



CROSSBILL NATURE GUIDES

Extremadura

SPAIN



24 ROUTES
22 SITES
WILDLIFE
LANDSCAPE
FLORA AND FAUNA
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CROSSBILL NATURE GUIDES

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Spain

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Dirk Hilbers

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CROSSBILL GUIDES FOUNDATION

This guidebook is a product of the non-profit foundation Crossbill Guides. By publishing these books we want to introduce more people to the joys of Europe's beautiful natural heritage and to increase the understanding of the ecological values that underlie conservation efforts. Most of this heritage is protected for ecological reasons and we want to provide insight into these reasons to the public at large. By doing so we hope that more people support the ideas behind nature conservation. For more information about us and our guides you can visit our website at: crossbillguides.org

About this guide

This guide is meant for all those who enjoy being in and learning about nature, whether you already know all about it or not. It is set up a little differently from most guides. We focus on explaining the natural and ecological features of an area rather than merely describing the site. We choose this approach because the nature of an area is more interesting, enjoyable and valuable when seen in the context of its complex relationships. The interplay of different species with each other and with their environment is astonishing. The clever tricks and gimmicks that are put to use to beat life's challenges are as fascinating as they are countless.

Take our namesake the Crossbill: at first glance it's just a big finch with an awkward bill. But there is more to the Crossbill than meets the eye. This bill is beautifully adapted for life in coniferous forests. It is used like scissors to cut open pinecones and eat the seeds that are unobtainable for other birds. In the Scandinavian countries where Pine and Spruce take up the greater part of the forests, several Crossbill species have each managed to answer two of life's most pressing questions: how to get food and avoid direct competition. By evolving crossed bills, each differing subtly, they have secured a monopoly of the seeds produced by cones of varying sizes. So complex is this relationship that scientists are still debating exactly how many different species of Crossbill actually exist. Now this should heighten the appreciation of what at first glance was merely a plump bird with a beak that doesn't close properly. Once its interrelationships are seen, nature comes alive, wherever you are.

To some, impressed by the virtual familiarity that television has granted to the wilderness of the Amazon, the vastness of the Serengeti or the sublimity of Yellowstone, European nature may seem a puny surrogate, good merely for the casual stroll. In short, the argument seems to be that if you haven't seen a Jaguar, Lion or Grizzly Bear, then you haven't seen the "real thing". Nonsense, of course.

But where to go? And how? What is there to see? That is where this guide comes in. We describe the how, the why, the when, the where and the how come of Europe's most beautiful areas. In clear and accessible language, we explain the nature of Extremadura and refer extensively to routes where the area's features can be observed best. We try to make Extremadura come alive. We hope that we succeed.

How to use this guide

This guidebook contains a descriptive and a practical section. The descriptive part comes first and gives you insight into the most striking and interesting natural features of the area. It provides an understanding of what you will see when you go out exploring. The descriptive part consists of a landscape section (marked with a blue bar), describing the habitats, the history and the landscape in general, and of a flora and fauna section (marked with an orange bar), which discusses the plants and animals that occur in the region.

The second part offers the practical information (marked with a green bar). A series of sites and routes (walks and car drives) are carefully selected to give you a good flavour of all the habitats, flora and fauna that Extremadura has to offer. At the start of each route description, a number of icons give a quick overview of the characteristics of each route. These icons are explained in the margin of this page. The final part of the book provides some basic tourist information and some tips on finding plants, birds and other animals.

There is no need to read the book from cover to cover. Instead, each small chapter stands on its own and refers to the routes most suitable for viewing the particular features described in it. Conversely, descriptions of each route refer to the chapters that explain more in depth the most typical features that can be seen along the way.

In the back of the guide we have included a list of all the mentioned plant and animal species, with their scientific names and translations into German and Dutch. Some species names have an asterisk (*) following them. This indicates that there is no official English name for this species

and that we have taken the liberty of coining one. We realise this will meet with some reservations by those who are familiar with scientific names. For the sake of readability however, we have decided to translate the scientific name, or, when this made no sense, we gave a name that best describes the species' appearance or distribution. Please note that we do not want to claim these as the official names. We merely want to make the text easier to follow for those not familiar with scientific names. An overview of the area described in this book is given on the map on page 15. For your convenience we have also turned the inner side of the back flap into a map of the area indicating all the described routes. Descriptions in the explanatory text refer to these routes.

Icons used to characterise the routes and to show the key interest:

-  1 Waypoint
-  Car route
-  Walk
-  Scenery
-  Geology
-  History
-  Ecology
-  Flora
-  Mammals
-  Birds
-  Reptiles / amphibians
-  Butterflies
-  Dragonflies
-  Invertebrates

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*The names and locations of the additional sites are shown in the map in the back cover.



LANDSCAPE

Paradise. That is the shortest description of Extremadura in spring. Old, majestic oaks in a rolling green carpet of pasture. Little lambs frolicking through endless orchards, their mothers standing knee-deep in wild-flowers. In the pools, happy black pigs are up to their bellies in mud. Little ribbons of white flowers dangle from their snouts. A stork glides down to its nest on an old church, where it is greeted by its partner and the rest of the stork community, numbering a dozen or more.

Welcome to Extremadura, where the partnership between People and Nature still seems harmonious.

Extremadura is a remote region in western Spain, bordering Portugal. Its rugged and infertile soil kept it on the periphery of civilisation for a long time. It was scorned by the Spanish and disregarded by the rest of the world. But this attitude has taken a 180-degree turn since ecotourism became in vogue. And with good reason, for the region has great things in store for all sorts of travellers, both domestic and foreign.

If you enjoy birdwatching, Extremadura offers you skies filled with eagles and vultures, and steppes alive with bustards and sandgrouse. If you love to search for beautiful flora, the extravagant number of Mediterranean wildflowers will dazzle you, especially in the mountains. In the endless orchards and along the flower-fringed streams you'll find yourself in the Garden of Eden. Nearby rocky mountain slopes and merciless steppes show a beauty of a more rugged kind. Remote regions invite you for a hike, and in the evening, you can quietly enjoy a wonderful meal in an old plaza while watching the geckos hunt around the streetlights attached to medieval houses and palaces.

Extremadura is a rollercoaster for every nature lover not only astonishing in its diversity but also in its genesis. If you have come to see a wilderness without a trace of human influence, you have chosen the wrong spot. The majority of Extremadura's valuable natural areas evolved through the interaction between the land and its inhabitants. This makes the region into a must-see example of the way nature and culture can enhance each other.

This nature guide will introduce you to the natural splendours of this beautiful region, explain the mechanisms behind them, and direct you to the best places to witness it all for yourself.

There are few landscapes as picturesque as the Extremaduran dehesa in spring.

a loose scatter of large farmsteads called *fincas*. Villages can be over 30 kilometres apart. The in-between areas take the form of empty steppes, vast *dehesas* (oak orchards, see page 23) and rough mountain ranges.

The autonomous region of Extremadura consists of two provinces: Badajoz in the south and Cáceres in the north. The routes and sites in the second half of this book are also divided per province: Cáceres is treated on page 124 to 203, while page 204 to 243 are dedicated to Badajoz.

Two large rivers drain Extremadura. Both flow from east to west but are very different in character. The Tagus (*Tajo*) drains most of Cáceres Province. It has steep and rocky margins and is dammed over its entire length, effectively making it a string of reservoirs. Important tributaries of the Tagus are the Jerte, Tiétar, Almonte and Alagón rivers. The Tagus reaches the Atlantic near Lisbon.

In Badajoz Province, the Guadiana is the defining river. It enters the province in the scarcely populated east where there are several very large reservoirs, but further west it becomes a sluggish river that flows through a large, fertile lowland. Extremadura's capital Mérida lies on the banks of the Guadiana, as does the region's largest town, Badajoz, which is on the Portuguese border. From there on, the Guadiana turns south and roughly remains on or close to the border until it reaches the Atlantic. The Guadiana is shallow with lots of islands, riverine forests and reedbeds, which collectively forms Extremadura's largest wetland.

With the exception of the Guadiana valley and, just south of it, the region of Los Barros, Extremadura has a poor and rocky soil. The Variscan bedrock (see geology chapter) is never far below the surface so there hardly is any soil. This is a defining characteristic of Extremadura – the poor soils and hot Mediterranean climate make the extensive pasture-woodlands known as *dehesas* (see page 23) the most successful type of land use. This landscape is renowned for its wildlife. Everywhere in this rolling lowlands there are low and rocky sierras which are the result of folding of the old strata in ancient tectonic movements. This combination of warm and rocky ranges, alternating with rolling pastureland and narrow engorged river valleys are what give Extremadura its unique landscape.

