Madrid

Hot Birding, Closer Than Expected

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Madrid is Spain's capital, and it is also a capital place to find birds. Spanish and British birders certainly know this, but relatively few American birders travel to Spain for birds. Fewer still linger in Madrid to sample its avian delights. Yet at only seven hours' direct flight from Newark or 8½ from Miami, Madrid is not that far off. Friendly people, great food, interesting museums, easy city transit, and great roads make central Spain a great vacation destination. For a birder, it can border on paradise.

Spain holds Europe's largest populations of many species, including Spanish Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*), Great (*Otis tarda*) and Little (*Tetrax tetrax*) Bustards, Eurasian Black Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*), Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*), and Black Wheatear (*Oenanthe leucura*). All of these can be seen within Madrid Province, the focus of this article, all within an hour's drive of downtown.

The area holds birding interest year-round. Many of northern Europe's birds winter in Spain, including Common Cranes (which pass through Madrid in migration), an increasing number of over-wintering European White Storks (*Ciconia ciconia*), and a wide variety of waterfowl. Spring comes early: Barn Swallows appear by February, and many Africa-wintering water birds arrive *en masse* in March. Other migrants, such as European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*), Common Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*), and Golden Oriole (*Oriolus oriolous*), however, rarely arrive before April. By August, many birds are once again on the move.

Common Kingfisher
(*Alcedo athis*).
Central Spain;
May 2005.
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Before exploring some of the birding possibilities in Madrid Province, a few recommendations are in order. As in any other large and growing city, some common sense is required when birding in and near Madrid. Pickpockets and bag-snatchers frequently target tourists in such high-traffic downtown areas as Plaza de España and Puerta del Sol. Such theft is not much of a concern outside the city, but cars should always be locked and anything of potential interest stowed in the trunk.

Allow ample time to explore and acclimate to the roadways. Buying a road atlas or good map at a local bookstore will help. While signs are plentiful, their placement and interpretation may at first confuse a North American driver. Off major highways, Spanish roads often lack shoulders and can be very winding.

Map by © Kei Sochi.

Madrileños, as Madrid residents call themselves, and Spaniards in general, don't have the same eating schedule as most North Americans. Restaurants usually don't open for lunch until 1 p.m. or 1:30 p.m., with peak lunch time being between 2 p.m. and 3:30 p.m. Local bars are fine places for meals and usually offer a relatively inexpensive *menú del día* that includes two dishes, dessert, and coffee. Most restaurants close after lunch by 4 p.m. or 4:30 p.m. and don't re-open for dinner until 8:30 p.m. at the earliest.

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To the American birder visiting Europe for the first time, the first Spanish birds may seem familiar. The center of town, for example, is hopping with House Sparrows and Rock Pigeons, along with the very similar but more arboreal Stock Dove (*Columba oenas*), which nests in sycamores lining such main streets as the north-south Paseo de la Castellana. Most Madrid starlings sport only tiny spots from late summer to late winter; from March into summer they have none. That's because they are not European Starlings but a separate species, the Spotless Starling (*Sturnus unicolor*). (In winter, migrating European Starlings appear, but Spotless Starlings are always common.) In the heart of town, the only corvid normally encountered is the Eurasian Magpie (*Pica pica*), now split from North America's Black-billed Magpie but very similar in appearance. Eurasian Blackbirds, Great (*Parus major*) and Blue (*P. caeruleus*) Tits, and Eurasian Goldfinches will remind American birders of American Robins, chickadees, and goldfinches back home. In addition, chunky Woodpigeons (*Columba palumbus*) clamber over thin branches in street-side trees, flashing white wing crescents, while from April to September, Common Swifts dominate the skies, screaming by in squadrons and nesting in cracks in buildings.

Eurasian Wryneck. *Central Spain; May 2005. © Andrés M. Domínguez.*

Take the teleférico or cable car into **Casa de Campo** on the city's west side and you may see a few European White Stork pairs nesting or wheeling overhead, or spot the quirky orange-black-and-white Eurasian Hoopoe, Green Woodpeckers (*Picus viridis*) of the distinctive Iberian *sharpei* race, exotic Monk Parakeets, and perhaps Crested Tits (*Parus cristatus*) in the pines. Birders hiking the trails may find Azure-winged Magpie (*Cyanopica cyana*), Little Owl (*Athene noctua*), or Great Spotted Cuckoo (*Clamator glandarius*).

