The Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve in northern Spain’s Basque Country is a hotspot for migrating birds on the East Atlantic Flyway. Now, a hi-tech new birdwatching centre is pioneering survey and conservation work as well as offering visitors an unparalleled twitching experience. Nick Haslam reports.
The centre is the brainchild of the two men busy at work in front of me. With the same family name yet unrelated, and living on opposite sides of the river, they met some ten years ago by chance while birdwatching on the banks of the Oca. Edorta was a young biologist and José Mari a newly graduated lawyer specialising in environmental law. On their first meeting, they quickly bonded over their shared love of the natural beauty of the area and discussed the fact that it would be the perfect location for a birdwatching centre.

When an old fish-canning factory came on the market shortly afterwards, José Mari realised at once that it could be the answer to their dreams. ‘The asking price was €500,000,’ he says with a laugh. ‘Which was precisely €500,000 more than I had. My parents thought I was crazy, but I finally persuaded them to help me out. They sold their summer house, which raised half the capital, and then my brother and I scraped together more than I had. My parents thought I was crazy, but I finally persuaded them to help me out. They sold their summer house, which raised half the capital, and then my brother and I scraped together a mortgage to buy the concrete shell.’

Eventually, their intense lobbying paid off, and with grants from the EU and the Basque Autonomous Community, as well as a bank loan and matched funding from a number of other sources, the necessary finances were in place. ‘We work particularly with schools in the area,’ says José as we bundle up the mist nets and walk out through the woods. ‘They were quick to realise how important it is to get kids interested early in birds and birdlife. And that enabled us to source additional educational funds to help set up the centre.’

STATE OF THE ART

Having opened only two years ago, the centre is now an impressive hi-tech building complete with classrooms, workshops, offices and accommodation. There is also an observation tower and viewing decks equipped with high-quality telescopes – linked to electronic viewing screens – that overlook a semi-tidal wetland on the Oca. It has a permanent staff of ten people, an annual budget of €300,000 and is the only research centre in Europe equipped to launch weather survey balloons, using a special platform set inside the building. Working with Euskalmet, the Basque Service of Meteorology, the centre analyses wind and weather high in the atmosphere. ‘This enables us to monitor
and predict the arrival of migrating birds,’ explains Edorta. ‘Some of the birds have been recorded at 9,000 metres, flying high to avoid adverse wind directions.’

Back at the centre, we check out one of the latest projects. Last year, 12 osprey chicks were removed under licence from nests in Scotland and brought to Urdaibai to fledge in specially prepared nests, in the hope of re-establishing a population of ospreys in the Basque Country. For their release last autumn, five of the birds were fitted with special GPS transmitters. Now, as he sits in front of a large screen, José Mari calls up the latest data from a satellite monitor. ‘This Urdaibai osprey is now on a baobab on Senegal’s coast that we’ve been able to identify on Google Earth,’ he says, pointing out the zigzagging daily track of the young osprey from its favourite nocturnal roosting spot to fishing grounds in the shallow lagoons. ‘One of our researchers went to Senegal this winter and saw the bird, which seems to be in good health.’

The programme is ongoing for the next five years, with more releases planned from Urdaibai and it’s hoped that the ospreys will eventually return to their former nests to find a mate and breed.

SWALLOW TALE

At this time of year, the centre is busy with volunteers and researchers, and later in the evening, just before sunset, I join Vicente de Alba Mora and Carmen Azahara, two young specialists working here, to watch as they set mist nets along the edge of the wetlands. The sky is busy with swallows, which have only just arrived at the wetlands, and as the sun sets, there’s a sudden fluttering in the air as numerous birds swoop in to roost on the reeds just below.

We wait until we see the first bats fly overhead – a sure sign, according to Edorta, that no more birds will come in – and then go out on fragile duckboards to release our quarry. The catch that night is impressive, with two sedge warblers, a Eurasian blackcap, three willow warblers and nearly 60 swallows. The birds are carefully placed in cloth bags and boxes to be taken back to the centre.

Over supper late that night, Edorta tells me about the impact that the bird centre is having in the area. ‘Through our classes in local schools, where the study of birds is used to teach many subjects, from English to maths, we’ve found unexpected results,’ he says. ‘Fathers who see their kids so involved in birds now think twice about hunting in winter. ‘And what,’ he then asks with a smile, ‘do you think is the biggest enemy of nesting swallows in the Basque Country?’

I’m mystified and say so. ‘The son’s new car!’ he replies with a grin. In the traditional Basque caserio, or farmhouse, the wide eaves where swallows nest also shelter the family car. ‘The new car gets spattered with droppings, so they knock down the nest. Now we find that there’s more tolerance as kids become aware of how far our summer visitors have come.’
IN THE FIELD

Next morning, just after dawn, teams are already at work on our haul from the night before – carefully noting weight, fat content, feather length and ring numbers. The centre runs regular courses to train new ringers and students are being taught how to handle the birds and how to place the tiny metal bands around legs more fragile than matchsticks.

The swallows are released in one group, erupting from a cardboard box to climb 200 metres above the centre, where they join their brethren to feed on insects. ‘They’ll be flying north later today,’ says Vicente, ‘if the wind and weather conditions are favourable.’

I spend the rest of the day with John Maguregi, the centre’s photographer and guide, who records all of the species that are seen here. We visit special observation points set within the biosphere reserve and I am amazed at the extraordinary variety of habitats present in the area, from the busy port at Bermeo, where small turnstones search for titbits among the fishermen – fuel for their imminent and epic flight to Iceland and Greenland – to the blustery headland at Matxitako, where the lighthouse overlooks the mouth of the Oca. Overhead, a peregrine swoops among Arctic terns, and in the distance, we can see the island of Izaro, once the site of a monastery and now protected breeding grounds of yellow-legged gulls and little egrets.

After lunch in the historic town of Gernika, we return to the centre to find a group of excited schoolchildren on the observation platform, where 11 spoonbills have just swooped in to feed in the lagoon immediately below. Two have rings that have just been identified as having been fitted the year before in northern Holland. Just beyond, a single avocet and two graceful black-winged stilts patrol the water’s edge and above, more than 1,000 swallows herald a busy night’s netting ahead.

It’s time for me to leave and as I load up my car, Edorta says: ‘We’ve just had more good news– a local banker wants to sponsor an osprey next year.’ José Mari gives me a crushing handshake. ‘The old factory,’ he begins, nodding up at the centre, ‘is still called the fabrica in the village. And it still provides work and manufactures things – maybe not canned fish – but data and an understanding of nature. Really, what more could we want?’

CO-ORDINATES

SPAIN

When to go

The Urdaibai Bird Center is open all year round, Tuesday to Friday from 10am to 4pm and weekends from 10am to 8pm. It operates two hides that are open from Wednesday to Sunday.

Getting there

Nick Haslam travelled to Spain with Brittany Ferries, which offers a choice of routes to Bilbao and Santander from Portsmouth and Plymouth. The centre lies around 40 kilometres from Bilbao and 140 kilometres from Santander. The simplest way to get there is to drive. The centre offers self-guided and guided tours as well as training and volunteer programmes.

Further information

Urdaibai Bird Center: www.birdcenter.org
Urdaibai tourism: www.turismourdaibai.com
Spain tourism: www.spain.info
Brittany Ferries: www.brittany-ferries.co.uk