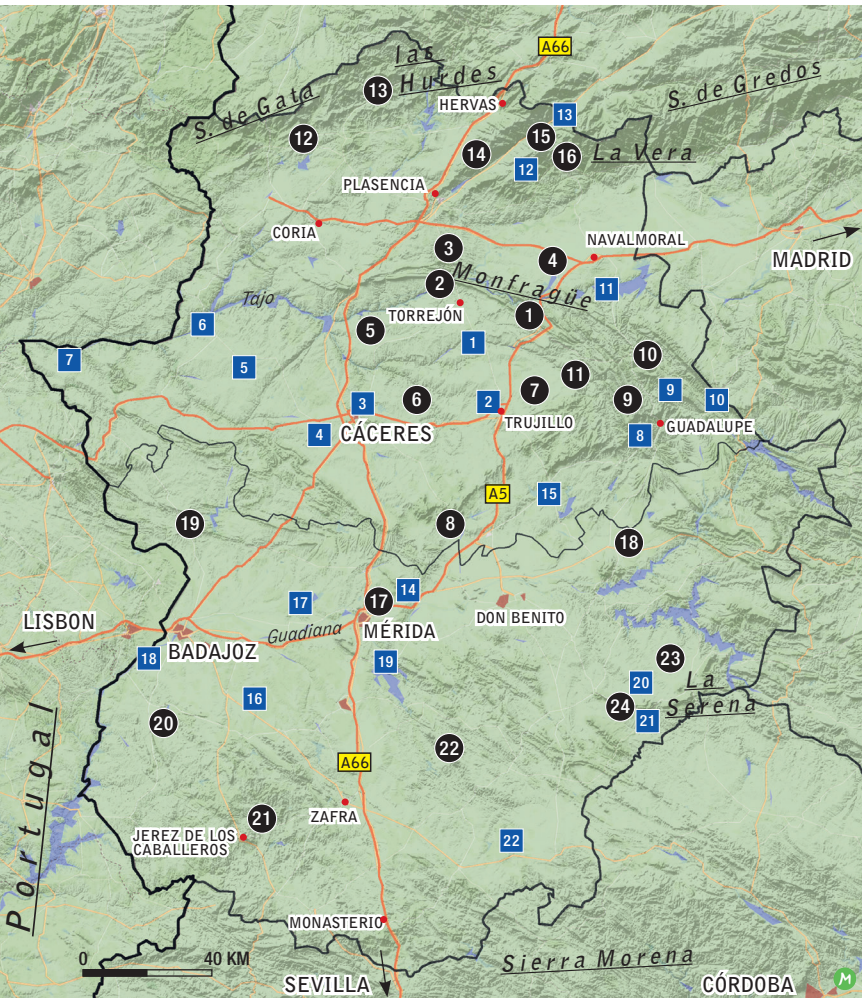
The beating heart of Extremadura (from a naturalist's point of view) is Monfragüe National Park (routes 1, 2 and 3) between the towns of Plasencia, Cáceres and Trujillo. Monfragüe is also a 'biosphere reserve'. It comprises a small and rocky mountain range along the Tagus river. Monfragüe lies like a rocky island in a sea of Mediterranean *dehesa*, which stretches out in all directions for kilometres on end (routes 1 and 4 to 6).

Towards the north they merge with the foothills of the Sistema Central, with, from west to east, the Sierra de Gata (route 12), Las Hurdes (route 13), Valle del Ambroz, Traslasierra and Valle de Jerte (route 14) and La Vera (routes 15 and 16). Towards the southeast the *dehesas* give way to the

Opposite page:
Overview of
Extremadura.
The numbers refer to
the routes from page
124 onwards. The
blue letters are sites
in Cáceres Province
(pages 196-203); the
red are sites in the
province of Badajoz
(pages 237-243).

Sierra de las Villuercas (routes 9 to 11), which is larger and more rugged than Monfragüe.

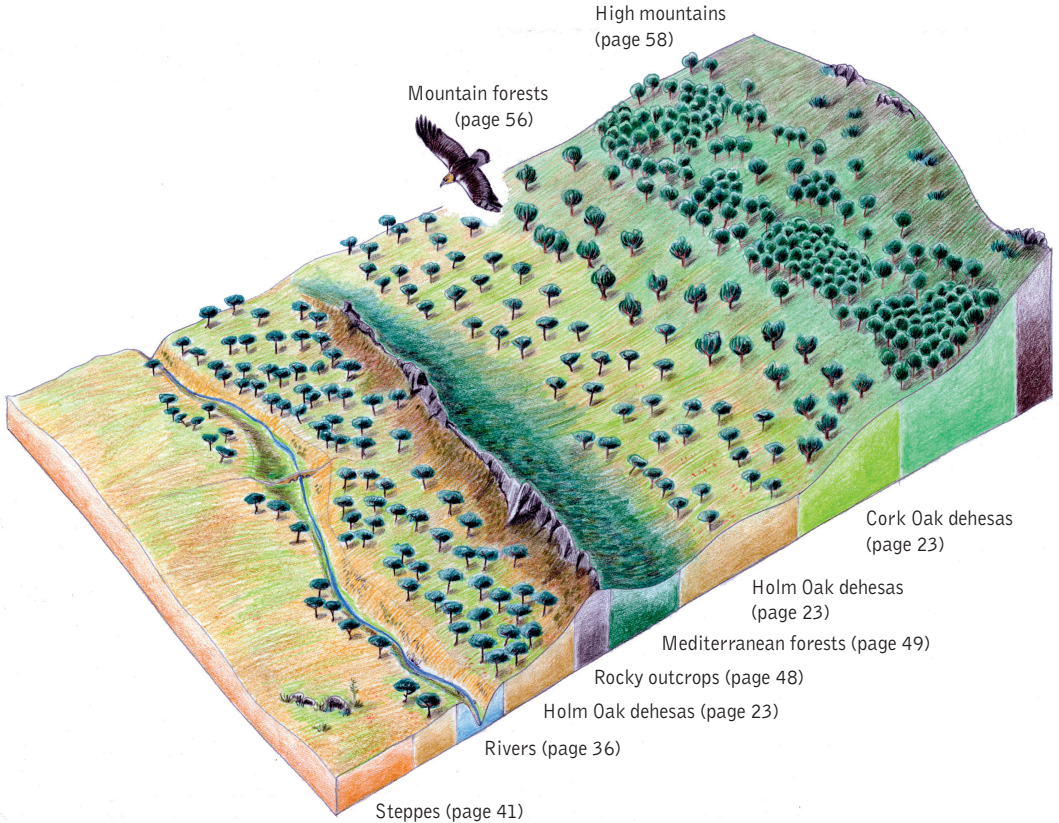
South and west of Monfragüe, the plains with dehesas are broken by large areas of steppe. These plains are known as the Llanos de Cáceres (route 5, 6 and 7). Cáceres and Trujillo are the major towns in this area. South of Cáceres lies a long, east-west mountain range, which separates the province of Cáceres with that of Badajoz. The western part of these mountains are known as the Sierra de San Pedro (route 19) and the east the Sierra de Montánchez (route 8).



brings up a truckload of new questions. The fascinating thing about unravelling Oscar Wilde's mystery is that it makes a lot more visible. That is, it enables you to find plants and animals and to discover principles and processes that would otherwise have remained hidden to you. With all of this in mind, this guidebook has been organised around the habitats of Extremadura, from the high mountains in the north, with their broom fields and Pyrenean Oak forests, to the cork and holm oak dehesas in the lowlands. The steppes and river valleys, the wetlands and the rocky outcrops also receive ample attention.

The routes we suggest to you have been carefully chosen to give the best possible introduction to all the habitats in the region, thereby optimising your chances of seeing all the plants and animals.

Schematic cross-section of the habitats of Extremadura, from the mountains of La Vera to the steppes on the plain.



Dehesa

Extensive Holm Oak dehesas are part of the landscape of routes 1, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 14, 18, 19 and 21, plus sites 1, 5 and 7 on pages 196-199 and sites 14 and 16 on pages 237-239. Old Cork Oak dehesas feature on routes 1, 9, 19 and 21 plus site 14 on page 237. Narrow-leaved Ash dehesas we found on routes 1, 14 and 21, and pasturelands with old Pyrenean Oaks are present on route 14.

Pick any road or track around the Monfragüe National Park. Go from Torrejón to Serradilla. Or to Monroy or to Jaraicejo. Gnarled oak trunks curl out from behind ancient stone walls, peppered with foxglove and asphodel. Above the gentle breeze you hear Hoopoes calling and Thekla's Larks singing from several directions. A squadron of Griffon Vultures glide by, directly followed by a Short-toed Eagle (or two).

This is not an exaggeration, but a real image of the dehesas of Extrema-dura: a paradise for naturalists.

What are dehesas?

The rolling, tree-dotted hills and plains of Extremadura are called dehesas. They undoubtedly form the most typical and special landscape of Extremadura and never fail to impress the visitor.

That said, the dehesa landscape is hard to define. There are no good comparisons with better known landscapes that really catch the essence of the dehesa. Sometimes they are called Mediterranean forests

The dehesa, a rolling parkland with evergreen oaks, is Extremadura's most typical landscape.



or woodlands, but that is not quite right. There are only few dehesas that are so densely covered with trees that they really resemble a forest. In scientific circles they are referred to as Mediterranean savannah, which comes closer. However, this is still not quite satisfactory, because the vast majority of dehesas are not as spacious and open as the only savannah that is most familiar to us all, the African savannah. Most dehesas are also rather more lush and colourful, and have a more secluded feel.

Dehesas in Extremadura consist predominantly of Holm Oak, which is replaced by Cork Oak on the richer, more humid soils at the base of the mountains. Occasionally, you can also encounter dehesas consisting of Portuguese and Pyrenean Oaks and, more rarely, Narrow-leaved Ash. These oddly orchard-like stands of oak cover 1.43 million hectares, about a third of the land of Extremadura, but are rare outside the region except for in adjacent Andalucía and Portugal. Extremadura holds about 35% of the world's dehesas and is therefore called the 'heartland' of the dehesa.