The **Real Jardín Botánico**, or Royal Botanical Garden (small entrance fee), is a tranquil, beautiful place with baths that attract birds from the trees. It sits between the Atocha train station and the famed Museo del Prado museum, just west of Parque del Retiro. Here you may see Stock Dove, European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*), Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*), Great, Blue, and Coal (*Parus ater*) Tits, Common Chaffinch, Common Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*), Hawfinch, and Short-toed Treecreeper (*Certhia familiaris*). This park is smaller but more lush than nearby Parque del Retiro. Fenced and quiet, it is also much more relaxing to explore.

But to sample what this portion of the Iberian Peninsula truly has to offer, you must leave town—although you won't have to go very far.

Monte de El Pardo

Just northwest of town lies Monte de El Pardo, an expansive royal hunting ground running from the city north

along the east side of the A-6 highway. The royal family often hangs out here. It's also an important refuge, appropriately enough, for a few pairs of Spanish Imperial Eagles, along with the immense Eurasian Black Vulture, Europe's largest raptor. Most of Monte de El Pardo is off limits except to royalty and wildlife, but the few public areas hold many avian treasures.

Birders can explore the top end by cutting off Highway A-6 east onto the narrow, winding road that passes through Hoyo de Manzanares and continues to Colmenar Viejo. This boulder-strewn, hilly country may reveal a soaring Spanish Imperial Eagle or, more likely, Eurasian Griffon (*Gyps fulvus*) and Eurasian Black Vultures, Azure-winged Magpie, Woodlark (*Lullula arborea*), Common Stonechat, and a nice mix of other country birds. But birders stand a better chance of seeing these birds—plus additional opportunities for other riverside, brush, and forest species—by visiting the southern end, off route M-605, where there are parking areas and trails running along the Manzanares River below a dam.

Scan the skies in this entire area for the occasional over-flying Spanish Imperial Eagle, Eurasian Black Vulture, or, more likely, Eurasian Griffon Vultures and Common Buzzards (*Buteo buteo*). From May to August, European Bee-eaters nest in the eroded riverside ledges and often perch on wires close by. A Common Kingfisher (*Alcedo athis*) or Gray Wagtail may zip past along the river. The high-pitched *beer* call of the Penduline Tit (*Remiz pendulinus*) can be heard, although the tiny call-givers can be surprisingly challenging to find. In spring and summer, the Golden Oriole's rich song drifts from the taller holm oaks and ashes. Patience should yield good looks at this blazing-yellow ball of color. Keep an eye on the Common House-Martins and Barn Swallows overhead; Red-rumped Swallows (*Hirundo daurica*) regularly show up as well. Cirl Buntings (*Emberiza cirlus*) may be coaxed from the shrubs and small trees along these Pardo pathways, along with finches, tits, and, in the warmer months, Melodious Warblers (*Hippolais polyglotta*) and Corn Buntings (*Miliaria calandra*). From April to September, Woodchat Shrikes (*Lanius senator*) may be in the open fields, while European Reed Warblers (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) are common in the riverside reeds in spring and summer, as are Cetti's Warblers (*Cettia cetti*) and Common Nightingales in nearby tangles. By the way, the Spanish name for Cetti's Warbler is *ruiseñor bastardo*—the bastard nightingale—because it has similar coloration, is also very vocal, and shares the same habitat with the famed russet songster.

In places, paths run along the public boundary, providing sweeping views, through a chain-link fence, of the expansive oak-studded pasture or *dehesa* beyond. From March or April into summer, such viewpoints—particularly early or late in the day—can be productive for Great Spotted Cuckoo, Azure-winged Magpie, calling Red-necked Nightjar (*Caprimulgus ruficollis*), and Eurasian Scops-Owl (*Otus scops*). This area is good for mammals, too, including red and fallow deer, wild boar, and exotic American mink.

Eurasian Scops-Owl (*Otus scops*). *Central Spain; June 2005. © Andrés M. Domínguez.*

La Pedriza, Santillana Reservoir, and the Guadarramas

Escaping the city northbound on Highway M-607, then east on M-608, the birder is set on a course to visit a reservoir, foothills, and highlands of the Sierra de Guadarrama mountain range.

