

# **The RAFOS Expedition to the Coto Doñana, Spain**

**11th October – 1st November 2014**

Karen Sims and John Towers visited the Coto Doñana, Andalucía, in 2013 and from this visit the idea arose of a RAFOS field visit to the area. Through a number of conservationist and ornithological contacts in Spain discussions were held by Karen concerning a RAFOS team undertaking voluntary conservation and survey tasks in the general area. Difficulties were encountered in that the Spanish appeared to lack comprehension of volunteer participation such that these offers were largely rejected. One reserve, the Dehesa de Abajo, lying just outside of the Coto Doñana, did take up the offer and it became the focus of our efforts. Other activities included surveying for Little Bustards and the contributing of our records to the Spanish Atlas project. On this basis the expedition went ahead and a schedule of activities was drawn up.

A total of 15 members spent from one to three weeks on the expedition, travelling via Faro in Portugal and were based in the Pequeño Rocio hotel in El Rocio. This was a good hotel to be based in. The facilities were suitable, food was very good and the couple running the hotel were very friendly and helpful although not having any English. The team had very little Spanish but we all managed to make ourselves understood and good relationships were established. Over the three-week period the evening meal was different each day with the only repetition being a dessert repeated once and a barbecue held twice, the barbecues being particularly appreciated. Unfortunately the hotel was some distance from the Dehesa de Abajo reserve, where our conservation work was undertaken, necessitating a journey of upwards of 45 minutes each way. Four cars were hired at Faro airport to facilitate transporting the team and baggage and for general travel around the Doñana area.

El Rocio is a rather unusual village in that it slumbers for most of the year and comes to life for a couple of weeks around Pentecost when literally hundreds of thousands of pilgrims arrive for the annual festival of the Romeria de El Rocio with focus upon the Ermita de la Virgen del Rocio. While the festival is ongoing the Coto Doñana visitor centres are understood to be closed.

The village has no paved streets or pavements, except for the main road passing to the side of the village; all is sand and is geared for horses. The large brotherhood residences, some with integral stables, were mostly closed up and very few local people were present while we were there. It is a very interesting place to visit.

The weather during the first week was variable with temperatures in the middling 20's and some rain. The remaining two weeks were characterised by dry weather, clear skies and cold nights and with daytime maximum temperatures ranging from 29 to 36 deg C. The dryness of these two weeks allowed the high temperatures to be more bearable than otherwise may have been the case. Sunrise was at approximately 08:30 and sunset at around 19:30 and then 1 hour earlier from the 26<sup>th</sup> October. With breakfast being taken from 08:00 we commenced our activities at 09:00. By nightfall most of us were ready for refreshments followed by dinner at 20:30. There were numerous flies and midges particularly on the rice fields and a considerable number of bites were received. For anyone fond of dragonflies they were in their thousands

(millions probably) again particularly in the rice fields but appeared to be of a limited range of species.

A brief description of the Coto Doñana is appropriate.

It is a huge area of several distinct habitats, it lies to the south-west of Seville and south-east of Huelva and is generally bounded to the east by the Guadalquivir River, to the north by farmland, to the west in the main by the El Rocio – Matalascañas road and to the south-west by the Atlantic Ocean.

The area was originally formed as the delta of the Guadalquivir River but its subsidiary streams have silted up and there now remains just one exit of the river into the Atlantic.

A huge sand-dune system extending up from the mouth of the Guadalquivir towards Huelva forms the south-west boundary and is a key feature, extensive Cork Oak and Stone Pine forests are also key features but the primary habitat is the marismas (marshes) which flood in winter by rainwater but which vary considerably in wetness over the course of the year. During our visit they were largely dry as they usually are for most of the summer.

In the 1500's or earlier the area became a hunting preserve of the kings of Spain and of the dukes of Medina Sidonia. It is believed that Doña Ana, wife of one Duke of Medina Sidonia (possibly the unfortunate Admiral leading the Armada in 1588) founded a hunting lodge in a remote part of the marismas leading to the area becoming known as the Coto (estate) of Doñana. This lodge became the Palacio de Doñana and it is now a biological research station but it is closed to the public.

In the late 1800's naturalists started to visit the area and began to realise its potential as a major wildlife refuge. The reports from a series of three expeditions by British, French, Spanish and American conservationists and ornithologists in the 1950's plus the commitment of the visionary landowner, sherry producer and ornithologist Don Mauricio González-Gordon and ornithologist José Antonio Valverde lead to the establishment of a reserve. This was subsequently expanded by purchases of land by the Spanish government and the WWF. The present reserve, including extensive buffer zones, covers some 1300 sq kilometres. In the last 20 years or so it has become recognised as a World Heritage Site.