The perfect man-nature hybrid

Dehesas are not a natural landscape free from human influence. On the contrary, the dehesa is moulded, modelled, shaped and modified over centuries of hard country life.

The change from the original forest cover to the more open dehesa happened slowly and long ago (see page 61). Since then, changes have been relatively minor. Of course, the dehesa has seen many shifts in ownership increases and decreases in livestock densities and so on, but these hardly compare to the transition to agriculture made in central Europe during the last century. Extremadura's soil simply cannot support intensive agriculture – it is too thin. (Although socio-



Roughly half of Extremadura's surface is covered by dehesas. From the many low mountain ranges, you have excellent views over these vast Mediterranean savannahs (route 20).



A Cork Oak dehesa north of Monfragüe (top). On average, Cork Oak dehesas are found on richer and damper soils and support an attractive flora. Two plants to look out for are Lusitanian Spreading Bellflower (centre) and Pink Butterfly Orchid (bottom).

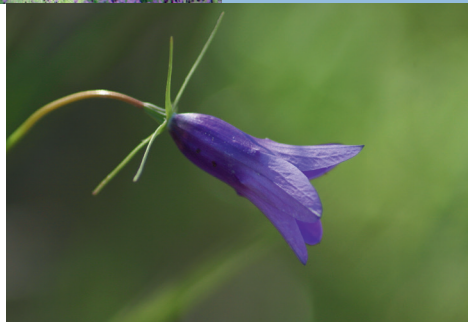
economic changes in the second half of the 20th century did change the face of the dehesa to some extent; see page 65).

As a result, management of the dehesas leaves a prominent role for natural processes. During the gradual conversion from forest to dehesa, nature was able to adapt to mankind's changes so that species could co-exist in harmony with traditional human agricultural practices. Today, the dehesas support a number of very rare and endangered animals, such as the Spanish Imperial Eagle and Black Vulture, as well as numerous others that are becoming increasingly rare in other areas in Europe.

How do dehesas work?

The dehesa ecosystem revolves around the establishment and disappearance of pasture. If you were to photograph a single dehesa over the years, you would see it change from a loosely planted cereal field into a pasture and then into scrubland (see illustration on page 31).

The traditional system of land use is simple. Grain is sown every four to ten years with barley, wheat and – on very poor soils – oats as the dominant crops. They serve primarily as animal fodder. The thin layer of soil can produce only one harvest, then it is exhausted, turned to pasture and left to recover.





FLORA AND FAUNA

While hikers, travellers and those searching for tranquillity are just beginning to find their way to Extremadura, birdwatchers, wildlife photographers and naturalists discovered the region decades ago. To them, Extremadura ranks among the top destinations in Europe. This is in part due to the large areas of relatively unscathed habitats which harbour good numbers of species that are scarce in many other areas in Europe. But it is also because of the nature of the flora and fauna itself. The position of Extremadura on a crossroads of two major biological realms, that of the Atlantic and that of the Mediterranean, gives rise to a specific biodiversity that can only be labelled, well, Extremaduran.

Mediterranean species dominate the flora and fauna of the region. Sardinian Warbler, Blue Rock Thrush, Short-toed Eagle, Strawberry Tree, Tongue Orchid, Two-tailed Pasha and Montpellier Snake are all examples of Mediterranean 'life forms'.

The Pyrenees to the north and the Atlas Mountains in Morocco to the south formed great barriers that limited the spread of species. Since the Moroccan and Andalucian mountains were once part of the same geological system, many of the species found in southern Spain today, are also present in northern Africa. Among the birds that are found on both sides of the Straits and occur in Extremadura are Black Wheatear and Thekla's Lark. Many more examples are to be found in the flora and among the reptiles and amphibians (e.g. Iberian Water Frog, Spanish Terrapin and Ocellated Lizard).

Looking at the distribution maps of these species, it is soon clear that what is loosely called 'Ibero-African' is in fact a collection of overlapping ranges, corresponding with barriers within this region. Some species never crossed the Pyrenees, whilst others spread across southern France, but were stopped by the Alps in the east and the colder climate towards the north (Ocellated Lizard and Champagne Orchid fit this category). Extremadura's most typical wildflower, the Gum Cistus, ranges from the French Cote d'Azur over Iberia and into Morocco and Algeria. Others crossed the Straits of Gibraltar. What they all do have in common though, is that they never made it into the eastern Mediterranean. 'Trapped' in this relatively small region, they evolved here to give this part of the world its distinct nature.

The Azure-winged Magpie is one of Extremadura's iconic birds: beautiful, noisy, curious and conspicuous. It is widespread and numerous within the region, but a rarity on a global scale. It occurs only in the centre and southwest of the Iberian Peninsula.

The Portuguese Laurel is an ancient relict from the Tertiary era, when the climate was damp and warm. It survives in moist gorges in the Sierra de las Villuercas (e.g. route 10).



Within this broad Ibero-African region, Extremadura, together with southern Portugal and western Andalucía, forms a very special area. This south-western corner of the Peninsula forms a lowland (the northern and central mesetas are much higher) defined by humid winds from the Atlantic that empty out over mountains in the north and east, such as the Sierra de Gata, the Sierra de Gredos and the Sierra de las Villuercas.

This Atlantic slant to the Mediterranean world of Extremadura is very much in evidence in the flora and fauna. One could even say it is the defining characteristic of southwestern

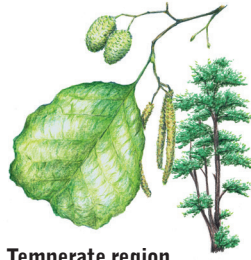
Iberian Peninsula. These conditions are found only in Extremadura, southern Portugal and western Andalucía. This ecoregion coincides with an old Roman province and so borrows its name, *Lusitania*. Emblematic species like Spanish Imperial Eagle and Azure-winged Magpie are restricted to this region (although the former probably once occurred more widely). Also, the Iberian Lynx, although extremely rare in Extremadura, broadly resides in this blessed part of the peninsula. As can be expected, the number of Lusitanian plants is very high – you'll find the name *lusitanica* in many scientific names, such as *Colchicum lusitanicum* and *Iris lusitanica*.

The story so far is as it pertains to the lowlands of Extremadura. The region's mountains are an even more complex hodgepodge of influences. In particular, the higher mountains, such as those of La Vera, form a retreat for plants of temperate Europe that got 'stuck' here after the last Ice Age ended and the temperatures rose throughout the continent. Silver Birch and Alder are examples of very unexpected Extremaduran plants. At the same time however, these northern 'islands' in the hot lowland plains, were and remain the perfect places for new species to evolve, of which Gredos' Snapdragon* (*Antirrhinum grossi*) and Gredos' Gentian* (*Gentiana boryi*) are two examples.

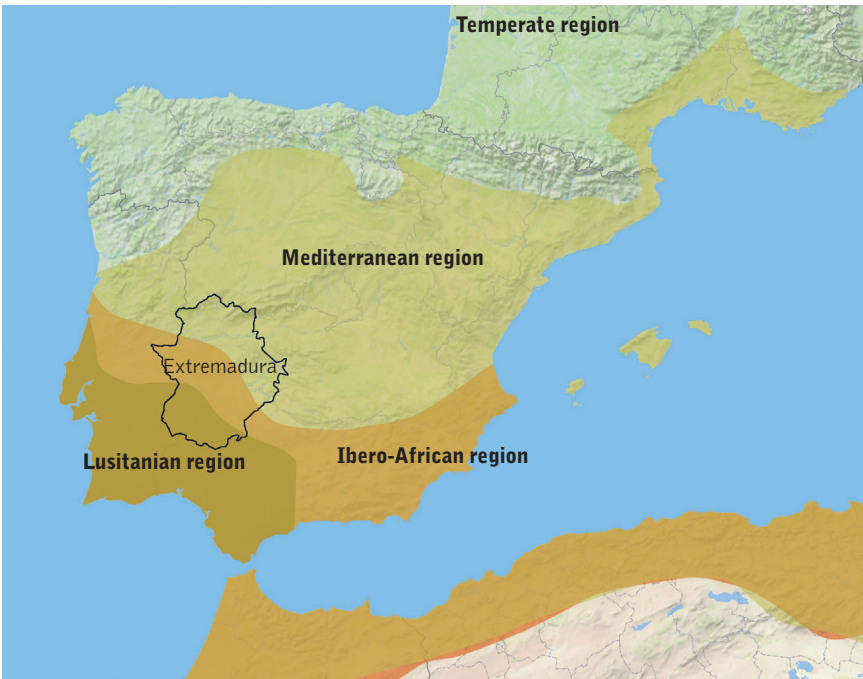
The mixture of these 'ecological regions' as one might call it, are what makes Extremadura unmistakable, unique and such an attractive place to visit.



Mediterranean region
Two-tailed Pasha
Charaxes jasius
Scrublands and
Mediterranean forests



Temperate region
Alder
Alnus glutinosa
Riversides



Lusitanian region
Azure-winged Magpie
Cyanopica cyana
Dehesa



Ibero-African region
Ocellated Lizard
Timon lepidus
Steppes, dehesas,
dry rocky terrain

Three plants of Mediterranean forests and the lower parts of the mountain: Lusitanian Milkvetch (top), Pallid Narcissus (centre) and Small-leaved Milkwort (bottom).



foothills gradually gives way to Alpine plants. Silver Birch occurs in a few isolated pockets high in the mountains and Common Juniper grows only in the highest and coldest regions. Much of the flora on these high slopes are a continuation of that of the Sierra de Gredos (just beyond Extremadura), but in our region the farthest reaches of the Garganta de los Infiernos give them a toehold here.