The first stop is the boulder-strewn hill country of **La Pedriza del Manzanares**, which provides a scenic backdrop for fine birding within 45 minutes of downtown. Weekday visits to this site are recommended, as it is extremely popular with weekend hikers and picnickers. The park closes when parking lots fill. Some of the best birding, however, is just outside the entrance gate and booth, where a dirt parking area (large but with limited spaces) marks the start of a track heading into scrub and pastures ringed by the beautiful hills. High atop the boulders, Eurasian Griffon Vultures roost and

Eurasian Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*). *Central Spain; May 2005. © Andrés M. Domínguez.*

nest, while down below a stream trickles by. In April and May, Woodchat Shrikes, migrating Whinchats (*Saxicola rubetra*), Northern Wheatears, Common Skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*), and Woodlarks are easy to see, and nine or more warbler species may pop up along the trail. Warblers that nest here include Orphean (*Sylvia hortensis*) with its somewhat mockingbird-like song, Subalpine (*S. cantillans*), Sardinian (*S. melanocephala*), Dartford (*S. undata*), Melodious, and Cetti's. Eurasian Jays (*Garrulus glandarius*) and Azure-winged Magpies may be seen flapping overhead or working the copses of trees.

Next stop: the entrance booth and up the road that winds into the mountains. With its many crags, thick forest, and streams, La Pedriza is home not only to vultures, Blue Rock Thrush (*Monticola solitarius*), and Eurasian Crag Martin (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*), but also to Eurasian Scops-Owl (spring and summer) and Little, Long-eared, Barn, and Eurasian Eagle (*Bubo bubo*) Owls. (A birder would be lucky to see or hear one or two of the owls, however, unless armed with time, tapes, and a local birder who knows where things are.) A wide, stony stream next to one of the top parking areas can be good for Eurasian Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*). During late spring and summer, hikes into the higher elevations get birders within reach of Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush (*Monticola saxatilis*), Ortolan Bunting (*Emberiza hortulana*), and Bluethroat (tough), although these birds show up closer to the road between La Morcuera Pass and Puerto de Navacerrada (see below).

Just east of La Pedriza and while you are passing Manzanares el Real on the busy M-608, you will see a large reservoir on the right. In general, **Santillana Reservoir** is a great spot in spring and fall for scattered shorebird and songbird vagrants and an important waterfowl and gull wintering site. Among other things, the pastures around the lake host *meridionalis* Northern Shrikes (part of a complex of subspecies likely to be split from Northern Shrike), Woodchat Shrikes, large numbers of Yellow Wagtails (*Motacilla flava*) from spring to fall, and foraging European White Stork pairs, which nest in nearby towns and atop sawn-off pasture trees visible from the road.

La Morcuera and Puerto de Navacerrada

Not far past the end of the reservoir on M-608, the M-611 highway snakes north (left) to the hill-perched town of Miraflores de la Sierra. Above this town, the highway runs through forested highlands for several miles to **La Morcuera Pass**, which comes up just before a sharp twist to the right. Here there's a wide pull-off (left side) with a

panoramic view of pastureland, brush, and rock outcrops sweeping down to the valley below. Ortolan Buntings sing along both sides of the road at this spot, and a pair or two of Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes might be on the rock outcrops. Tawny (*Anthus campestris*) and Water Pipits (*A. spinoletta*), Common Skylarks, Woodlarks, and Northern Wheatears live in the open areas. Golden and Booted (*Hieraaetus pennatus*) Eagles sometimes pass overhead, along with the occasional Peregrine Falcon. At dusk on warm nights from late May into summer, listen for the rolling trill of European Nightjars (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) from La Morcuera back to where M-611 leaves the forest. Sometimes, a Red-necked Nightjar can be heard as well, reaching its upper limits here.

Beyond La Morcuera, M-611 winds beyond bull pastures to the town of Rascafría. From here, a turn left onto M-604 leads to the ski station at Puerto de Navacerrada. Along the way, you will pass a large picnic area on the right, followed by a pull-off into the **Mirador de los Robledos**. This viewpoint can be great for raptors, and has produced, at least occasionally, sightings of Short-toed (*Circaetus gallicus*), Golden, and Spanish Imperial Eagles, Eurasian Black and Griffon Vultures, and Peregrine Falcon. In recent years, Red-backed Shrikes (*Lanius collurio*) have bred here, part of the southward expansion by the species into central Spain.