The Coto Doñana reserve proper (Park National) is of restricted access so allowing largely undisturbed conditions for the large range of animal species using the reserve throughout the year and in particular for certain rare breeding species. Four visitor centres on the periphery of the reserve, with free access, provide a flavour of the Park National.

There are four-hour guided tours into the reserve proper by large SUVs from the El Acebuche visitor centre but that is about all. These are not considered as suitable for birdwatching. This centre, some 12km south of El Rocio, houses the administration of the overall reserve and is well worth visiting but its wetland areas had completely dried up by the time of our visit. It is very good for close views of Iberian Magpies (formerly known as Azure-winged Magpie) and held good numbers of Dartford Warblers, Firecrests, Crested Tits and Black Redstarts, etc, and would be good for marshland species when there is some water. Numerous good hides are provided. It also houses a captive breeding centre for the Iberian Lynx, the iconic species of the Doñana.

A very unexpected bird turned up while the team were having lunch at this visitor centre. The "funny looking sparrow" turned out to be an adult Alpine Accentor which

initially looked tired and lethargic but then hopped around the visitor centre courtyard close to our tables. This species is a rare visitor to the Coto Doñana and is usually found in high montane areas, as its name would suggest.

The smaller La Rocina visitor centre, which lies immediately south of El Rocio, is also well worth visiting but its wetland areas were almost dry. At El Rocio the large lagoon on the southern edge of the village remained with a good deal of water and attracted a fair range of birds so it was very popular during our free time. This lagoon is within the boundary of the main reserve and the marismas extend from the lagoon east and southeast for many miles. There is also a visitor centre there, which boasts a rooftop viewing area.

The fourth visitor centre is the José Antonio Valverde centre lying some 10 - 11 km south-east of El Rocio as the crow flies but is about 60km by road. This latter centre is way out into the marismas and when they are under water it should be a tremendous place to visit.

The buffer zone (Park Natural) around the main reserve is of much less restricted access and can hold a similar range of birds as are found on the main reserve. The buffer zone merges in the northeast and east into extensive rice fields and some cotton fields in the area of the Dehesa de Abajo and Isla Mayor. Rice production commenced in the early 1970's much to the alarm of conservationists. However the presence of water in the rice fields for most of the year allows breeding of amphibians, crayfish and numerous insects, etc, which in turn attract a wide range of birds.

Harvesting of the rice mostly occurs in October-November at which time each harvested field immediately becomes a magnet for hordes of herons, egrets, storks, ibises, waders, gulls and numerous harriers. A day or so later they may all have moved on to another field. The earlier fears of conservationists appear not to have materialised except perhaps in the case of water usage. It is quite probable that the dryness of the marismas while we were there meant that most of these species were out in the buffer zone and in particular on the rice fields and in the irrigation streams and ditches and not on the main reserve. We seemed to be quite fortunate in that during our visit the harvesting was taking place close to the roads. The invasive Louisiana crayfish, which has severely impacted upon the indigenous species, is now a key food source for the birds within the rice fields.

The team's conservation activities were centred upon the Dehesa de Abajo, which lies some 35km north-east of El Rocio in an area largely comprising of rice and cotton farming. The reserve has an extensive, shallow lake, which attracts large numbers of ducks, waders and flamingos. It also has large Cork Oak and Stone Pine woodlands where Booted Eagles and Spanish Imperial Eagles breed along with shrikes, warblers, etc. White Storks nest there in Wild Olive trees in considerable numbers. Marbled Duck also breed there in small numbers. A pleasant and welcoming visitor centre provides very good facilities. From this centre, which sits on a low hill, there are good views across the lagoon and woodlands and also across the rice fields out to the horizon.

The team conducted a number of counts of the various bird species present on the lagoon and also counts of stork nests. Birds noted here by the team included c3000 Greater Flamingos, 2500 Black-winged Stilts, 8300 Shoveler, 250 Avocets and small

numbers of Ruff, Greenshank, Ringed Plover, Red-crested Pochard and a few Marbled Ducks. An approximate total of 283 stork nests were also recorded. The nests survey was conducted on two days, one each in the first and second weeks, by a line of us transecting the woodlands. On the first day 5 members took part and a good high count was achieved. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day 11 members counted in the woods towards the northern edge of the reserve resulting in a very low count, showing that most nests were closer to the lake. In addition two of the ladies surveyed an area to the east of the centre with good results.