Orchids

What applies to plants in general also goes for the wild orchids in Extremadura: there are a fair number of species, but few grow in good numbers with most being restricted to a few favoured spots. The

highest diversity is found in a few isolated pockets of calcareous soils. Again, there is a clear difference in species found in the lowlands and those in the mountains.

In the lowlands, the most frequent species is the Common Tongue Orchid, which grows, sometimes by the thousands, in pastures that are moist or wet during the winter. It is frequently accompanied by Champagne Orchid and occasionally by Fragrant Bug* (*Anacamptis fragrans*), Loose-flowered and Heart-lipped Tongue Orchids. The Small-flowered Tongue Orchid by contrast, occurs on drier areas and is not at all uncommon in grassy dehesas. Its small size means that it is easily overlooked.



Extremadura's pride is also a kind of tongue orchid, which we have named Green Tongue Orchid* (*Serapias perez-chiscanoi*; p. 211), because of its colour. The Green Tongue Orchid* is so special because it is confined largely to the Extremaduran section of the valley of the River Guadiana (with only a few spilling over into Portugal) – a proper endemic species. Note that Common and Small-flowered Tongue Orchids occasionally have green-flowered forms too.

Throughout the dehesas, many other species appear as soon as soils are not too acidic. Sawfly and Conical Orchids in particular are widespread, although usually not too abundant. They flower



Rockroses: a Mediterranean delight

The family of cistuses and rockroses is interesting because it is very much associated with the Mediterranean basin. Only a handful of species spread into the warmer parts of temperate Europe, and, curiously, two genera occur in America, but the vast majority of species is endemic to the countries surrounding the Mediterranean. In Extremadura, rockroses are particularly well-represented.

The aforementioned Gum Cistus is in Extremadura the most common member of the family. It has the largest flowers and, with most sepals sporting dark red dots, it is an easy plant to identify.

On roadsides and along trails, the Gum Cistus is often accompanied by several other species, such as the smaller, white-flowered Sage-leaved Cistus (wrinkly, oval leaves), Narrow-leaved Cistus (similar flowers, but dwarf shrub with linear leaves) and Umbel-flowered Rockrose (small clusters of white flowers and linear leaves).

The Grey-leaved Cistus is an indicator of more base-rich soils (and thus of a more interesting flora, including orchids). It is a big shrub with greyish leaves, but the most eye-catching difference is its big pink flowers. This plant is only to be confused with Wrinkle-leaved Cistus* (*Cistus crispus*), which is not as tall and has smaller, deeper pink flowers and small, wrinkly leaves.

In the mountains these plants are joined by several other species of rockroses. The Poplar-leaved Cistus is fairly widespread whereas Portuguese Cistus* (*Cistus psilosepalus*) is, within Extremadura, confined to the Sierra de Gata whilst Laurel-leaved Cistus is typical of the Sierra de las Villuercas.

Much rarer in Extremadura are the rockroses of the *Halimium* group, recognised by their yellow flowers. Several species occur, of which Basil-leaved Rockrose and *Halimium lasianthemum* are the most widespread, growing in scrub on base-rich soils. The most frequent yellow-flowered rockrose is not a shrub, but a small and very delicate flower with dark red spots that sometimes extend to form a band across the base of the petals. This is the Spotted Rockrose and it is common on poor, shallow soils that abound in Extremadura.



Poplar-leaved Cistus

Birds

The best routes to see vultures, eagles and other birds, are routes 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 12, 19, 22, 23 and 24, plus site 10 on page 200. Dehesa birds are present in large numbers on routes 1, 4, 5, 6, 11, 19 and 21, plus sites 5 on page 198 and 14 on page 237. Bird-rich wetlands feature on routes 4 and 17, plus sites 15, 16, 17 and 18 on pages 238-240. Explore the birdlife of the steppes on route 5, 6, 7 and (best) 23, plus sites 5 on page 198 and 20 and 22 on pages 241-243. Birds of dry rock slopes are found on routes 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 22 and 24, plus site 19 on page 241. To see the birdlife of the mountain forests and scrublands, try routes 9, 10, 12, 14, 15 and 16, plus site 12 and 13 on pages 202-203. Birdwatchers visiting in winter are recommended to focus on routes 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 18, 23 and 24, plus sites 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21 and 22 on pages 237-243.

A comprehensive list with the best sites for each bird species is given on page 258.

In a poll for the most popular birdwatching destination in Europe, Extremadura would be a hot favourite to win. There will not be many serious birders who haven't either visited Extremadura or dreamt of doing so. And rightly so, for Extremadura combines a large and attractive diversity of bird species (many birds are striking and colourful whilst others are rare or absent elsewhere in Europe) with a bird density that is not equalled by many other regions. The numbers of raptors, birds of steppes and of small-scale arable land are simply unsurpassed by any region in Europe.

Undoubtedly one of the most magnificent birds of Extremadura – the Spanish Imperial Eagle.



Vultures

Regardless the rarities and Iberian specialities Extremadura has to offer, the one bird that never fails to impress is the Griffon Vulture. With its white, downy neck and tawny, somewhat shaggy plumage it is the classic vulture. It has a wingspan of up to 2.6 metres.

The sheer quantities in which this massive bird inhabits the rocky sierras of Extremadura is special. Monfragüe National Park alone supports nearly 700 pairs. Most, if not all, other mountain ranges in the region have their own colonies. Especially in Cáceres Province it will be rare not to see a few Griffons if you are out in the field for a day (or even a few hours).

Griffon Vultures breed in colonies on cliffs,

Extremadura's special bird species

Spanish Imperial Eagle Endemic to the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula and Morocco.

Black Vulture Rare everywhere in Europe except Extremadura, with largest densities in the world found in and around Monfragüe.

Azure-winged Magpie Endemic to the centre and southwest of the Iberian Peninsula.

Great Bustard Largest European population is in Iberia, of which sizable ones are in Extremadura.

Little Bustard Within Europe, almost restricted to France and Iberia (with more in Russia, the Ukraine and further into Central Asia).

Common Crane Over 100,000 winter in Extremadura, which is about half the estimated European population.

Pin-tailed Sandgrouse Within Europe, only in Iberia and a small area in France; large numbers in Extremadura.

Black-bellied Sandgrouse Within Europe, only in Iberia; large numbers in Extremadura.

Lesser Kestrel Threatened bird, of which the largest European populations are found in southwestern Iberia.

Griffon Vulture Very large numbers in Extremadura.

Great Spotted Cuckoo Mediterranean bird that is most numerous in southwestern Iberia.

Black Stork Outside Eastern Europe, almost exclusively in Extremadura.

Black-winged Kite Within Europe, only in southwestern Iberia and southwestern France.

White-rumped Swift African species occurring only in Extremadura and Andalucía.

Spotless Starling Within Europe, about 90% are found in Iberia.

Iberian Grey Shrike Endemic to Iberia and southern France, common and widespread in Extremadura.

unlike its even larger cousin, the endangered Black Vulture which nests in trees (mainly in large Cork Oaks). With a wingspan of almost three metres, the Black Vulture is considered the world's largest raptor, with the exception of the condors of America. The largest concentrations of Black Vultures in the entire world are found in Monfragüe, where over 400 pairs breed in an area of roughly eight-by-thirty kilometres (2024 census). Smaller populations are present in Sierra de Gata, the northern part of Sierra de las Villuercas and Sierra de San Pedro. Outside of Extremadura the Black Vulture is less common, occurring in several isolated mountain ranges in the central and southwestern part of Spain. It is reintroduced in Catalonia and on Mallorca.

The third vulture is the much smaller and rarer Egyptian Vulture. Even so, it is not at all an uncommon bird in the region, breeding in isolated pairs



Extremadura has one of Europe's largest concentrations of Griffon Vultures (top) and Black Vultures (bottom). They are especially numerous in the northern and central part of the region.



in rock ledges throughout the region. The reason for the large numbers of vultures lies both in the land use and in the geology of Extremadura. The vast plains are the perfect scavenging ground whilst the many mountain ranges and undisturbed woodlands offer plenty of nesting sites. The ability of vultures to cruise for more than a hundred kilometres from their nesting sites enables them to exploit a vast area in which to find carcasses.

Other birds of prey

Vultures are not the only scavengers.

Black and Red Kites too, prefer the easy meal over the hassle of catching live food. Kites often go for the roadkill, sometimes putting on spectacular shows as they swoop down to the tarmac.

Red Kites are numerous in winter, when a large part of the central European population moves south to flee the cold and lack of prey. From March onwards, most Red Kites disappear (low numbers breed in the mountains of northern Extremadura) and are replaced by thousands of Black Kites. During spring and summer, the Black Kite is the

most numerous raptor in Extremadura, vastly outnumbering the 'common' Buzzard or any of the eagles.

