

Pyrenees

17th June - 21st June 2005

An intensive five day tour with renowned World Lister Tom Gullick

(Participants - Chris Knox, Tony Blake, Ricard Gutierrez, Tom Gullick)



Lammergeier - Escuin Mirador June 2005 - (Tony Blake)

17th June

Having arrived the day before Tony and I met up with Ricard Gutierrez at Barcelona airport as planned and headed towards the Catalanian steppe country passing Monserrat on our way. Our plan for the first day was to initially look for Montagu's Harrier (a declining bird in Catalonia) then meet up with Tom Gullick and head up the Cinca Valley on towards our base at Bielsa in the north Pyrenees. We arrived at Ricards Montagu's site in the heat of midday and soon raptors started to 'appear' Kestrel, Common Buzzard, and Short-toed Eagle, a perched Harrier sp proved to be a female Marsh, and shortly afterwards we obtained views of a pair of Montagu's Harrier floating over the fields.

Our next destination was Fraga to the west of the town of Lleida where we met up with Tom and were quickly shown a roosting Scops Owl, followed by a nice Great Spotted Cuckoo and a pair of wheezing Penduline Tit.

We headed into Aragon and the area known as Monegros, stopping at a series of 'paddy

fields' on the road between Sant Lucina and Castell Florite - Black-winged Stilt were breeding and 100+ Lapwing and two Green Sandpiper were probably birds that just didn't make it north and were summering, several Black-headed Gulls proved the only ones of the trip, two Whiskered Tern were also noted, an adult and an instructive first summer type. At the western end of the 'paddy fields' we stopped opposite an obvious orange roofed building off to the left, here we obtained excellent views of a pair of Lesser Kestrel, the male bird being particularly obliging as it followed a nearby tractor disturbing insects in its wake, the Starlings on the roof here were now Spotless. Just north of the village of Castell Florite we stopped at a Black Wheatear site, the bird eventually showing well, Tom had no qualms about taking the 4x4 over newly cut arable fields and this produced excellent views of Little Bustard, and up to 5 Roller's were seen.

We then followed the Cinca Valley roughly north towards Barbastro and the foothills of the Pyrenees proper, as we climbed we made stops at various cliffs and bluffs noting Alpine Swifts, Crag Martin, Chough and Raven, and birds such as Black-eared Wheatear were commonly noted from the vehicle. From Barbastro we continued north on towards Ainsa with both species of Kite common over the valley, and eventually our base for the trip, the Hotel Bielsa in the north Pyrenees.

www.hotelbielsa.com.



Hotel Bielsa - our base for the trip (Chris Knox)

18th June

Leaving Hotel at 7am today we were to explore the area to the east-south east of Bielsa, initially heading for the village of Plan, then heading into the pinewoods above. Here were our first woodland birds, Great spotted Woodpecker, Goldcrest, Firecrest, Crested Tit, and Short-toed Treecreeper. As we climbed we flushed two Citril Finch these being the first of 20+ birds noted most often seen feeding on the ground. Our next stop was the Col Sagun where we obtained excellent close views of both Chough species, and a fine displaying Rock Thrush, Water Pipits were song fighting throughout the Col as were several Tree

Pipit, and a handful of Northern Wheatear were noted. As we dropped down from the Col we stopped at a roadside for a fine male Rock Bunting and nearby our first Red-backed Shrikes of the trip, an immature Lammergeier was noted distantly, one of 11 species of raptor noted today.



Col Sagun (Tony Blake)

Heading into the valley anticipation was high as we approached our Wallcreeper site, passing through Chia we headed onto El Run stopping at a small lay-by on the N260 main road. The drought in northern Spain this year has meant many rock faces have remained dry and as a consequence feeding sites for Wallcreeper have been much harder to locate, however we were not to be disappointed, as we watched a splendid male Wallcreeper at ranges down to 25 metres for almost an hour. Also in this area were hundreds of Alpine Swift, lots of Crag Martin and whilst waiting for the star bird we also noted Dipper, Grey Wagtail and several Spotted Flycatcher.



Male Wallcreeper (Tony Blake)

Benasque was our next destination, leaving the village we headed south towards an obvious

cliff face with two aeries / towers nearby, here we watched a Lammergeier cave, inside a single chick soon to be attended by a massive adult bringing food. As we waited for the adult Lammergeier we noted a good selection of raptors including Golden Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, and Honey Buzzard. From Benasque we headed towards Campo and back on towards the Ainsa valley adding Orphean and Western Bonelli's Warbler and excellent views of Wryneck. Cirl Bunting and a handful of Rock Sparrow were noted at roadside stops, and we arrived back at Bielsa 1930 after a long and tiring day.

