



Protecting precious habitats for birds in Extremadura

The visionary conservation of this wild region's mountains, valleys, meadows, waterways and towns nurtures spectacular avian life – and avid birdwatchers

Words by Emerson Mendoza Ayala

On the leafy slopes of Extremadura's high mountains, in its glacial valleys through which crystalline rivers flow, and across its golden *dehesas* (wooded meadows) rolling on to the distant horizon, silence prevails. Despite its rich natural and cultural heritage, this kaleidoscopic region, nestled between the cork oak groves and vineyards of Portugal and the windmills of La Mancha, goes largely unnoticed – by humans, that is.

Seen through a bird's eyes, though, the diverse landscapes and well-preserved ecosystems of Cáceres and Badajoz – Spain's two largest provinces, which comprise Extremadura – are highly desirable for the 385 avian species recorded here. Indeed, the region has become a sanctuary for species rarely seen in the Iberian Peninsula, such as the Spanish imperial eagle, cinereous vulture, black stork and black-tailed godwit.

In Extremadura, protection of the natural environment is tightly linked to bird conservation. Almost 75% of its territory is classified as Important Bird Areas, including 71 Special Protection Areas for birds (SPAs) covering over 26% of the region.

In addition, EU-financed nature conservation and management projects of the LIFE Programme have contributed to the recovery of various endangered bird species in the Iberian Peninsula by improving their

habitats in Extremadura. For example, the LIFE Iberian Agrosteppes project succeeded in bringing together nature conservationists, livestock breeders and farmers to safeguard steppe birds. More work is needed, though, particularly for species dependent on agricultural environments. In recent years, little bustard numbers have declined by over 60% in La Serena and Sierras Periféricas, Extremadura's largest SPA.

Already, though, the region has led the way in protecting various bird habitats. Recognising that some species now prefer to nest in human constructions – cathedrals and churches, or spaces in other buildings – Extremadura became the first European region to designate as SPAs several of its urban centres hosting nesting colonies of lesser kestrel, one of Spain's smallest breeding birds of prey.

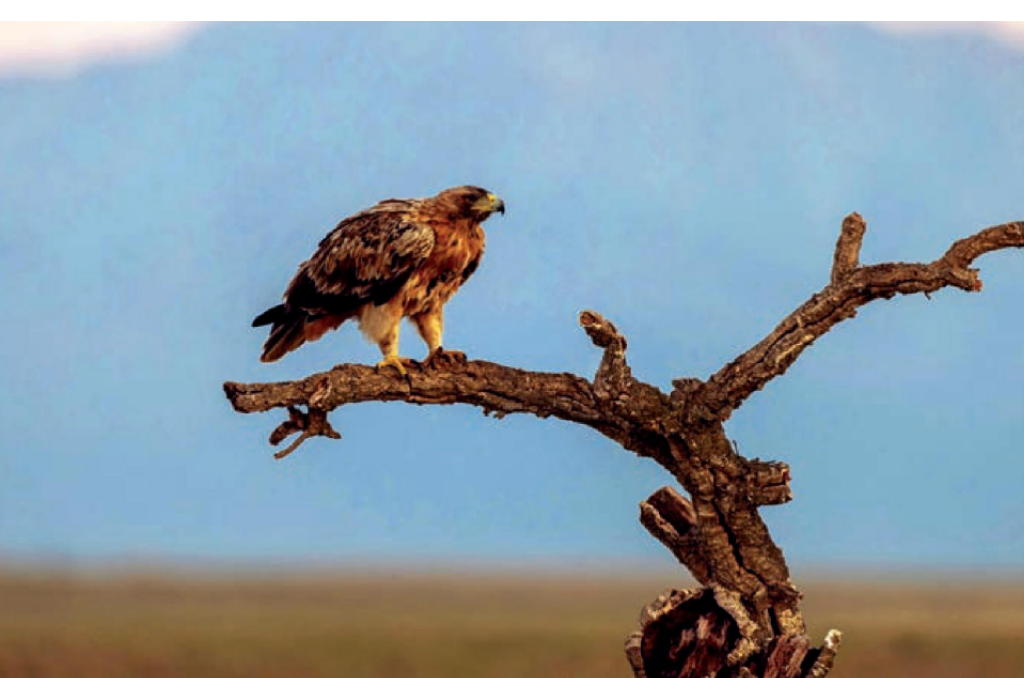
Add the Villuercas-Ibores-Jara UNESCO Global Geopark, three Biosphere Reserves – Monfragüe, Tajo Internacional and La Siberia – and the Protected Landscapes of Monte Valcorchero and Castañar Gallego, and it's clear why Extremadura is the birding paradise of southern Europe.