There are five species of eagle in Extremadura. Booted and the Short-toed Eagles are widespread in the dehesas and steppes. The beautiful and endangered Spanish Imperial Eagle is endemic to the central and southwestern part of the peninsula and one of Extremadura's star birds. Centuries of persecution made it rare and the subsequent outbreak of myxomatosis, a deadly disease that wreaked havoc amongst the eagle's main prey, Rabbits, brought it to the brink of extinction. Fortunately, the population has recovered somewhat and numbers are gradually growing again in Extremadura, from 35 pairs in 2000 to over 50 pairs now. The Spanish Imperial Eagle is a typical dehesa bird, breeding, like the Black Vulture, on well-developed tree crowns and sometimes on pylons.

The Bonelli's Eagle is a species of rocky sierras, where it builds its nest on remote ledges. It spends a proportionally large amount of its time on the ground, making it a hard bird to spot, although in Monfragüe and La Serena you have a good chance on finding it. The Golden Eagle too, is rather thinly spread. It is most frequent in the mountains, both high and low and hunts hares in the steppes.

Another bird many people come to search for is the Black-winged Kite. This feisty little raptor is an active and agile hunter, feeding mostly on rodents. It is originally from Africa but spread into Iberia in the middle of the 20th century. The first records were from Portugal. Breeding was proven in Spain in 1975 where it is now a widespread bird. Extremadura was one of the first areas to be colonised. Here it is associated with cereal plots and scattered trees and bushes. It hovers frequently and often perches on wires, but, despite this conspicuous behaviour, it can remain elusive.

A roughly similar habitat is preferred by Montagu's Harriers – grain fields and steppes. Montagu's Harriers have declined almost everywhere in Europe, including Extremadura. The rare all-black form is more common (3-5% of the total population) in Spain than anywhere else in Europe. Marsh Harriers are found in and around wetlands, but disperse into the steppes as well. Hen Harriers breed only very rarely in Extremadura, but they are frequent winter visitors to the steppes.

The Extremaduran mountains are inhabited by a different group of



As a breeding bird, the Red Kite is fairly scarce in Extremadura (in contrast to the Black). In winter though, they are quite common.

Reptiles and amphibians of Extremadura

Species	Main habitats	Frequency
Fire Salamander	streams in well-forested mountains	uncommon
Sharp-ribbed Newt	lowland streams and pools	common
Southern Marbled Newt	lowland streams and pools	common
Bosca's Newt	lowland streams and pools	common
Iberian Painted Frog	lowland streams and pools	uncommon
Iberian Midwife Toad	lowland streams and pools	common
Midwife Toad	mountain streams	rare
Western Spadefoot	lowland streams and pools	common
Spiny Toad	anywhere	common
Natterjack Toad	temporary and shallow pools	common
Iberian Tree Frog	moist, well-vegetated areas	frequent
Stripeless Tree Frog	moist, well-vegetated areas	frequent
Iberian Parsley Frog	lowland streams and pools	uncommon
Iberian Frog	streams in well-forested mountains	rare
Iberian Water Frog	any standing water	very common
European Pond Terrapin	freshwater marshland	rare
Spanish Terrapin	any aquatic environment	common
Worm Lizard	subterranean in lowland areas	common
Moorish Gecko	urban and rocky environments	common
Turkish Gecko	as above, but in the south	rare
Iberian Wall Lizard	urban areas, rocks, scrub	very common
Schreiber's Green Lizard	bushy places in mountains	uncommon
Ocellated Lizard	steppes and dehesas	common
Spiny-footed Lizard	sparsely vegetated areas	uncommon
Spanish Psammmodromus	sparsely vegetated areas	frequent
Large Psammmodromus	any vegetated area	very common
Three-toed Skink	grassy patches in lowland and hills	uncommon
Bedriaga's Skink	open terrain with sparse bushes	uncommon
Viperine Snake	aquatic environments	common
Iberian Grass Snake	aquatic environments in mountains	rare
Montpellier Snake	scrub, dehesas, fields	common
Horseshoe Whip Snake	lowland forest and scrub	rare
Ladder Snake	steppes and dehesa	common
Southern Smooth Snake	dehesa and scrub	uncommon
False Smooth Snake	dehesa, rocky places	frequent
Lataste's Viper	open sandy or rocky places	uncommon

terrain you may also find the smaller Spanish Psammmodromus and the Spiny-footed Lizard. The latter especially is a handsome creature, with a black pattern and pale yellow dots. The young have a reddish tail. The Spiny-footed Lizard has the odd habit of lifting its feet from the hot surface to cool off. Spiny-footed Lizard and Spanish Psammmodromus

seek out the hotter and drier areas and are not as common as the Large Psammmodromus. The fourth small lizard was once simply called the Iberian Wall Lizard, a species of all sorts of rocky places including higher slopes. Recent genetic research has revealed that this lizard actually forms a complex of various closely related species, of which two occur in Extremadura: the Geniez Wall Lizard found almost throughout the region but is replaced by the Guadarrama Wall Lizard in the Sierra de Gata and Las Hurdes.

The biggest lizard in Extremadura is the Ocellated Lizard. It is an impressive beast that grows up to 80 cms in length. It is quite common in dehesas and bushy steppes, but to find it you'll have to be aware of sudden movements in the grass. They are very agile and during warm weather they can dash across the road with such speed that you are left wondering whether you actually saw one or just thought you did.

Ocellated Lizards are not easily confused with other species, except perhaps the smaller (but still large) Schreiber's Green Lizard. This species occurs only in the high mountains of La Vera and perhaps also Sierra de las Villuercas (where you won't find Ocellated). The males are easily distinguished by their bright blue heads and almost neon-green backs. Schreiber's Green Lizard has a very small range – the world population is restricted to the mountains of western Iberia, where they live in bushy areas, preferably near mountain streams. They love to sunbathe on rocks.

The two skink species of Extremadura are not so easy to find. Skinks are smooth-scaled, shiny lizards with small



The Viperine Snake is strictly aquatic. Here it sticks its head out of the murky water (left).

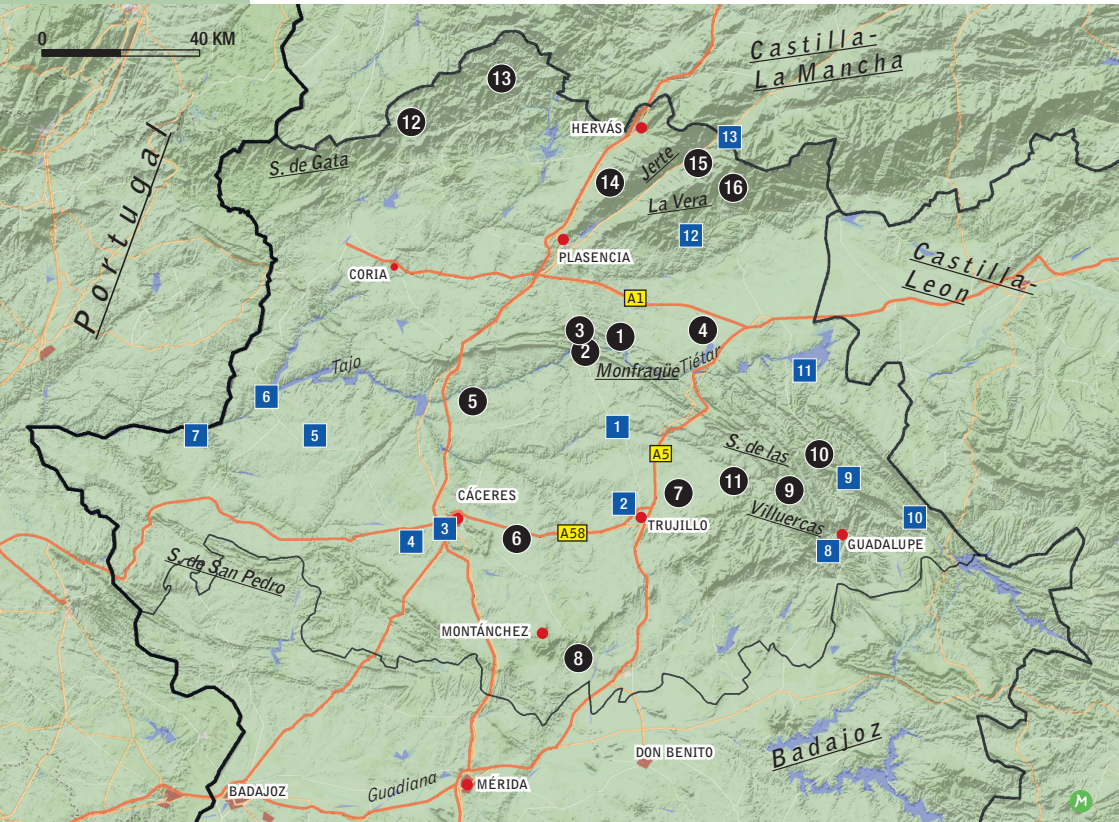
The Large Psammmodromus, easily recognisable by the olive-brown back and cream stripes, is the most-seen lizard in Extremadura (right).

Routes in Cáceres Province

Most of the classic wildlife sites are situated in the province of Cáceres, including those in and around the National Park of Monfragüe. The National Park, with its phenomenal number of vultures and eagles, is the most famous site of all, so that's where we start our routes – first a car route that connects the National Park's major highlights (route 1), followed by two beautiful walks (routes 2 and 3).

Monfragüe seamlessly connects with the immense lowland area to the south, known as the Llanos de Cáceres. Here you'll encounter an endless expanse of dehesa and steppe, each with their own attractions. Routes 4 to 7 explore these plains that are so typical of Extremadura. They are all car routes with some stops and short strolls, as this is the best way to explore the lowlands. In addition to these routes, the sites 1 to 7 on pages 196 to 199 are also situated in these lowlands.