19th June

A 6am start this morning with the aim of heading into France via the Bielsa tunnel hoping to locate several upland species which are to be seen easier on this side of the Pyrenees. Our route was to take us past the town of St Lary where we noted Whinchat in the roadside fields, as we climbed up towards the Col D'Aspen [of Tour de France fame] we added Yellowhammer and Whitethroat, species that appeared to be absent from the Spanish side, plus woodland birds such as Nuthatch, Common Treecreeper, Marsh Tit and Chiffchaff. From the Col D'Aspen we then headed for the Col Beyreand where whilst watching Ring Ouzel we all got excellent views of a Black Woodpecker as the bird flew 200 metres across the col into the woodland beyond. Both species of Redstart were also noted here, Common Redstart being a particular 'local' find. La Mongie Ski resort [1723 m] was the next stop where we obtained close views of breeding Snow Finch, they appear to be nesting in the ski lift machinery, one pair possibly nesting in the chair itself!!



La Mongie Ski Resort (Chris Knox)

Our next target was not so easy, in summer Alpine Accentors remain high on scree slopes and we had to climb up the Col de Tourmalet, an hour of looking and listening eventually paid off. During the summer months these birds are obviously a lot more reluctant to show themselves than in winter when they are very showy around the resort area. Black Redstart was common on the Col de Tourmalet as were Alpine and Common Chough; nearer

the base of the Col we noted a small group of Citril Finch. Raptors appeared much scarcer on the French side of the Pyrenees with a day list of 8 species, including a Sparrowhawk, and just before the border tunnel back to Bielsa a fine adult Lammergeier flying low along the valley and given excellent close views.

20th June

Our last full day in the Pyrenees today saw a general mopping up of species we still needed or hadn't seen well, we left Hotel at 0700 and headed south of Bielsa towards the town of Ainsa, just north of here we noted several Yellow-legged Gull a small number of adults that are summering in this area. During the remainder of the morning we explored the Ainsa area, the highlights of which were Woodlark, Orphean and Subalpine Warbler a family party of Dartford Warbler, and several pair of Ortolan Bunting, which is a declining species in Spain. Further south near Barbastro we added a nice family party of Blue Rock Thrush before heading north again then a little west into the Ordesa National Park and an area that has been described as a 'hidden wonder of the Aragonese Pyrenees' - the Gargantas de Escuin [Escuin Gorge].

We parked at the now deserted village of Escuin and walked some 150 metres to the Mirador [signposted] overlooking the spectacular canyon. An hour here produced superb close views of up to 10 Lammergeier as they flew past, often at eye level jostling for air space like fighter squadrons, at one stage birds were seen in the sky against the backdrop of distant thunder and lightning - superb. Also in the Escuin Gorge were Griffon and Egyptian Vulture, and a fly through Hobby, a pair of Nuthatch and Spotted Flycatcher were seen around the village.



Gargantas de Escuin (Tony Blake)

21st June

Leaving Bielsa for good today and heading generally south away from the Pyrenees via Monegros and eventually on to the coast and the Llobregat at Barcelona. Our first stop was a road bridge over a overlooking a small marsh where we heard a Water Rail, and obtained views of Reed and Great Reed Warbler and a nice family party of Penduline Tit. Monegros [especially the area to the north of Castell Florite] eventually gave up both species of Sandgrouse, and was very good for larks - Crested, Thekla and Lesser Short toed, also seen were several Tawny Pipit and a nice Little Owl. From here we moved back to the Santa Lucina 'paddy fields' where Green Sandpipers had increased to 4 and they were joined by a party of 4 Black-tailed Godwit. Continuing alongside the Cinca River we stopped at the heronry opposite the town of Mequinenza on the N211 road, [cross the main bridge in town and continue on the minor road to east of the river], here we recorded lots of Cattle Egret, Night Heron, a handful of Little Egret and Purple Heron, plus 4 Squacco feeding out on the river.

