



Where I work Xabier Cabodevilla

In this photograph, taken on a late summer's day in the region of Campo de Calatrava in central Spain, I'm tagging a red-legged partridge (*Alectoris rufa*) with a GPS tracker to help me to monitor the impact of human activity on these and other steppe birds' lives. I also study two sandgrouse species (*Pterocles alchata* and *Pterocles orientalis*) and two types of bustard (*Tetrax tetrax* and *Otis tarda*).

The outlook isn't great for the birds I research. Red-legged partridges are native to the Iberian Peninsula, as well as to some parts of France and Italy, but their populations are falling rapidly owing to activities such as intensive agriculture and hunting. In central Spain, populations of the birds have declined by around 50% in less than a decade, according to my PhD research.

Partridge fieldwork isn't as easy as this picture suggests. Generally, I prefer to track birds from a distance, following them into the fields with a telescope or a pair of binoculars, staying far enough away so as not to spook them, and waiting until they

roost on the ground in the evening. This can mean long days tracking the birds under a blazing hot Spanish sun.

In the morning I'll come back to collect faecal samples from where we spotted the birds roosting. Finding partridge poo is also hard: sometimes I start at 6 a.m. and don't find anything until the afternoon, even if I have a pretty good sense of where they were the previous day.

I completed my PhD in September and am looking for a postdoctoral research position where I can continue studying. It's a little stressful, but I'm trying to keep things in perspective and stay relaxed about my future: it's been a difficult year finalizing my degree and publishing papers. Often, among researchers, our work is also our hobby; it can be difficult to switch off. We'll see where science takes me next year.

Xabier Cabodevilla recently completed his PhD at the University of the Basque Country in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain, and the Spanish Institute for Game and Wildlife Research in Ciudad Real. **Interview by Jack Leeming.**

Photographed for *Nature* by
Guillermo Gutierrez Carrasca.