

OUTING TO BRAZO del ESTE

15 MAY 2010

Led by Dr. John Cortes

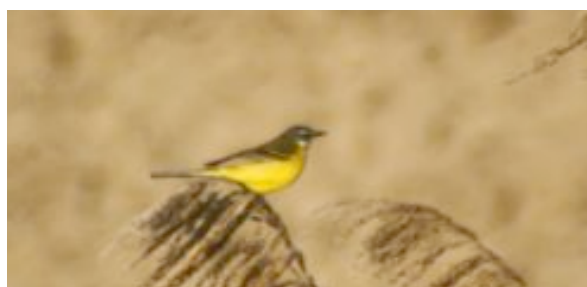
Report & photographs by Theresa Leverton

Brazo del Este is located 20 km south of Seville in the Guadalquivir river estuary and is an area with one of the highest levels of biodiversity in the Iberian Peninsula. This former branch (brazo) of the Guadalquivir is east (este) of the river and has become an extensive wetland, marsh and reedbed area that is surrounded by rice plains and farmland where a variety of crops are grown. It is an outstanding ornithological site, where over 230 species of birds have been recorded. It is noteworthy for its high numbers of waterfowl especially in winter, while in times of drought, birds from the nearby Doñana National Park flock here.

Just four people left the border at 6am this morning: John (who was leading) was accompanied by Jonathan, they met up with Gonzalo and Rosemary and were joined by Jill and myself at Las Palmeras services at 7am, a little after daybreak. During the latter part of our journey there we had already had views of early birds, including the emerging silhouettes of pairs of Storks on their nests and the outlines of several raptors of various species, perched up on distant pylons. We saw a pair of Raven flying, a Kestrel, a rabbit and a hedgehog (squashed). We had also had a wonderful sighting of a flock of Black Kites leaving their overnight roost, located in a small area of woodland. The birds flew out together, spreading out to go about the business of another day's scavenging. Coffee and toast fuelled us up for the onward journey and we set off to continue along the AP5 in the direction of Seville. Just before reaching Jerez de la Frontera, we turned onto the old original part of the autopista that leads to Seville. This is a very long straight stretch of road that presently is enhanced by colourful shrubs lining both sides of the road and filling the central reservation. Masses of pink and white Oleander blossom interspersed with golden yellow Broom and pink Tamarisk, no doubt boosted by the ample winter rainfall, have created a beautiful unbroken display. We continued driving straight until taking the turn-off for Utrera (A362), then we followed the signs to Los Palacios, driving through the town to reach our destination just beyond it (journey time around 2 ½ hours incl. stop). We left the town to follow a surfaced, but very dusty track that is bounded on its left side by fields and farm buildings and on the other by a wide dyke, now filled to the top with water, that has a windbreak of Eucalyptus trees behind it.

The site we were heading towards lay behind the trees, but we stopped for our first bird sighting when John came to a sudden halt as he spotted a Collared Pratincole fly across the road in front of him. The field the bird had flown up from had been recently planted with a crop that was just beginning to show green shoots, and scanning it revealed several more of these handsome birds very well camouflaged against the stone strewn brown earth. There were numerous Larks there too and Swallows and House Martins swooping down over the track and field edges. More extensive searching by Jill with her telescope also revealed a Red-legged Partridge on the field's edge.

We drove on a short way and took a turning to the right, crossing the dyke, then turned right again into the vast, flat and partially flooded plains area. The site is completely open and fully exposed to the elements and when we arrived it was windy and quite chilly, so we were grateful that our bird sightings began without having to leave the shelter of our vehicles.



9.06am: Three Gull-billed Terns flew across the track ahead of us and just a little further on a Yellow Wagtail crossed over and landed on a reed perch, swaying perilously in the wind.

