



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

# IN THE FLY ZONE



We're crouching in a thicket of holm oak in the rolling hills of the Basque Country above the spectacular

estuary of the River Oca on a grey, misty afternoon. My companions, José Mari Unamuno and Edorta Unamuno, have just switched on the *reclamo* - a small digital audio decoy - at the foot of a long, fragile black mist net that we've erected on slender poles. 'There's a chance we might net something,' whispers José Mari. 'Newly arrived birds will be establishing their territories now.'

Suddenly, we hear a call and see a blur of movement in the net. Edorta jumps to his feet and deftly removes the tiny creature, whooping with delight. 'It's the Iberian chiffchaff, for sure - the first one we've netted this year!'

'These long-distance migrants have a different feel to the other chiffchaffs, which winter here and breed in northern Europe,' says José as he blows back the buff yellow feathers to reveal the fat content on the bird's stomach. 'They're muscular and aggressive - completely unafraid - whereas the European migrants are more passive.'

With its bright eyes watching us and the occasional cheep of protest, the bird is carefully weighed - a mere 8.9 grams - its wing feathers and other parts of its anatomy are measured, and then a tiny ring is placed on one of its legs. Watching it dart away, apparently unfazed by the experience, it's extraordinary to think that just a few days earlier, this minuscule creature was flying across the arid wastes of the Sahara.

#### MIGRATION HOTSPOT

It's a fitting baptism for my visit to the Urdaibai Bird Center on the Basque Country's rugged Atlantic coast. Set in the heart of the 250-square-kilometre Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve - one of the first to be declared in Spain, during the early 1980s - the centre lies within the wetlands of the River Oca.

It's strategically set in a bottleneck of the avian migration route between Africa and Scandinavia, where the Pyrenees form an obstacle to millions of birds passing between winter feeding areas and summer breeding grounds. In this small area between mountains and Atlantic, some 344 species of bird have been seen - out of Spain's total of 563 species - making it one of the Northern Hemisphere's migration hotspots.



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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 that overlooked the wetlands 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 a mortgage to buy the concrete shell.'

For the next five years, the two Unamunos struggled to raise money. In the meantime, they used the three-storey hangar as a temporary bird-ringing station. 'It must have been the largest [such station] in Europe,' says Edorta. 'We were dwarfed by the immensity of the space.'

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



**OPPOSITE:** José Mari Unamuno holds up a ringed Iberian chiffchaff; **ABOVE:** José Mari removes a chiffchaff from a mist net; **LEFT:** attaching a GPS locator to a young osprey at the Urdaibai Bird Center



A volunteer removes a bird from a mist net set in the reed beds of the River Oca wetlands close to the Urdaibai Bird Center

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

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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 splattered 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

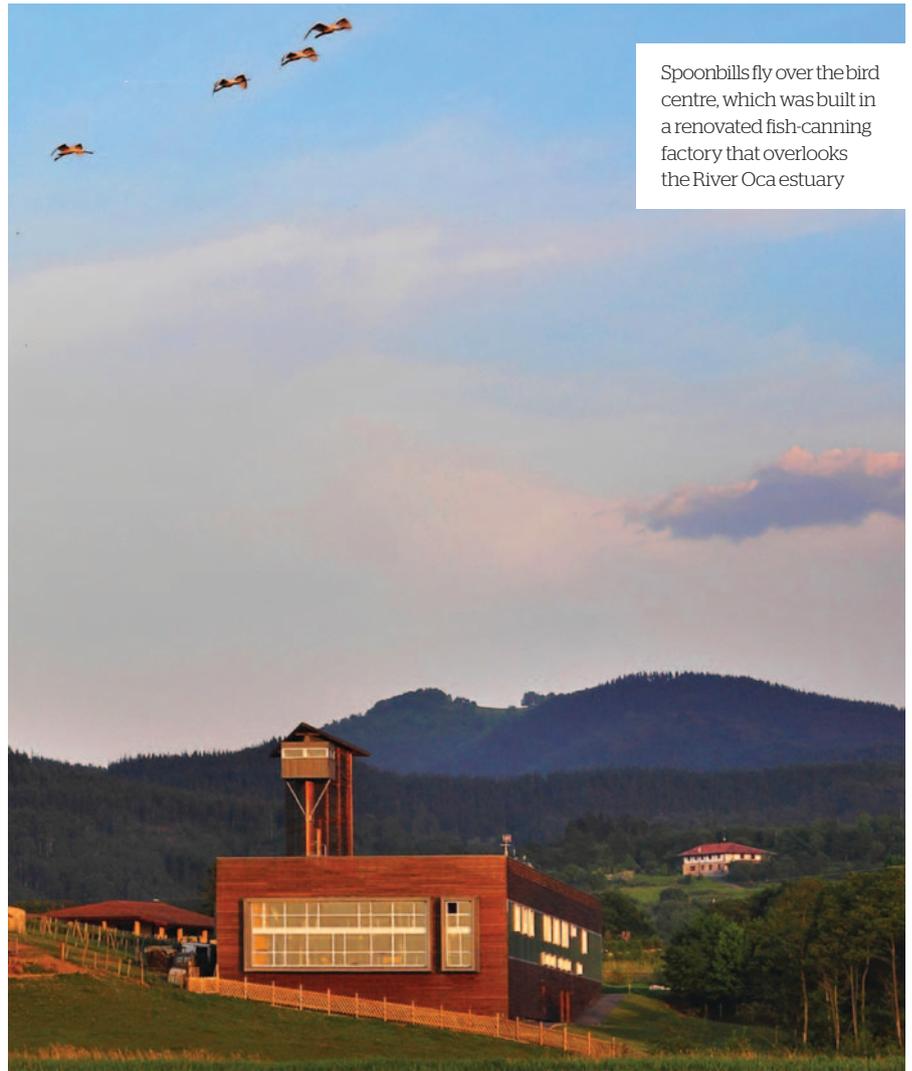
Next morning, just after dawn, teams are already at work on our haul from the night before - carefully noting weight, fat content, feather length and ring numbers. The centre runs regular courses to train new ringers and students are being taught how to handle the birds and how to place the tiny metal 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'm 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?' G



Spoonbills fly over the bird centre, which was built in a renovated fish-canning factory that overlooks the River Oca estuary

## 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](http://www.birdcenter.org)  
Urdaibai tourism: [www.turismourdaibai.com](http://www.turismourdaibai.com)  
Spain tourism: [www.spain.info](http://www.spain.info)  
Brittany Ferries: [www.brittany-ferries.co.uk](http://www.brittany-ferries.co.uk)