Extremadura's best birding spots

Venture into the dense chestnut and oak forests among the southern foothills of the imposing Sierra de Gredos, in Extremadura's far north-east, and you'll be serenaded by the murmur of water and the ►

Soaring species
(this page:
left-right) Griffon
vultures are booming in Monfragüe National Park, where more than 600 pairs thrive amid the rocks and forests; spy Iberian magpies in Extremadura's historic capital, Mérida, a rewarding destination for urban birdwatching





Feathered friends (this page: clockwise from top left) Extremadura is a haven for the Spanish imperial eagle; the Peña Falcón crag in Monfragüe hosts a vulture colony; white storks nest on village rooftops; Cáceres' World Heritage-listed Old Town is a great base for birding; Monfragüe's Mediterranean forests are home to profuse birdlife; (right page) rock buntings and bee-eaters provide aural and visual spectacles



whisper of wind through the treetops mingling with the melodious songs of blackcaps, chiffchaffs and nuthatches. Descend from those picturesque highlands into the valleys of La Vera, Jerte and Ambroz to hear the calls of bluethroats and golden orioles (so rarely seen in the UK), and to spot goshawks, European honey-buzzards, Thekla's larks and great cormorants.

Around Plasencia, further to the south, you might spot vultures, buzzards and eagles flying over the area's characteristic cork oaks and glittering granite formations. This is where I grew up, and I remember with nostalgia the croaking of the graceful white storks perched on their nests in the cathedral complex, and the swooping flight of lesser kestrels above the Plaza de San Vicente Ferrer.

The Tagus River snakes around the rocky outcrops of Monfragüe National Park, some 30km south of Plasencia. Standing at the lofty Salto del Gitano lookout in the far west of the park, you might spot Egyptian and griffon vultures, red kites and eagle owls soaring over the Peña Falcón crag. The sight of these majestic birds of prey circling above the 300m cliff, or perching to feed their chicks, is one of Extremadura's most unforgettable images.

Just east of Monfragüe National Park stretches the Arrocampo reservoir, created in the late 1980s to provide cooling water. It now hosts numerous species that relish its warm waters and nest among its abundant bulrushes. It's home to Extremadura's largest populations of purple swamphen, black-crowned night heron and purple heron – indeed, eight species of heron nest here.

The UNESCO World Heritage-listed Old Town of Cáceres makes a memorable base from which to head out birding in the surrounding plains, known as the Llanos de Cáceres, and across the wider province.

La Siberia Biosphere Reserve, in north-east Badajoz province, encompasses vast steppes, dehesas, mountains, Mediterranean forest and irrigated

“Be serenaded by the murmur of water and the whisper of wind through the treetops mingling with the melodious songs of blackcaps and chiffchaffs”

areas. It also features five reservoirs, including La Serena – Spain's largest – and Orellana, a Ramsar site hosting a large colony of gull-billed tern and an estimated 65,000 wintering waterfowl each year. Despite gradual changes in Extremadura's steppe systems, they remain refuges for pin-tailed

and black-bellied sandgrouse, singing calandra larks, nightjars, stone-curlews and bombastic great bustards.

Mérida – another city boasting World Heritage-listed archaeological sites – is considered one of Spain's finest settings for urban birding. From the Roman Bridge over the Guadiana River you can watch swallows, penduline tits, European bee-eaters, black-winged kites, and graceful Iberian magpies flying over the ninth-century Moorish Alcazaba. The capital of Extremadura is also a fine base for exploring the ancient Roman reservoirs of Proserpina and Cornalvo or the rocky Sierra Grande de Hornachos mountains, and for birdwatching in Zafra and quaint villages among the vineyards and olive groves towards the Andalusian border. ■

Need to know

When to go

Birdwatching in Extremadura is wonderful at any time of year.

Mid-autumn to late winter is the best period to see most of the resident and wintering birds, including impressive flocks of **egrets and cranes** feeding and relaxing in the dehesas.

Extremadura Birdwatching Fair is held in Monfragüe National Park each February. At the most important ornithological tourism fair in southern Europe, you can take **guided tours**, attend talks from specialists and enjoy creative **workshops** focused on bird conservation. fioextremadura.es/inicio-english/

Getting there & around

Cáceres, Plasencia, Mérida and Badajoz are all accessible by **bus or train from Madrid**. Buses also run direct from **Lisbon** to Badajoz, Mérida and Cáceres.

Travelling by public transport from cities to villages can be challenging. Ask at bus stations or tourist offices for local timetables, or check the websites of regional transport companies such as **Cevesa** (cevesa.es) and **Leda** (leda.es); another handy website providing information on multiple transport providers is movelia.es/en. Carry cash to pay for services.

Events

Come in spring or summer to enjoy diverse local festivals celebrating the history, culture and exuberant nature of Extremadura.

The **Cherry Blossom Festival**, held in the villages of the Jerte Valley from late March to early April, marks the arrival of these delicate blooms with exhibitions, medieval markets, open-air celebrations and tasting sessions. turismovalledeljerte.com

Martes Mayor, held in Plasencia on the first Tuesday in August, reputedly dates back to the 12th century. Celebrations begin on the Monday night with parades and music. Then, on the Tuesday, the walled centre is transformed into a boisterous medieval market showcasing the best of the area's local produce, particularly vegetables and fruits, while locals dance to the music of the flute and the tambourine.

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. ■

“Extremadura is home to a range of Mediterranean birds, some threatened, including the black stork and Bonelli’s eagle”



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