9.08am: The first of many of the day's sightings of a Purple Heron. They entered the site from all directions, and crossed back and forth over the reedbeds between the various bodies of standing water, no doubt scouting for the best spots to hunt in. To begin with we called attention to each one of these handsome birds as we spotted them, but after a while our sightings were too numerous to do that and our attentions were diverted to less 'common' birds! Little Egrets too were numerous throughout the site.



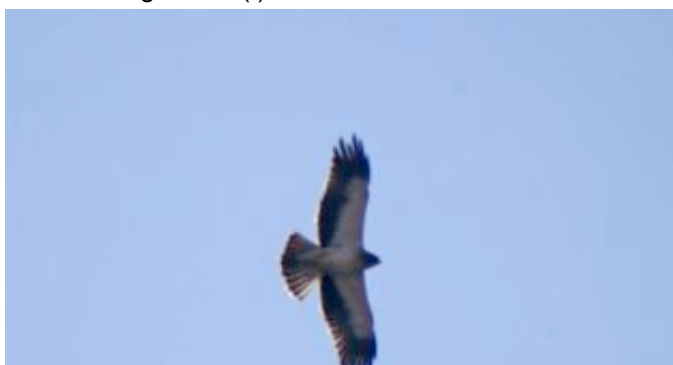
We were very pleasantly surprised by a Night Heron that flew up out of a reed bed we had parked opposite and we watched it travel a short way, hoping to spot where it landed again, but without luck. As it turned out though, we were fortunate enough to have several more sightings of these generally more nocturnal birds as they flew up and across various watery parts of the site.

The site, or part of it, is a designated 'Paraje Natural', although much of the land is cultivated. The areas left in their natural state that are accessible are located on either side of a very straight track. The track is wide enough for two vehicles to pass easily, but is un-surfaced, so is very dry and dusty and even a car driving carefully upon it throws up a cloud of dust behind it.



This is the only route through the site and today numerous large tractors were being driven up and down its length at frequent intervals, each one engulfing us in a thick fog of dust as it passed. We got the impression that our presence was proving to be an irritation to some of the tractor drivers, with some of them sounding their horns and others vocalising their impatience as they were forced to pull out around our parked

vehicles. It wasn't pleasant, but were we being a little over-sensitive when we fancied that some of them accelerated as they approached us to create an even thicker dust cloud with which to engulf us? (!)



We had not travelled all this way to be put off that easily though, and brushing the dust from our selves, our binoculars and camera lenses and beginning to warm up in the strengthening sunshine, we concentrated on the increasing bird activity around and above us.



We made our first stop where we saw the Night Heron, leaving the cars to scan the reedbeds for sights of Reed and Great Reed Warblers, but although we could hear a whole host of them, catching sight of even one proved difficult. Last year we saw a lot of both species obligingly perched atop reeds and singing their scratchy tunes, but that day was sunnier, warmer and wind and tractor and dust free, so perhaps some or all of those elements affect their behaviour. But there were plenty of other sights, a Booted Eagle flew low overhead, we had glimpses of Marsh Harriers, more Yellow Wagtails and Grey Herons: then a special treat – a lone wading Spoonbill.

9.51am: We stopped to admire a handsome Collared Pratincole that was resting on top of a mud wall behind a dry dyke. It stood up as we watched it, but happily didn't move far and allowed us to watch it closely for some time.



9.56am: A little further on, on the opposite side of the track, probing about in a shallow pool with a 'beach' were elegant Black-winged Stilts and two beautiful Avocets.