A supplementary count was made via a telescope from near the visitor centre across to the far side of the lagoon with a significant number of nests being recorded.

Other birds noted on the reserve included Spanish Imperial Eagle, Golden Eagle, Booted Eagle, Red Kite, Black Kite, Marsh Harrier, White Stork, Black Stork, Iberian Grey Shrike, Woodchat Shrike, Whiskered Tern, Hoopoe, Crested Lark, Northern Wheatear, Dartford Warbler, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Fan-tailed Warbler, Sardinian Warbler and Black Redstart.

A useful and very satisfying activity undertaken by the team was the cleaning up of a particular area of the reserve that had been used as a dumping ground for farming type materials by previous owners/users of the land. This activity was carried out on the 15<sup>th</sup> October and again on the 22<sup>nd</sup> October. As it turned out we had chosen the hottest day (22<sup>nd</sup>) for this activity when it reached about 35-36degC but it was completed satisfactorily. Whilst lifting a large crumpled piece of brown plastic sheeting a rather nasty looking spider emerged. It quickly disappeared and was not identified. The reserve manager noted later that the local mayor had undertaken to arrange removal of the piles of rubbish that we had built up.

The reserve manager Beltran de Ceballos Vasquez warmly applauded our contributions to conservation activities on the Dehesa de Abajo. A television film crew were present on one occasion to film us doing our bit and to interview Beltran. The filming was a part of a programme covering conservation activities in Spain, Italy and Lebanon with a focus on the conflicts of human needs, water utilisation pressures, farming and wildlife needs.

In the uncut crops in rice fields close to the reserve a large group of Yellow-crowned Bishops were seen, of which three males were quite stunning, one or two Black-headed Weavers were also seen with them. These are invasive African species which have a toe-hold in southern Spain. A sprinkling of Black Storks was noted in this general area, which were very good to see but they were quite wary. They tend to be passage migrants and winter visitors to the Doñana.

On the way to the Dehesa one morning, on stopping at a rice field four chicken-sized birds in silhouette were seen some 500 metres away. On returning later in the day their numbers had increased to about 70 then others emerged from a reedbed to total over 100. Through the 'scopes these could be seen as Purple Swamp Hens having blue-purple plumage with a turquoise sheen around the head and neck, bright red bill and legs and white under-tail coverts. They were large compared to Moorhens but were very wary, dashing quickly into the reeds upon the approach of a harrier then creeping back out a few minutes later.

Close to this area the Rio Guadiamar flows through the buffer zone between the Dehesa de Abajo and the Park National and creates a distinct habitat attractive to

raptors, little brown jobs, herons, etc. Particularly noted here were Black-winged Kite, Hen Harrier and Hoopoe.

In 1998 the Doñana was seriously threatened by a very large flow of toxic waste from a breached reservoir at a mining site some way to the north. This flow got into the Rio Guadiamar and severely devastated a large section of the marshes in what is considered as Spain's worst environmental disaster. An international rescue operation was mounted and proved successful such that today it is very difficult to picture the extent of the original devastation.

Also near to the Dehesa de Abajo we recorded sizeable flocks (perhaps several hundred strong) of Glossy Ibis moving around the area. Apparently not that many years ago the Ibis was much scarcer in this part of Spain. Then on the long road around to the José Antonio Valverde visitor centre Purple Heron, Short-toed Eagle, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Booted Eagle, Griffon Vulture and numerous Kestrels and Lesser Kestrels were noted. This Spanish Imperial Eagle, seen and photographed by Dave Bodley, was a faded immature bird, which resembled a Tawny Eagle. Close to this visitor centre Karen's party came upon a horse carcass being devoured by a very large number of Griffon Vultures.

During the first week, on the 13<sup>th</sup> October, a Buff-breasted Sandpiper, a North American species, was found and photographed by the team near the lake in the Dehesa de Abajo. This was potentially the 2<sup>nd</sup> recorded occurrence for Andalucía and the find by RAFOS very much pleased the reserve manager.

The Iberian Magpie, *Cyanopica cooki*, was common in wooded areas and made a very fine sight. It has recently been split as a distinct species from the Azure-winged Magpie, *Cyanopica cyana*, of eastern Asia, (IOC list v4.4).