At **Puerto de Navacerrada**, the pines around the ski center and toboggan rental usually produce Citril Finch (*Serinus citrinella*), European Pied Flycatcher (*Ficedula hypoleuca*), Great Spotted Woodpecker, and often Red Crossbill. Rock Buntings (*Emberiza cia*) and Common Ravens patrol the roadside. The chair lift operates not only during winter ski season but also in warm months, carrying hikers and birders to just above 6,000 feet, a good elevation for finding Alpine Accentor (*Prunella collaris*), Bluethroat, and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush.

"Suburban" Grassland Birds

The outskirts of Madrid are sprawling in every direction, yet some of Europe's last great grassland birds manage to hang on just outside of town, not far from Madrid-Barajas Airport. These birds still have space thanks to conservation efforts, but each year development expands around them. One magical road is M-103, which runs north-south starting just northeast of town. Virtually all along its length, from near the small town of Cobeña up to the intersection with the east-west N-320, this road holds birding interest. Dwindling numbers of Lesser Kestrels (*Falco naumanni*) and many European White Storks nest on churches and other tall structures. Red-legged Partridges (*Alectoris rufa*) scurry across farm fields. Dirt roads marked with "Cañada Real" signs, which indicate traditional livestock passage routes, provide great birding, particularly from Fuente el Saz de Jarama northward.

The best one is just north of the small town of **Valdetorres de Jarama**, an immediate right turn after town when headed north. This bumpy road through rolling grain fields often yields flocks of Great Bustards as well as Little Bustard, Black-bellied Sandgrouse (*Pterocles orientalis*), Calandra Lark (*Melanocorypha calandra*), and Northern Harrier in winter and Montagu's Harrier (*Circus pygargus*) in spring and summer, with an occasional Eurasian Stone Curlew (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) thrown in. The bustards are around all year and should be scoped for in both the near and far fields. March into mid-April is the best time to see displaying males. Winter tends to be wetter but still rich in birds, including good numbers of Red Kites (*Milvus milvus*). In wet weather, however, the track often becomes impassable for a regular car.

Wetlands Near Sightseeing

South of the city sit two important wetlands, both near major tourism sites. The **Laguna de San Juan** is a reed-fringed marsh that is home to Purple Swamphens, Marsh Harriers (*Circus aeruginosus*), exotic Red Avadavats (*Amandava amandava*), and a few pairs of Bearded Reedlings (*Panurus biarmicus*). In winter, large numbers of waterfowl shelter here; in spring and fall, huge numbers of swallows roost. The hills overlooking the wetland are home to Black Wheatear. The laguna sits off M-404. If you are headed east from Ciempozuelos on this highway, the sign to the laguna appears on the right, just after crossing the Río Tajuña.

The laguna sits about 3.7 miles (5.9 kilometers) west of the charming little hilltop town of Chinchón, with its crumbling castle, parador, church, and restaurants ringing a plaza

Common Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*). *Central Spain; May 2005.*
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Rivas Vaciamadrid and Laguna de El Campillo

For one-stop, Metro-accessible bird-shopping just outside Madrid, you can't beat a walk around **Laguna de El Campillo.** This former gravel pit at the east edge of the town of Rivas Vaciamadrid is flanked on one side by the Jarama River and on the other by eroding cliffs. In between, you'll find marsh, field, and forest—and the birds that go with them.

The laguna can be reached on foot via a 15-minute walk from the Rivas Vaciamadrid Metro stop, on the Metro's purple number 9 line. For Metro details, see <www.metromadrid.es>. European White Storks often nest at the station and will also be across the street nesting on the church and cell-phone towers as early as December.

On foot: To walk to the laguna from the Metro, exit the station and cross the main thoroughfare, Avenida de Francia, just above the glorieta or traffic circle. Head up the sidewalk, with the church to your right and Avenida de Francia (paralleling Calle Wenceslao García) on your left. Turn right onto Calle Marcial Lalanda, which has a tennis/handball court on your right. Continue straight, crossing several street intersections until the road ends at a T-junction. Turn left here onto a gravel road and you will see the laguna on the right and the cliffs rising up on the left.

By car: From the A-3 highway headed east from Madrid, exit toward the Rivas Vaciamadrid "casco urbano" (*after* exit signs for a commercial center) and keep left. After passing under the highway, at a traffic circle, exit right onto a road that parallels the highway. This road turns into the dirt road that runs along the laguna's west end. Parking is available at the pull-off shortly after the gravel begins and next to a small nursery area.