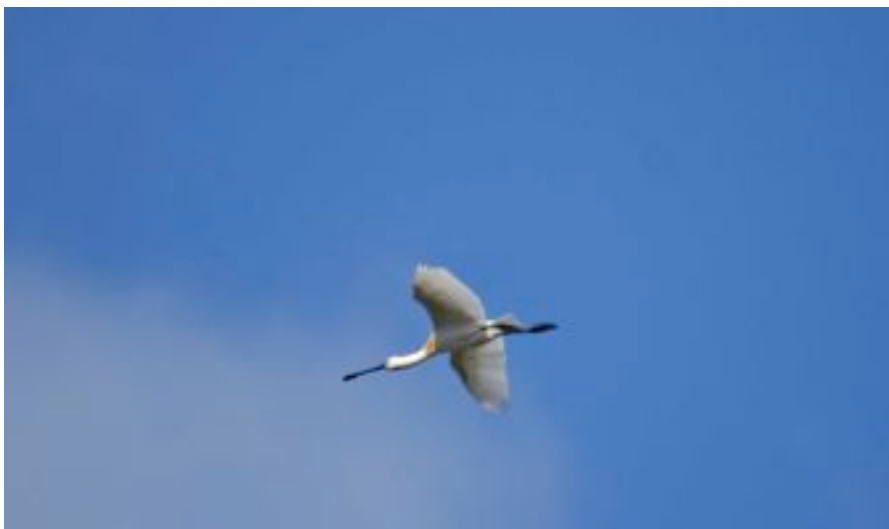
There were differences in the colouring of the head plumage of the Stilts and we wondered why. Apparently the dark markings on the head are variable: both sexes can show a wholly white head or varying degrees of black on crown and nape in breeding plumage. The slightly larger male is identified by its blacker and more glossy-green mantle.

10.15am: A flock of Spoonbills flew over then we spotted Greater Flamingos at the front of a shallow pool, almost hidden by tall reeds. They kept our attention for a good few minutes as they gradually strutted their way around to the far bank of the water, some to feed and others to rest.

I find these bizarrely-beautiful birds endlessly fascinating and could happily have watched them for much longer, even though they weren't doing anything very much.

(John informed us that these birds would have flown up to this location from Huelva to feed.)





10.40am: The Spoonbills returned, to our delight flying in directly over our heads. Breeding adult birds have a yellow neck ring and nape plumes. Immature birds have black wingtips. The Spoonbills



set themselves down on the edge of a large shallow body of water, partially screened from our view by a curtain of dried reeds. They were a fair distance away, but Jonathan spotted that amongst them was a single Sacred Ibis. John told us that the Ibis' origin was unknown, but that it has been here for some time. It may have arrived here by accident or perhaps

attached itself to a migrating Spoonbill flock whilst in Africa. (There are several reports of sightings in the locality posted on the Internet.)

We spent a good half an hour watching the big wading birds before moving along the track a short way to the spot where last year there was a bustling nesting colony of Whiskered Terns. Then the standing water was shallow, leaving numerous small 'islands' of vegetation above its surface that the terns were using as nesting sites, but presently the water level is higher and there are clearly insufficient suitable areas to accommodate the birds' needs. There were a few sightings of Whiskered Terns, so hopefully they have found a suitable nesting site nearby. It had warmed up considerably by now and we had a few sightings of Great Reed Warblers, although still rather distant and low down in the vegetation. We watched two birds fly into reeds a short distance away from us, picking up on them several times as they moved around low down amongst the stems. They were typically warbler shaped, undistinguished olive-brown in colour and glimpsing them briefly, could have been any of a number of species. Then we heard a very distinct, loud grasshopper-like calling, which John immediately attributed to a Savi's Warbler, coming from the direction in which we had been following the above-mentioned pair. The behaviour fitted too, so we believe it is fairly safe to say that is what they were.



11.23am: Moving on we drew up alongside a stretch of water meadow where a Purple Heron was hunting.

Superbly camouflaged, it captured our attention as it raised and lowered its head and neck above and below the tops of the rushes, resembling an exotic reptile performing a hypnotic ritual more than a bird. A few metres away from the heron, a Great White Egret was stalking, the pure white of its plumage standing out in stark contrast to the bright green of the rushes, but feeling no need to conceal itself.



