



Birding paradise (this page) Extremadura's habitats, encompassing steppe, oak woodland, *dehesa* wooded meadows, meandering rivers and reservoirs host a diverse array of bird species; (opposite, from left) birding guide Hugo Sánchez Mateos delights in recording species rarely seen in the area, such as the aquatic warbler; Hugo inherited his father's passion for birds at a young age; black storks are among various Mediterranean birds at home in largely rural Extremadura

The birds of Extremadura with Hugo Sánchez Mateos

BIRDING GUIDE IN EXTREMADURA

Words by Emerson Mendoza Ayala

The land calls. It whispers: "come back" to emigrants and to their descendants, because it yearns for those who established strong connections with its nature and its people.

Hugo Sánchez Mateos, born in Madrid in 1987, returned to his parents' homeland in Extremadura ten years ago to work as a technician in forest and natural environment management. More recently, he has devoted himself to ornithology full time.

Hugo absorbed his father's passion for birds long before he learned to hold binoculars. The north of Cáceres province is his favourite birdwatching area, and the Portaje reservoir is his top destination "because of emotional memories, I guess, from having been there a lot since I was little".

Since 2016, Hugo has coordinated the Extremadura Rarities Committee, which he founded together with five field ornithologists with the aim of compiling and standardising records of birds considered regional rarities. The recently published VII report includes the first regional sighting of a greater spotted eagle, seen at his favourite reservoir, and four records of the lanner falcon, listed as regionally extinct in the Red Book of the Birds of Spain 2021.

Hugo balances his work as a nature guide for Iduna Tours (idunatours.com/en-gb) with time sharing scientific information and his voluntary service as a bird ringer for the NGO SEO/BirdLife. In 2018, his team

confirmed a visit from an aquatic warbler, one of the "most endangered species and one of the most exciting", on migration. This bird, which weighs only about 10g, makes a trip of around 6,000km from its breeding grounds in Eastern Europe to winter in sub-Saharan areas.

Although it can sometimes take him ten days to capture a single specimen, and occasionally there are years in which no birds are ringed, he describes his contribution to ornithology as "one of the greatest joys".

He cites the moment when his team recorded a Siberian chiffchaff, marking the first sighting of this subspecies in Extremadura.

Within the region, some areas are particularly favourable for certain breeding species – for example, the Arrocampo reservoir. This is the only site in Extremadura with a population of bearded reedling, and the only reservoir in Cáceres province where there is evidence of breeding great bittern and ferruginous pochard, the latter of which is at risk of extinction in Spain.

Extremadura is a land of diverse natural charms. The preservation of its ecosystems was one of the few positive consequences of the lack of industrialisation in a region

historically dominated by agriculture and livestock farming. Partly as a result, it is home to a wide range of Mediterranean birds, some of them considered threatened or of conservation interest, such as the black stork, Bonelli's eagle and steppe birds.

Despite the success of some conservation and endangered birdlife recovery projects in several Special Protection Areas, Hugo believes that there is still much work to be done. He pleads for a more sustainable introduction of renewable energy schemes,

for changes in land management and agricultural subsidies, and for the promotion of sustainable tourism all over Extremadura.

Hugo is also highly self-critical, conscious of his duty as a nature guide to raise ecological awareness among travellers. Through his work leading for Iduna Tours, he aims to contribute by placing great emphasis

on respect for ornithology, and by being rigorous with the data and information provided on these tours.

Extremadura is undoubtedly one of the best birdwatching destinations in Europe – and we are all responsible for preserving the wildlife habitats of these lands that welcome visitors so warmly. ■



Antony Shutterstock