Overview of the Province of Cáceres. The numbers refer to the routes on the following pages. The site descriptions in Cáceres Province are given on page 196 onwards.



South of the plains, a low mountain range separates the province of Cáceres from that of Badajoz. The western part of it is known as the Sierra de San Pedro and lies mostly in Badajoz (see route 19), while the eastern part is the Sierra de Montánchez, which offers some attractive hiking (see route 8).

East of the Cáceres plains, the land rises to a mountain range that consists of several parallel, jagged ridges – the Sierra de Las Villuercas. In many ways, this sierra is the wilder and larger brother of Monfragüe, which is actually a forerunner of the Villuercas mountains. It would be one of the remoter parts of Extremadura were it not for the small Pilgrimage town of Guadalupe with its enormous monastery that attracts tourists and devoted Catholics alike. The key sites in the Sierra de las Villuercas are combined in a single car route (route 9). In addition, we've described two walks (routes 10 and 11) and several other spots (sites 8, 9 and 10 on page 200).

North of Monfragüe and las Villuercas lies another plain with large expanse of dehesa. It is on average more fertile than the Llanos de Cáceres. North of that plain lies a range of sierras, which are all part of the Sistema Central. In the west, bordering Portugal, lies the Sierra de Gata. Then comes Las Hurdes, Valle del Ambroz and the famous Valle de Jerte with its many cherry orchards. The Jerte valley, north of the town of Plasencia, borders Extremadura's highest mountains: the south slopes of the Sierra de Gredos, known as La Vera.

We've described one walking route in the scenic Sierra de Gata (routes 12) and another in Las Hurdes (route 13) and two others in La Vera (routes 15 and 16). The latter two rise to an altitude of 1,000 – 1,500 metres and lead through an Alpine landscape with a rich flora and fauna that is very different from all the rest of Extremadura. The Jerte and Ambroz valleys are explored on a car route with short walks (route 14) which is above all scenic.

Lonely roads through endless dehesas characterise the landscape of the province of Cáceres (route 1).



ROUTE 1: MONFRAGÜE NP ROUND TRIP

85 KM, FULL DAY OR MORE



The classic route – all the highlights of Monfragüe.

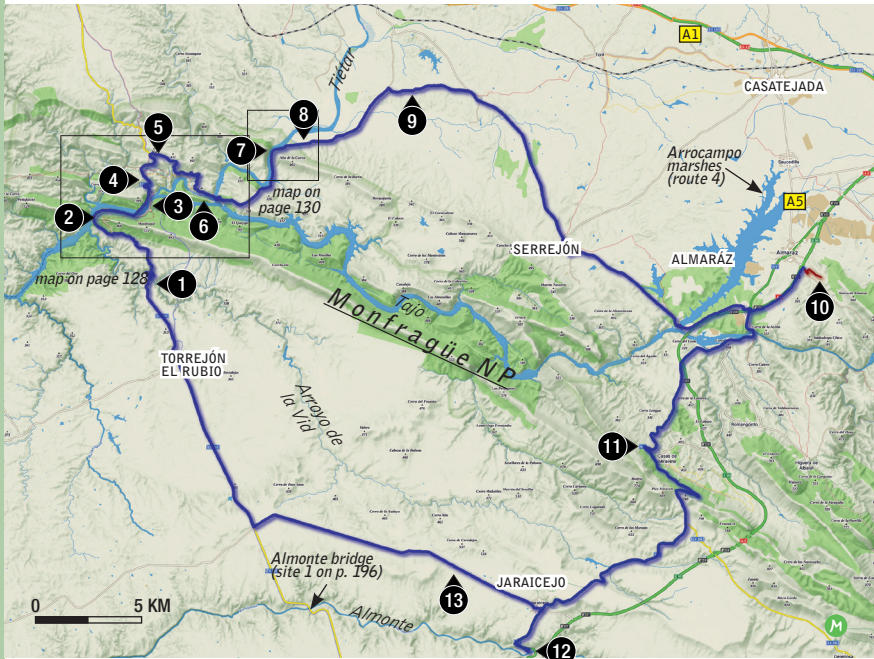
More vultures than you can count, and many more birds.

Spectacular cliffs along the Tagus river.

Hillside with many orchids in early spring.

Habitats: Cork and Holm Oak dehesa, streams, cliffs, wetlands, limestone outcrops, Mediterranean forest, olive groves

Selected species: Naked Man Orchid, Mirror Orchid, Black Vulture, Egyptian Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Black Stork, Bee-eater, Blue Rock Thrush, Orphean Warbler, Rock Sparrow, Ocellated Lizard, Spanish Festoon



This can well be dubbed the trip of trips in Extremadura. It covers all the highlights of Monfragüe National Park and its surroundings – enough to keep you spell-bound from dawn until dusk. The area is diverse, including mountains, dehesas, Mediterranean forests and wetlands. Well-known sites such as the cliffs of *Salto del Gitano* and *Portilla del Tiétar*

alternate with less visited sites, such as the pass of Casas de Miravete and the limestone hills of Almaraz. If this is your first visit to Extremadura, this is the route with which to start.

Note that this is a long route. To do all points justice, you need two days, so we advise you to pick the sites that you think hold most interest for you and save the other ones for the next day.

Starting point: Torrejón el Rubio

(GPS: 39.771195, -6.011716)

Head north in the direction of Plasencia.

1 Through the fine Holm Oak *dehesas* and with views of the Monfragüe mountain range in the distance, you head towards the Arroyo de la Vid, a stream that in typical Extremaduran fashion, has cut out a small gorge in the hard Hercynian bedrock. Along the way, look for typical *dehesa* birds such as Hoopoe, Azure-winged Magpie, Thekla's Lark and Woodchat Shrike.

Just before you cross the stream, there is a small car park on the left. Park here and walk to the bridge, cross it and follow the trail to the right to the river. The puddles and slow-flowing parts are excellent for Spanish Terrapins, Viperine Snakes and amphibians. Meanwhile, don't forget to check the skies for passing Black Storks, Egyptian Vultures and other cliff dwellers, which breed along the cliffs of the Arroyo, or come in from Monfragüe.

Return to the car and continue. On your right lies the castle of Monfragüe on the mountain ridge (the goal of route 2). Stop on the car park of on the edge of the Tagus reservoir, from where you have great views over the cliffs on the Tagus edge.

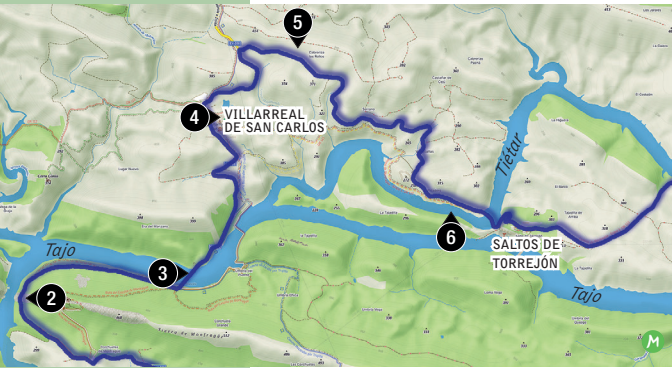
2 This is the *Salto del Gitano*, Monfragüe's grand entrance. The impressive escarpment on the opposite side is the *Peñafalcón*, the famous vulture rock. The many Griffon Vultures that circle around the rock are the immediate eye-catcher at this site. The colony on the Peñafalcón is one of the largest in Monfragüe. Once the air starts to warm up in the morning, the vultures depart to cruise the thermals in search of carrion and sometimes soar right over your head. One or two pairs of Egyptian Vulture and Peregrine Falcons breed as well in some years. Black Storks breed in the fissures just above the water line. To see their



The Peñafalcon is a spectacular gateway to Monfragüe (route 1 and 2). Over 50 pairs of Griffon Vultures breed on the cliffs, together with Egyptian Vulture and Black Stork.

nest, you have to walk a little further on, go around the corner and then look back to the rock. Other birds that can be seen near the Peñafalcón include Rock Bunting and Blue Rock Thrush (on the slopes close to the car park), Red-rumped Swallows and, in the sky, Black Vulture (which breeds on tree tops all over Monfragüe, unlike the cliff-breeding Griffons). Black Kite and perhaps Golden or Spanish Imperial Eagle may also pass by. Botanists can enjoy the endemics Spanish Adenocarpus* (*Adenocarpus argyrophyllus*) and Spanish Foxglove* (*Digitalis thapsi*) on the cliffs around the car park.

Continue along the road. Notice that once past the Peñafalcón, you drive on the north-facing side of mountain (*Umbría*), which is clad in dense Mediterranean evergreen forest. Cross the Tagus (*Río Tajo*) and park on the car park on the other side.



3 Unlike the Guadiana in southern Extremadura, the Tagus has so many dams that it has become a string of reservoirs rather than a river. Ecologically, this has been disastrous for the river habitat, especially for the fish fauna.

Nevertheless, this spot may have some interesting sights in store for you. Underneath the bridge there are many

House Martin nests, and you may see Alpine Swift, Crag Martin and sometimes Rock Sparrow. This general area has Bonelli's Eagle too, so keep your eyes open for this elusive bird as well.

