move around more freely. Perching places are sparse in this part of the site; a mixed flock of Linnets, Goldfinches & Chaffinches flew into a small twiggy bush, with more birds alighting on the grass stems below to feed on seeds.

There was an interesting departure from our usual route at this point; we would have continued driving and made a left turn onto the long main track here, but Stephen had gained permission for us to pass through a post and wire gate to the right, so we left our cars and continued along here on foot.



The track leads between fields with the river on one side and a dry ditch on the other. There were numerous Chiffchaffs along here amongst the reeds, Stonechats perched up on top of stems and posts and Corn Buntings singing from the wire fence. Stephen had pre-visited the site during the last week when there were large numbers of Snipe and Common Cranes here, but the field was being ploughed this morning, moving the Cranes on. We did however see Meadow Pipits, a Green Sandpiper and more Lapwings and there were still Snipe in the field opposite, with Calandra Larks. With binoculars it was possible to see very large numbers of Storks gathered at the back of the fields and another perched Buzzard. By the time we turned around to walk back the sun had all but burnt off the mist and it was feeling much warmer.



To our delight Calandra Larks were flying up high to sing and to perform display flights against the clear blue sky.

Calandra Larks are often seen together in large wintering flocks. They are a big, heavily built lark with a large head, stout Greenfinch-like bill and a black patch on neck-side. Characteristic in flight, they show dark wings (all black below) with a broad white trailing edge. Sings in circling song flight, often very high up; the long black wings and closed tail give the impression of a much larger bird. Feeds on seeds, shoots & insects.

A Spoonbill was spotted flying, seeming to be trailing a leg.

Back at the bottom of the track we heard Fan-tailed Warblers 'zitting' amongst the long grass, heard a Cetti's Warbler from somewhere by the water and saw a pair of Mallard flying.

Driving along the main track we had some great views, a Purple Swamp Hen (I still prefer Purple Gallinule- it sounds more exotic as befits these colourful birds), Coots, loads more Cattle Egrets and ditto Corn Buntings and Stonechats.



There were Little Egrets, Grey Herons, and a distant hovering Kestrel. We stopped to admire 3 Cranes feeding in a field, which although not a brilliant sighting, turned out to be our best view of the day of Cranes on the ground.



The convoy came to a halt to admire three beautiful Spoonbills standing at the edge of a flooded field.



We stopped again a little further on as Golden Plovers, incredibly well camouflaged against the bare brown earth were spotted in a distant field feeding together with yet more Lapwings. In winter plumage they were only visible with the aid of a telescope, we may well have passed them by if they had not been pointed out to us.

We turned right off the main track, crossed the bridge over the river, stopping just past it as a Black-winged Kite had been spotted, perched at the top of a tree. The beautiful bird then flew out across the field it had been scanning, hovered Kestrel-like over a spot on the ground then returned to its perch. We stayed back for a few minutes and watched it fly again, this time going down onto the ground as though to grab something, then it flew back along a length of hedge and back up to its perch.

The surface of this length of track was full of potholes to avoid and from our position at the back of the convoy; the only birds we saw were a couple of Chiffchaffs and Goldfinch. The track is lined down one side with willow trees, currently bearing catkins. We stopped briefly to have a look at them, and getting out of the car inadvertently disturbed a bird we were hoping to see on this trip - a Great Spotted Cuckoo. It left the cover of the shrubbery on the other side of the track and flew low down, close to the hedge and back along the way we had just driven. Just a brief glimpse, but a glimpse none the less.

The next spot was of a Little Owl that had been sitting up on one of the huge arms, or booms, of an irrigating contraption; it was long gone by the time we tail-enders arrived! We did see a Marsh Harrier here though, quite distant and flying above the hills to our left, but still good to see. Causing a little more excitement a Hen Harrier flew into view on the opposite side of the track, again distant, but it was possible to see it was a female that was then joined by another bird, probably the male. As we drove off we spotted a very tight flock of dark-coloured birds flying away from us that turned out to be Glossy Ibis.

We carried on up to the farm, leaving the cars once again to scan around the very different terrain here. To one side there is rough pastureland where cows were grazing around clumps of flowering Asphodels; this is part of the Hen Harriers' territory and they would have been around here when we saw them from lower down.

Parked close to a cow shed with a very muddy enclosed area in front of it full of curious cattle, the air around us was rather pungently fragranced, which some felt added to the *campo* atmosphere but which others found strangely offensive (townies!). But, where there are animals there is food and dung that attract insects and small rodents, and therefore birds. There were large numbers of Jackdaws all over the place that Stephen told us nest on the rock faces of a local quarry, and a little crowd of Chiffchaffs that were perching in the squares formed by a wire fence surrounded by yellow mustard-type flowers, diving out acrobatically to chase flies. A single Barn Swallow was spotted and a Booted Eagle that was perched up on a telegraph pole pointed out, 2 Buzzards circled, then a Hen Harrier flew in and scanned the area in front of us (pastureland surrounded with olive and cork oak trees and other scrubby vegetation).