The Loop

A dirt track leads up to the top of the cliff and follows along the top, providing a nice overall view of the area. This top path may produce Black Wheatear at any month and singing Spectacled Warblers (*Sylvia conspicillata*) in May or June. But most of the action is down below.

To circle the lake, follow the dirt road along its west shore. Following this route, the sun rises on the right, drenching the base of the cliffs in perfect morning light. Watching and yielding for trucks and other vehicles, slowly work your way up the dirt road. After a cement works, which has Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*), you reach a gate to a private farm with a "Do not enter" sign. Here you can take a narrow foot path to the right that crosses railroad tracks and leads to a path around the lake. Follow this path left along the lake shore. Marshes from here to where the path jogs hard right hold the best water birds, including a pair or two of Purple Swamphens. Until the late 1980s, the Purple Swamphen was considered a rare specialty of southern Spain. Today, thanks in good part to conservation efforts, these blue, red-legged marsh denizens are easier to find and are pushing their range northward.

If you continue on this lake loop, you get nice looks at the Jarama River, and then you arrive at the park's visitor center, the entrance to which comes up on the right. There are restrooms, literature, and staff here to field questions (likely only in Spanish). From this point to the loop's finish, there are many views of the river on the left and the lake on the right.

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Here is a list of some commonly seen Laguna de El Campillo birds, sorted by habitat:

- **Overhead:** Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*) from spring to early fall, Cattle Egret, and European White Stork (much of year).
- **Grasses and scrub above cliffs:** Spectacled Warbler (spring and summer), Crested Lark (*Galerida cristata*), Corn Bunting, finch flocks, and sometimes *meridionalis* Northern Shrike and Eurasian Stone Curlew.
- **Cliffs:** Eurasian Kestrel, Little Owl, European Bee-eater (spring and summer), Eurasian Hoopoe (spring and summer), Black Wheatear, Black Redstart, Blue Rock Thrush (winter), Red-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*), Eurasian Jackdaw, and sometimes Rock Sparrow (*Petronia petronia*) and Rock Bunting.
- **Scrub at base of cliff:** Melodious (spring/summer), Sardinian, and Dartford Warblers, tits, finches, and Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*) in winter.
- **Marsh at north end of lake:** Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*), Little Bittern in summer, Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*), Purple Swamphen, and Penduline Tit.
- **Lake, river, and wet edges:** Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*), Great Cormorant (fall to spring), Northern Shoveler (not summer), Common Pochard, *crecca* Green-winged Teal, Common Kingfisher, Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) from fall to spring and Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) from spring to summer, Eurasian Coot, Common Moorhen, Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls in winter, Green and Common Sandpipers, European and Great (*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*) Reed Warblers in spring and summer, Cetti's Warbler, Common Nightingale in spring and summer, and Reed Bunting in winter.
- **Trees and edge:** Long-tailed (*Aegithalos caudatus*), Blue, and Great Tits, Green Woodpecker, Monk Parakeet, and Eurasian Tree Sparrow; and in spring and summer Eurasian Hoopoe, Common Cuckoo, European Turtle-Dove, and Golden Oriole in the poplars.
- **Migration:** Many possibilities, including Little Egret, Osprey, Booted Eagle, Eurasian Hobby, Common Crane, Bank Swallow, various warblers, Ortolan Bunting, Common Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*), and Eurasian Wryneck.

that turns into a bull ring during festival times. Olive trees just outside town often reveal perched Little Owls. European Bee-eaters and *meridionalis* Northern Shrikes frequent roadside wires.

Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*), Purple Swamphen, Marsh Harrier, Red-necked Nightjar, and waterfowl can also be seen at **Mar de Ontígola**, just outside Aranjuez, a town known for its royal summer palace and extensive gardens (nesting Stock Doves). Surrounding acreage holds European Bee-eater, Eurasian Stone Curlew, and Great Spotted Cuckoo.

The sites outlined here provide a firm sampling of what Madrid Province offers birders within easy reach of Spain's capital. A determined birder can fill out a good portion of the Spain bird list by just exploring these mountains, wetlands, fields, and forests, while allowing, of course, a little extra time to soak in the art galleries, architecture, and fine restaurants of one of Europe's best-loved cities.

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