Continue to Villarreal de San Carlos.

4 This village, with bar and visitors' centre, is the only settlement in the park and consists of one big car park and one small street. Villarreal was founded by King Carlos III to house royal guards, who had to ensure the safety of the travellers in what was then a dangerous and desolate region.

After Villarreal, take the first right, in the direction of Salto de Torrejón.

5 These scrubby hills covered with young Holm Oaks, French Lavender and Gum Cistus, are not very interesting, but ironically,

they are the reason that Monfragüe received its protective status. Under the Francoist regime's drive to create a paper industry they were planted with Eucalyptus. It was envisaged that Eucalyptus woodland would cover all of Monfragüe, but thankfully, strong opposition from the germinating Extremaduran conservation movement prevented this ecological disaster (see also page 68). The young Holm Oaks were replanted to restore the original Mediterranean forest.

6 Just before reaching the dam on the Tiétar there are two viewpoints on the right. The first has a short circular path around a hill overlooking the Tiétar river just before it meets the Tagus, and the second overlooks a small vulture colony, where beside Griffons, Egyptian Vulture usually breeds. On the other side of the dam lies Salto de Torrejón, a village that was built to accommodate the dam workers.

Continue until you see the Río Tiétar on your left. There are various viewpoints here at either side of the river where you can stop, admire the landscape and look for birds of prey.

The next site is the rocky outcrop you see ahead. Stop at one of the parking spaces and continue on foot.

7 From the bend in the road you overlook the Portilla del Tiétar, Monfragüe's more modest but still very scenic 'back door'. Its Griffon Vulture colony is smaller than on the *Peñafalcón*, but closer. In some years,



The Iberian endemic Spanish Foxglove* (*Digitalis thapsi*) flowers in May and is fairly common on rocky soil.



Spanish Terrapins are numerous in the streams in and around Monfragüe.

ROUTE 24: BENQUERENCIA AND THE SIERRA DE TIROS

4 KM, 2 HOURS, EASY OR 6.7 KM, 4 HOURS, MODERATE



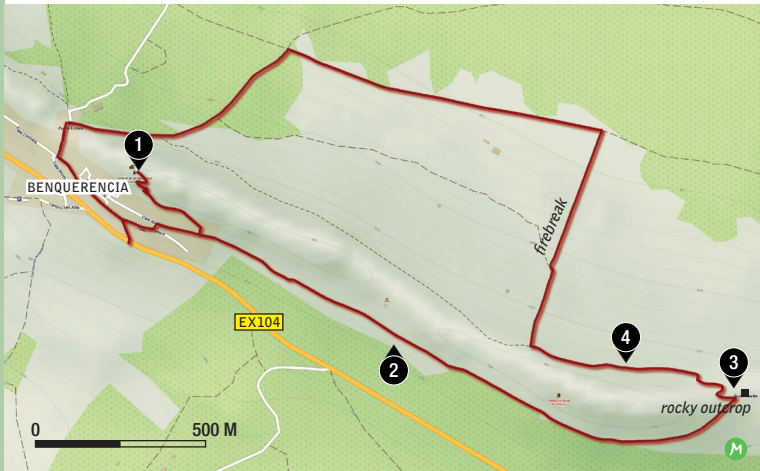
Large sections
without shade

Wide vistas over the treeless plains of La Serena.

Easy encounters with the birds of the lower Extremaduran mountain ranges.

Habitats: rocks, cliffs, scrub, orchards

Selected species: Large-flowered Sand-crocus, Griffon Vulture, Bonelli's Eagle, Golden Eagle, Eagle Owl, Black Wheatear, Alpine Swift, White-rumped Swift, Blue Rock Thrush, Orphean Warbler, Common Crane, Lesser Kestrel



The castle ruins that tower out over the village of Benquerencia de la Serena form a perfect spot for a picnic in the field. The scenery is breath-taking and there is a rich assembly of birds present, which include Black Wheatear, Blue Rock Thrush, Alpine and White-rumped Swift and Bonelli's Eagle. From the castle there is a great short walk over to the Puerto Mejoral, famous for its evening flight of Cranes in winter, but attractive year-round. The dedicated hiker can continue over an unclear and overgrown path on the north slope to make it a circle.

Starting point: Benquerencia de la Serena (GPS: 38.697905, -5.493426)

Follow the signs *Castillo* on the eastern side of the village and walk the path up the hill just before the last house of the street.

1 The sombre remains of the castle are home to breeding Lesser Kestrels, Black Wheatears and Blue Rock Thrushes. Other raptors pass over every now and then, using the warm air over the south slopes. Look out for Short-toed, Booted, Bonelli's and Golden Eagles, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures. Bonelli's Eagle in particular, drifts by regularly. On clear days the views of the empty plains of La Serena are impressive.

2 A trail leaves the eastern edge of the village through the olive groves on the south-facing slope. The track is graced by Mallow-leaved Bindweed and colourful pasture flowers (from February to April), but the birdlife is most interesting, with Orphean and Sardinian Warbler, Hoopoe and several more widespread species. Crag Martins and Red-rumped Swallows wheel over your head and in late spring you could theoretically find four different species of swifts: Common, Pallid, Alpine and White-rumped. Check the rocks for Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting and Black Wheatear.

3 The trail rounds the mountains near the Puerto Mejoral, a gap in the Sierra de Tiros. The views here are again unforgettable and the aforementioned raptors can also be seen.



Although the views over the steppes of La Serena are fabulous (left), your eye is regularly distracted by the passing raptors, which may include all three vultures and various species of eagles. Especially Bonelli's Eagle (top) shows itself regularly.



TOURIST INFORMATION & OBSERVATION TIPS

Travel and accommodation

Travelling to Extremadura

Most visitors to Extremadura either drive to their destination, or fly and rent a car at the airport. Extremadura lies in the middle of the triangle of Madrid, Lisbon and Seville and each of these cities have large, international airports with connections to just about anywhere in Europe. The westbound motorway out of Madrid leads directly to Lisbon and connects with the motorway to Seville at Extremadura's capital, Mérida. Depending on which area of Extremadura you want to visit, you can choose to fly in via Madrid (northern Extremadura), Seville (southern Extremadura) or Lisbon (western Extremadura).

By road (whether overland from central Europe or via a ferry from the UK to Bilbao/Santander) it is best to arrive via Salamanca and enter Extremadura in the Valle de Ambroz near Hervás.

If you decide to try your luck with the public transport, bring a good book, because it is inevitable that you will be spending quite some time in bus or train stations. The Spanish trains (RENFE) are of good quality and the high speed trains (AVE) are among the best on the continent, but unfortunately, there are few train lines into Extremadura, and none of them are comfy AVE trains. The main line runs from Madrid to Navalmoral, Monfragüe (yes, Monfragüe has a train station, albeit about 20 kms from the National Park), Cáceres, Mérida and Badajoz. A regional train runs up from Seville via Zafra to Mérida. Finally, there is a line from Puertollano (near Ciudad Real) via La Serena to Mérida. For more information, check renfe.com/es/en, trenes.com, or for international train connections, raileurope.com.

You can penetrate deeper into Extremadura by taking one of the many private bus companies. Check horario-autobuses.com/bus/horarios-autobuses/extremadura.

At minimum, a rudimentary grasp of Spanish is needed to explore the country by bus.

Observation tips

Nearby destinations worth a visit

Extremadura has enough wildlife to keep you spell-bound for weeks. However, there are a few areas not far from its borders to the north and south that offer habitats that you won't find within the region.

To the north lies the Sierra de Gredos reserve, which can be reached by driving through the Jerte valley and then turning east at the town of El Barco. The reserve can be entered from the village of Hoyos del Espino, all in all just 50 kms from the Extremaduran border. The nature reserve offers a great opportunity to explore the Alpine habitats that are very hard to reach on the Extremaduran side. Being such an isolated mountain region, the Sierra de Gredos has a number of unique plants and animals (see page 58). If Hoyos is too far, you can also opt to take the road up through Candelaria (north of Hervás) to above the treeline to over 1400m.

From Extremadura's southern border it is not far to the city of Seville. South of this Andalusian city lies the Coto Doñana, one of the major European wetlands. The Coto Doñana is a birding hotspot that presents nature in a completely different guise with an atmosphere determined by wide open mudflats and dusty, sun-baked Umbrella Pine forests and vast open skies. East of the Coto Doñana in the province of Cádiz, there are more excellent nature reserves, both wetlands and mountain sites in Los Alcornocales and the limestone Sierra de Grazalema. These mountains near the Mediterranean coast are renowned for their scenic beauty, unique flora (including many orchids) and vivid culture. The Coto Doñana and these other areas are described in the *Crossbill Guide to Western Andalucía*.

Southwest of Extremadura, you find yourself in the Alentejo in southern Portugal, which is in nature and landscape a continuation of Extremadura. Beyond the Alentejo, around Lisbon and in the Algarve, there are limestone hills and coastal marshes with a rich flora and fauna that is very different to that of Extremadura. The Alentejo, Lisbon area and the Algarve are described in the *Crossbill Guide to southern Portugal*. Just east of Extremadura, between Guadalupe and the royal city of Toledo, lies an extensive, wild and little visited area of dehesas, mountains, steppes and scrublands, protected in the National Park of Cabañeros. It is somewhat like a high altitude version of Extremadura (you are on the meseta here), but without the fences, making it a perfect area for walks.