A few minutes later and a couple of hundred metres further along the track, we were standing overlooking a totally contrasting terrain. On one side the land was prepared for growing crops, while on the other lay fallow ground sparsely covered with rough grass and wildflowers, that was well populated by nesting pairs of Collared Pratincoles. We had more wonderful views of these unique and handsome birds as they flew overhead chasing after insect prey and then landed on the ground, probably close to, but deliberately not approaching their nests while we watched. John also sighted a Tawny Pipit here.

'Pratincole' derives from the Latin words 'pratium'- meadow or grass & 'incola'- inhabitant or resident.



The indigenous plants of the area have to be tough to survive relentless exposure to sun and wind and the most obvious species growing alongside the track are various species of thistles. It



was certainly hot enough for insects to be flying, but perhaps because of the wind, we didn't see many – a few Green-striped White and Clouded Yellow butterflies were about it.

Our next observation spot was over a small lake that last year yielded sightings of a Red-knobbed Coot, Little Bittern and Night Herons amongst others, but today there were fewer visible birds about, although we did see a Mallard with her four ducklings, Purple Gallinule, Grey Heron and common Coots.



On our last visit, this was the point at which we turned our vehicles around to travel back in the direction we had come, but we decided to continue on for a while to investigate the area ahead. We drove for perhaps a couple of kilometres and it seemed that we may have seen the best of what the site had to offer today. Then we came upon a sight that none of us could ever have anticipated.



We crossed a very small, awkward bridge over a waterway, on the other side of which John had stopped his car. We initially thought he had decided to turn around here, but then he pointed out what had caught his attention. In a smallish, shallow pool of water stood a collection of wading birds that a zoological garden would have been proud to present. There were White Storks, Grey Herons, Purple Herons, Little Egrets and a single Night Heron crowded together amicably picking up fish that we thought may have become stranded by a sudden drop in the water level.

A car drove alongside the pool disturbing the feeding birds that flew up and away, breaking the moment, although most gradually returned. By then though Jill had spotted a Squacco



Heron that turned out to be one of two, hunting in a pool close by. This close sighting of the birds in their beautiful golden-brown breeding plumage was a special treat that rounded off a morning of some spectacular sightings.



We heard a Cetti's Warbler here too and watched as a few Black Kites circled around overhead, perhaps investigating the possibility of leftovers to scavenge.



In the centre of a patch of open ground away from where the Squacco Herons stalked through the water, a lone Black Stilt sat quietly on her nest.

We agreed to turn around here and head back in the direction from

which we had come and had only driven a short way, when passing by a rough pasture we disturbed a Bee-eater that had been perched on a wire boundary fence. We slowed down and we realised there were several more perched on overhead cables crossing the field and more flying low over the field. Starting off again we disturbed a Short-toed Eagle that had been perched on a pole above us and had lovely views of it as it flew away from us. A little further on overhead cables running parallel to the track a Corn Bunting sat very close to a Cirl Bunting. Our last noted sighting here was of a Kestrel hovering over the same field.

We headed for the little town of Pinzon and the venta that we have eaten at the last few times we have visited this area. As always the food was tasty, the portions generous and amazing value for a small amount of money.



The pair of Storks that nest beneath the cross on the roof of the building opposite were once again busily feeding their growing young ones.

Our number of recorded species for this site was 45:

Night Heron, Cattle Egret, Squacco Heron, Little Egret, Gt. White Egret, Grey Heron, Purple Heron, White Stork, Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo, Mallard, Black Kite, Marsh Harrier, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Kestrel, Red-legged Partridge, Moorhen, Coot, Purple Gallinule (Swamp Hen), Black-winged Stilt, Avocet, Collared Pratincole, Kentish Plover, Redshank, Gull-billed Tern, Whiskered Tern, Swift, Bee-eater, Crested Lark, Barn Swallow, House Martin, Meadow Pipit, Tawny Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Savi's Warbler, Fan-tailed Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, Great Reed Warbler, Reed Warbler, Common Waxbill, Goldfinch, Corn Bunting, Cirl Bunting and Sacred Ibis.