There followed a rather 'birdless' drive to the Lleida area and the site of Lesser Grey Shrike a now threatened Spanish bird with less than 20 pairs remaining. The bird was seen well breeding in the vicinity of Alfes Aerodrome, best viewed from a small hillock behind a small concrete reservoir, however the bird did roam and was seen to fly some distance to feed, the Lesser Grey was one of four Shrike species seen today.

From the Lleida area we drove almost due east to reach the coast south of Barcelona, stopping at the picturesque resort of Garraf, where we added a screaming colony of Pallid swift, Shag, and at least four Blue Rock Thrush. Our final stop of the day was the Llobregat Delta just south of Barcelona airport; this excellent reserve produced a host of wildfowl, Purple Gallinule, Little Bittern and the feral Monk Parakeet and Common Waxbill. We found Marsh sandpiper on the pools and a brief seawatch added Gannet, Audouins Gull, and Gull-billed Tern. We ended the trip at Barcelona airport at 1800 and after farewells I stayed on another evening flying back to Newcastle on Easy Jet the following lunchtime.

Species List.

1. **Mute Swan.** - A single bird noted on lake near centre of Benasque.
2. **Shelduck.** - Family party noted at Llobregat.
3. **Gadwall.** - A single male- Llobregat Delta.
4. **Mallard.** - A handful noted in Pyrenees, 'lots' at Llobregat.
5. **Red-crested Pochard.** - A single noted at Llobregat.
6. **Common Pochard.** - Two females Llobregat.
7. **Red - legged Partridge.** - Small numbers noted in Pyreenan foothills.
8. **Quail.** - Several heard and flushed.
9. **Little Grebe.** - A single heard 'trilling' at the Black Wheatear site north of Castell Florite.
10. **Shag.** - A single noted feeding off Garaff on 21st; birds visiting here at this time of

year are on feeding sorties from the Balearic's.

11. Gannet. - An immature flying south off Llobregat.

12. Little Bittern. - 4 + noted at Llobregat - and showing very well.

13. Night Heron. - Good numbers noted at Rio Cinca heronry, plus small numbers noted at Llobregat.



Night Heron (Tony Blake)

14. Squacco. - 4+ Rio Cinca at Mequinenza heronry.

15. Cattle Egret. - A fairly common bird in both Catalonia & Aragon.

16. Little Egret. - Noted only on Rio Cinca and smaller numbers at Llobregat.

17. Grey Heron. - 'Good' numbers at Llobregat, plus 1-2 at St Lucina 'paddy' fields

18. Purple Heron. - Uncommon, with only a handful noted all week.

19. White Stork. - Common, most pairs with large young in nest.

20. Greater Flamingo. - 4+ noted at Llobregat.

21. Honey Buzzard. - Only two birds noted.

22. Black Kite. - 'Common' - good numbers noted daily.

23. Red Kite. - Again noted daily, but slightly less so than above.

24. Lammergeier. - First noted near Col Sagun - an immature bird, with an adult on the French side the next day, best seen however at the Escuin Canyon where up to 10 birds viewed from Mirador and often seen right overhead or flying through the canyon at eye level affording superb views.



(Photo Tony Blake)

- 25. **Egyptian Vulture.** - Small numbers noted daily in both Pyrenees and foothills.
- 26. **Griffon Vulture.** - Common.
- 27. **Short-toed Eagle.** - 1-2 noted daily, seen very well at Monegros.
- 28. **Marsh Harrier.** - Regularly noted on 'way-up' to Bielsa, but not afterwards.
- 29. **Montagu's Harrier.** - Pair seen well on Lleida steppes - a declining species in Catalonia /Aragon.
- 30. **Sparrowhawk.** - 3 birds noted in Pyrenees, both sides.
- 31. **Common Buzzard.** - Handful noted daily, present on both high and low ground.
- 32. **Golden Eagle.** - 2 noted in Pyrenees, one seen well near to Lammergeier site above Benasque.
- 33. **Booted Eagle.** - Only a single dark phase bird noted on drive up to Bielsa.
- 34. **Lesser Kestrel.** - A pair watched well on road between Castell Florite and Santa Lucina, nesting in an orange tiled building 200m off the road.
- 35. **Kestrel.** - Seen most days.
- 36. **Hobby.** - Two birds noted one Escuin canyon, and also one above Alfes Aerodrome.
- 37. **Water Rail.** - As single bird heard.
- 38. **Moorhen.** - Only at Llobregat Reserve.
- 39. **Purple Gallinule.** - 5+ noted at Llobregat, feeding fledged young.
- 40. **Common Coot.** - Llobregat.
- 41. **Little Bustard.** - A single bird flushed from newly cut field at Monegros.
- 42. **Black-winged Stilt.** - Lots at Sant Lucina Paddy Fields and Llobregat.
- 43. **Stone Curlew.** - Pairs [3+] noted at Monegros.
- 44. **Little Ringed Plover.** - 2 noted at Llobregat Reserve.