Finding snakes, spiders, scorpions and the like

For the uninitiated, this is how you do it. Seek out a stony field or dehesa and start turning the stones. Underneath them you will find a wonderful, hidden world of creatures that appear on too many menus to be able to afford themselves a place in the sun. They come out at night to hunt and avoid being hunted by crawling under a rock.

Turning stones is rather like unwrapping Christmas gifts: it is exciting, highly addictive and there is always one more ahead that must hide something good. Mostly you will find ants and their nests, but every now and then you will find Scorpions,

Tarantulas, Scolopendras or snakes. Toads, Western Spadefoots and Sharp-ribbed Newts are other possibilities and if you are lucky you might even stumble upon a Worm Lizard.

Turning flat stones of over 20 by 20 centimetres yields the best results. Lift them up to one side, turn them over and step back. Be aware that some animals have a painful sting or bite. Never hold the stone you turned in your hand, because the animal might be underneath it and crawl up.

Turning stones is very invasive for the animals that live beneath them. Many of them worked hard to create an underground nest. Therefore, make sure that you don't disturb the subterranean life too long and place the stone back in exactly the same position as you found it.

Some snakes are active at night (see reptile and amphibians section on page 110). These often warm themselves on the surface of small country roads. A drive or walk at dusk can reveal Ladder, False and Southern Smooth Snakes. In spring these places are also used by other snakes and lizards to warm up for the day. Extremadura's two aquatic snakes, Iberian Grass and Viperine Snake can be seen in the standing or slow-flowing sections of rivers.

Note that snakes and lizards become more active in the course of May. A late April visitor may not see a single snake on his holiday, while a late May visitor could see one every day.

(Bird)watching the steppes

Even though they are open and there is little to restrict your view, finding the birds of the steppe is a challenge. To maximise your chances, make sure you go out early in the morning. You need to be out and about at sunrise. This is when the birds are active. In the late hours of the day, the bird activity sees another, more modest peak. Not only are the birds most active and vocal at this time of the day, they stand out more prominently in the low light, while in the middle of the day the heat haze makes observations difficult. Added advantage of rising early is the beautiful light over the steppes.

The best way to find birds is to drive slowly along small steppe roads with the windows rolled down to hear the bird sounds (note that it can be cold driving like this, so dress appropriately).

This is the way to find Little Bustard and both sandgrouse. To help you recognise the calls download them in advance onto your mobile phone (see for downloads the excellent site xeno-canto.org/europe). Never (!) play back the calls of Little Bustard out loud in the field as it seriously disrupts the courtship of this strongly declining and fragile bird.

Stop at vantage points (e.g. hill tops) and take your time to scan the area with your binoculars to find birds on the ground. A telescope makes birdwatching in the steppes easier and much more interesting.

Birds are easily frightened off by movement. It is best not to leave your car, but if you do, stay low and next to the car to prevent the birds from detecting your movements. If you want to explore the steppes on foot, you'll do best to choose a spot with a little

water and some ‘dog’s teeth’ rocks. Here there is most to see in terms of insects, reptiles and plants and less to disturb in the form of vulnerable steppe birds.

Guided birdwatching excursions

There is a large team of local nature guides that offer guided birdwatching and / or naturalist excursions to groups or individual travellers, either for a single day or for a longer period. This is an excellent way of getting to know Extremadura more intimately. Some are native *Extremeños*; others moved into the region from other parts of Spain, the UK, the Netherlands or Germany. They all speak English, and some speak other languages as well. These guides joined forces in the Birding in Extremadura Club (birdinginextremadura.com). Check this website to find a local nature guide to explore Extremadura with.

Bird list

The numbers between the brackets () refer to the routes from page 124 onwards:

Geese and ducks Most geese and ducks are winter birds on well-vegetated reservoirs. Mallard, Shoveler, Gadwall, Teal, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Pintail, and, more rarely, Wigeon and Red-crested Pochard, can be found on the shallow reservoirs of Arrocampo (4), Talaván (5) and Canchales (site 17 on page 239). In spring, these are the sites for Mallard (common) and the odd Gadwall. In 2019, several Ferruginous Ducks were present in Arrocampo (4). Greylag Goose is an uncommon winter visitor, while Egyptian Goose now breeds near small ponds in the steppes (e.g. 23).

Partridges Red-legged Partridge is frequent in any shrubby terrain. Quail breeds in areas with cereal plots and mountain broom scrub (e.g. 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 14, 16, 23 and sites 4 and 5 on pages 197-198 and sites 16, 17, 20 and 22 on pages 239-243).

Grebes Great Crested Grebe is common on reservoirs throughout the year (4, 5, 17, 21 and site 11 on page 201 and sites 14, 15, 17 and 18 on pages 237-240). Little Grebe is locally common on reservoirs with vegetated shores. (4, 5, 6, 18 and sites 15, 17 and 18 on pages 237-240).

Cormorants, spoonbills, ibises, herons, and egrets Great Cormorant and Grey Heron are most frequent on large reservoirs and rivers. Spoonbill, Little Egret, Great White Egret, Night Heron, Little Bittern and Purple Heron breed in reedbeds (best 4, 17 and sites 15, 17 and 18 on pages 237-240). Squacco Heron is currently only present at Arrocampo (4) and Azud de Gadiana (site 18 on page 240). Great Bittern is very scarce and mostly found at Arrocampo (4). Glossy Ibis is increasingly common along the Gadiana river (17, sites 17 and 18 on page 239-240) and since recently also at Arrocampo (4). Cattle Egrets associate with herds in plains and steppes and are rather common and widespread (best 4, 5, 6, 7, 17, 20, 21 and 23).

Storks White Stork breeds in good numbers in almost any town and village and sometimes in large Eucalyptus trees in the steppes. Black Stork is a fairly frequent

and widespread but shy, breeding bird along wooded rivers and cliffs near rivers. Monfragüe (1, 2 and 3) is the best place to find it, but you can find it in all mountainous areas. In September they congregate in large numbers on the edges of the reservoirs of Guadiloba (6).

Vultures Vultures cover long distances and can be spotted anywhere, even from a terrace on the Plaza Mayor in Trujillo. This being said, Cáceres Province, the Sierra de San Pedro and the southeast (La Serena) definitely have the highest numbers. Griffon Vultures are most numerous. The best views are obtained on routes 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11, 19, 22 and 24. Black Vultures are common in the northern mountains 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 11, 12 and 19. Egyptian Vulture is a lot less common and most easily seen on 1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 22 and site 10 on page 200.

Eagles Booted and Short-toed are widespread and can be seen anywhere. Golden Eagle is particularly frequent in La Serena (23, 24, site 20 on page 241), but can be seen in Monfragüe, Hornachos and all other mountain ranges as well. Spanish Imperial Eagle breeds with several pairs in Monfragüe, and the nesting site at the Portilla del Tiétar (1) is for years now the most reliable site for this endemic bird. Other routes to look out for this bird are 6, 7 and 19. Bonelli's Eagle is fairly easy to observe in the Sierra de Tiros (24), but also on 1, 3, 19, 23 and site 19 on page 241.

Other birds of prey The Osprey is frequent on migration but rare in winter, mostly on rivers and shallow reservoirs (4, site 11 on page 201 and sites 15, 17 and 18 on pages 238-240). Montagu's Harrier has declined alarmingly and is now rare in the steppes of Cáceres (5, 6, 7), Brozas (site 5 on page 198). Only in La Serena it is still a common hunter of the arid fields (22, sites 20 and 22 on pages 241-243). Hen Harrier takes its place in winter. Marsh Harrier numbers are increasing. It is now frequent on wetlands (4, 5, 23, site 15, 16 and 18 on pages 238-240). It is increasingly common in arid fields too. Red Kite is common and widespread in winter, but scarce in spring and summer (most in the northern mountains; 12, 14, site 12 on page 202). Black Kite is the most numerous bird of prey from March onwards. Black-winged Kite prefers cereal fields in open dehesas and not too dry agricultural land. It is not an easy bird to track down and seems to be a bit more numerous in winter. Good routes are 4, 5, 18, 23 and sites 16, 17 and 22 on pages 239-243. Common Buzzard is widespread and rather common throughout. Sparrowhawk is fairly common in mountain forests. Goshawk and Honey Buzzard are raptors of the mountains, mostly in La Vera (14, 15, 16, site 12 on page 202) and to a lesser degree in Las Villuercas (9).

Falcons and kestrels Lesser Kestrel used to be a very common, colonial bird in many towns and villages, but is declining alarmingly. It is still widespread, but numbers are not nearly what they once were. It breeds in town centres of Guadalupe, Cáceres, Plasencia, Trujillo, Jerez and Cabeza del Buey and can be seen on routes 4, 6, 7, 9, 19, 21 and 22). Common Kestrel is an uncommon breeding bird of open terrain. Merlin winters in small numbers in the steppes. Peregrine is a rare resident bird of cliffs (1, 9). Hobby is a scarce breeding bird, mostly along small rivers in La Serena and las Villuercas.

Rails, crakes and gallinules Purple Gallinule, Water Rail and Moorhen breed at Arrocampo (4). Coot is frequent on many shallow reservoirs.



The wealth of birds and the splendid scenery has given Extremadura the status of a natural paradise. The rugged mountains, steppes and Mediterranean woodlands of this once unknown region in western Spain, are now one of the most appreciated destinations for wildlife enthusiasts.

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