At El Rocio late one afternoon approximately 130 Griffon Vultures were seen to arrive very high up and land just east of the village. A British birder mentioned that these were most probably part of a large number of Griffons coming in from Portugal in possibly a starving state, several dead birds having been found in the region. It was not clear if they were simply roosting or were attracted to a carcass but they took some considerable time to descend, appearing almost motionless in the sky at times. Other birds of note at El Rocio were several Penduline Tits, Bluethroat, Cetti's Warbler, Spotted Redshank, Black-winged Stilt, Snipe, Flamingo, Grey-lag Goose, Pintail, Great, Little and Cattle Egrets, Spoonbill, a party of Waxbills, Iberian Grey Shrike, Osprey, Marsh Harrier and a couple of Spanish Imperial Eagles.

On two Sundays arrangements were made to join a local bird guide, Manu Mojarro, for a day on the Odiel marshes at Huelva and a day in the hills to the north of Seville. Both days were hugely enjoyable and rewarding with this friendly, engaging and informative guy whose knowledge of local history was also appreciated.

On the first Sunday eight members of the team joined Manu. The salt-pans on the Odiel marshes held Great and Little Egrets and various waders plus Caspian Terns, Slender-billed Gulls, Ospreys and Stone Curlews. We moved further down the marsh and onto the Isla de Saltes and to a long breakwater protecting the port of Huelva. On the opposite bank of the River Odiel here is the area from where Columbus sailed on his first epic voyage of discovery in 1492. These marshlands are an excellent place

for birds, which included large numbers of Audouin's Gulls and a few Kentish Plovers, Grey Plover, Iberian Grey Shrike, Whimbrel, Curlew and Sandwich Terns. Audouin's Gulls are making a strong comeback in this area from a perilous situation of not many years ago. A conservation success story here.

On that day we also visited the Laguna del Portil where Manu knew that a Mediterranean Chameleon should be present. We tumbled out of the vehicle and there was a bright green adult, extremely well camouflaged in a bush, about 6 feet in front of us. One or two young ones were in a neighbouring bush. Also present on the Laguna were a party of 13 Little Stints and 4 Black-necked Grebes plus Little Grebes, Pochard, Avocets, etc.

The following Sunday the whole team were with Manu this time to the north of Seville in the hills above Guadalcanal. An Egyptian Mongoose was seen scampering across the road whilst in the skies were Griffon Vultures plus a distant Black Vulture, a couple of Golden Eagles grappling in flight, several Spanish Imperial Eagles and also a Hen Harrier which was quartering the fields. Corn Buntings were numerous and the opportunity occurred of comparing Crested and Thekla Larks side-by-side. On the return journey a party of 4 Great Bustards were seen at sunset to the west of Seville.

One afternoon (21<sup>st</sup> Oct) we called in at Matalascañas on the coast but there was very little by way of seabirds except for one skua on the water several hundred yards out. Michael Chatfield duly swam out towards it but it soon flew and revealed itself as a Great Skua. We fully understood Michael's decision to return to shore some distance away from us. Meanwhile those remaining on top of the low cliffs found a winter plumaged Spanish Sparrow amongst the party of sparrows there.

And then the time arrived to return home. It had been a tiring, intensive visit but very satisfying. The objectives had been generally met although the planned Little Bustard survey was inconclusive, the management of the Dehesa de Abajo reserve were well pleased with our efforts and the reputation of RAFOS was enhanced. A large number of bird species had been recorded and many on the team had a number of "lififers" to add to their individual tallies. On the last Friday evening of the visit we took our leave of our hosts at the hotel, Juan and Maria, and most of us departed for Faro airport before dawn on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November but with Dave and Linda Munday leaving later that day.

#### References:

Portrait of a Wilderness, the story of the Coto Doñana expeditions (of 1952, 1956 and 1957). Guy Mountfort, Hutchinson. 1958