We heard the distinctive honking of Cranes flying and two separate groups headed straight for us then passed close over our heads giving lovely views of these large, elegant birds.



Absorbed by the Cranes we had failed to notice that a huge flock of White Storks had gathered behind us and were beginning to wheel characteristically and drift across above us: a truly breathtaking display no matter how many times you've seen it before.



Moving along a short way we stopped again as Stephen spotted a Great Spotted Cuckoo that had been perched but that promptly dropped to the ground, disappearing from view. Somehow someone picked up a Little Owl sitting in a tree above a bramble patch, but I have to admit I just could not see it for the life of me.

So, onwards to lunch - which all GONHS outing regulars will appreciate is an essential part of the day's proceedings. Stephen did us proud, guiding us to el 'Cortijo Los Monteros', which is located on the Medina-Benalup road (km6). We were made very welcome and seated at a very long table in front of a huge roaring log fire. We all enjoyed our choices from the tasty and generously portioned 3-course 'menu del dia', and refreshed and ready for the final part of our trip.

Stephen was taking us on to a reservoir, and we stopped en route at a lovely woodland spot along the road where we were to look out for a sight of rare Spanish Imperial Eagles. A pair nested here for the first time last year, an unexpected event that has caused much excitement and hope that the presence of these magnificent birds may be re-established here.

We had no luck with the Imperial Eagles, but we thoroughly enjoyed the moments of peace and the tranquillity of our surroundings. The presence of the pool of water added another dimension to the prettiness of the scene, its surface was covered with pretty little white flowers and it was well populated with frogs. While some of us were content to wander around and take it all in, others were still working, diligently scanning the sky for the elusive raptors. Stephen heard the whistling call of a Green Woodpecker, or Iberian Woodpecker as he referred to it as and whistled back to it, hoping to bring it to us, but he could probably see we were quite a crowd and chose not to show himself.

Yes, I know that cows wandering amongst woodland are a common sight throughout the Alcornocales woodlands, but I was very taken with this one grazing intently by the water's edge with her calf. She looked so healthy, her coat almost the shade of the stripped cork oak trunks and she was sporting a fearsome looking set of horns *and* a pair of dangly earrings.



She even had her own personal egret standing on guard.



Back to the birds-more Buzzards, Griffon Vultures and a Sparrowhawk were spotted very high up and then two beautiful Red Kites aroused excitement when they flew into view directly overhead. They seemed to be as interested in us as we were in them and they spent some time moving around us slowly, whilst peering down curiously.





Arriving at the reservoir we discovered it is the Barbate reservoir, water we had seen many times previously from the main AP4 road, without knowing what it was called. It was constructed in 1992 to prevent the agricultural land at the site we had just visited from flooding, which seems a little ironic as that site was historically a huge lake and wetland area that was drained so the land could be put to agricultural use. The reservoir is said to cover 2,537 hectares of land, but has undoubtedly swelled following all the rain we have had recently. It does look beautiful, but as most reservoirs are, it is a fairly sterile environment for birds, although apparently Osprey have nested there in previous years: their nest site has now been taken over by opportunistic Storks.



View to the Sierra del Algorroba and the range's highest peak, el Picacho

There is some scrubby vegetation growing on the bank of the water we were on, but there was not much wildlife to see. We could hear Sardinian Warbler amongst the scrub and Keith scrutinized some distant ducks, which he said were Mallard and possibly Pintails, but apart from a herd of goats grazing in an idyllic spot on a grassy hill near the water, there were no signs of activity. It's a lovely spot though with views to the Sierra del Algorrobo, located on the western boundary of the Alcornocales Natural Park. The highest peak, el Picacho and its surrounding woodland, has been the location for several previous GONHS outings.



The group picture – everyone is still smiling (or squinting in the bright sunshine!) It was another very enjoyable outing, so thanks to those that organised it and made it happen and special thanks to Stephen for giving generously of his time and for finding us some fascinating and beautiful wildlife to look at.

**Bird List for the day:** Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*, Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*, White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*, Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*, Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*, Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, Pintail *Anas acuta*, Red Kite *Milvus milvus*, Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*, Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*, Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*, Buzzard *Buteo buteo*, Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus*, Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*, Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*, Coot *Fulica atra*, Swamp Hen (Purple Gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio*, Common Crane *Grus grus*, Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*, Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*, Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*, Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*, Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius*, Little Owl *Athene noctua*, Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* (Iberian race *sharpei*) (heard), Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*, Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*, Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*, Pied (White) Wagtail *Motacilla alba*, Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*, Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*, Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis* (heard), Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* (heard), Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*, Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*, Spotless Starling *Sturnus unicolor*, Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*, Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*, Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*, Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra* (51 species)