A Birdwatching Guide to Doñana. John Butler. Trafford. 2007

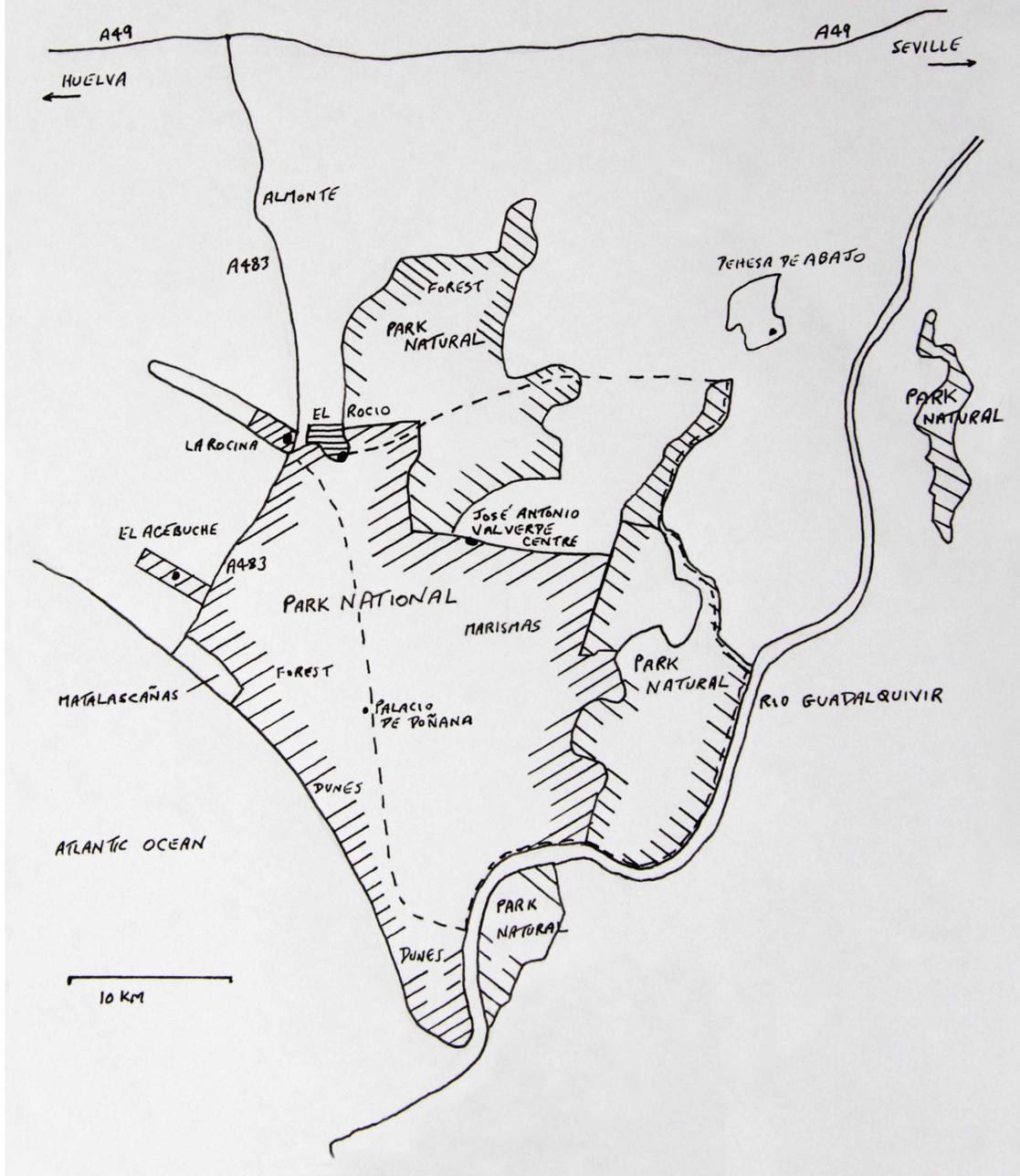
International Ornithological Committee (IOC) World Bird List v4.4

Team members:

Karen Sims	11 Oct – 01 Nov	Leader
John Towers	11 Oct – 01 Nov	
Pete Evans	11 Oct – 01 Nov	
Mick Carroll	11 Oct – 01 Nov	
Keith Cowieson	11 Oct – 18 Oct	
Al Jordan	11 Oct – 25 Oct	
Michael Chatfield	17 Oct – 25 Oct	
John Orme	18 Oct – 25 Oct	
Dave Bodley	18 Oct – 01 Nov	
Anne Bodley	18 Oct – 01 Nov	
Dick Yates	18 Oct – 01 Nov	
Ken Earnshaw	18 Oct – 01 Nov	
Sally Earnshaw	18 Oct – 01 Nov	
Dave Munday	21 Oct – 01 Nov	
Linda Munday	21 Oct – 01 Nov	

Ken Earnshaw  
3 March 2015

SKETCH MAP OF THE DOÑANA AREA



SKETCH MAP OF THE OPIEL MARSHES, HUELVA