LRP (Tony Blake)

45. **Lapwing.** - Noted only at Sant Lucina - 100+, a non-breeding summering population.
46. **Black-tailed Godwit.** - 4 moulting adults noted at Sant Lucina paddy fields.
47. **Marsh Sandpiper.** - A single at Llobregat Delta - adult.
48. **Green Sandpiper.** - 2 at Sant Lucina on first day increased to 4 on the last.
Also noted on concrete banked reservoir near lesser grey Shrike site.
49. **Black-headed Gull.** - Only at Sant Lucina. [100+]
50. **Audouins Gull.** - 10+ off Llobregat beach - including several adults.
51. **Yellow-legged Gull.** - 'Michahellis' - 10+ noted at Llobregat, plus several adults in the Bielsa valley, which appear every summer.
52. **Gull-billed Tern.** - 2 flew south along Llobregat beach.
53. **Whiskered Tern.** - An adult and probable 'first summer' bird present at Sant Lucina on first day of trip.
54. **Black-bellied Sandgrouse.** - 4 birds flushed from fields near Castell Florite in Monegros plus several more heard distantly.
55. **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse.** - 4 flushed from slightly higher ground than above, just across the valley.
56. **Rock Dove.** - Several wild? seen.
57. **Stock Dove.** - A handful noted in Pyrenees.
58. **Woodpigeon.** - Fairly common.
59. **Collared Dove.** - As above.
60. **Turtle Dove.** - Never easy to see, and not every day, most seen around the Ainsa area.
61. **Great Spotted Cuckoo.** - Adults and Juveniles noted.
62. **Cuckoo.** - Fairly common, including several on the coast at Llobregat.
63. **Monk Parakeet.** - A handful of 'feral' birds noted at Llobregat and Barcelona Centre.
64. **Scops Owl.** - One flushed upon meeting Tom near Lleida.
65. **Little Owl.** - 2 birds seen.

66. **Common Swift.** - 'The' swift in most of Catalonia, Aragon, and Pyrenees.
67. **Pallid Swift.** - A colony of 100+ birds on sea cliff resort of Garaff.
68. **Alpine Swift.** - Lots in Pyrenees, some cliff faces having 100's of birds.
69. **Bee-eater.** - Common.
70. **Roller.** - Fairly common at Monegros, with 5+ noted in one area, best looked for in isolated 'clumps' of trees out in open fields.
71. **Hoopoe.** - Fairly uncommon in Pyrenees, regular at lower altitude.
72. **Wryneck.** - Two birds seen well.
73. **Green Woodpecker.** - ssp 'Sharpei'- fairly common.
74. **Black Woodpecker.** - A single flew over Col Beyreand in France.
75. **Great Spotted Woodpecker.** - Fairly common.
76. **Calandra Lark.** - Several noted on plains of Monegros.
77. **Lesser Short-toed Lark.** - 6+ noted at 'Sandgrouse' site near Castell Florite in Monegros.
78. **Crested Lark.** - Common.
79. **Thekla Lark.** - Noted only only last day for definite, several birds watched on shrubby plateaus whilst looking for Sandgrouse.
80. **Woodlark.** - 4+ noted in the Ainsa area.
81. **Skylark.** - Several birds noted singing.
82. **Crag Martin.** - Fairly common, including birds hunting garden lawns in Bielsa Village!
83. **Swallow.** -
84. **House Martin.** -
85. **Tawny Pipit.** - At least 4 birds noted.
86. **Tree Pipit.** - Several birds singing in the Col Sagun.
87. **Water Pipit.** - 'Lots' singing at above site, and throughout the Pyrenees.
88. **'Yellow' Wagtail.** - Pair noted at Llobregat Reserve.
89. **Grey Wagtail.** - Handful noted, including in and around Bielsa.
90. **White Wagtail.** - As above.
91. **Dipper.** - A single noted at Wallcreeper site plus a bird noted on River at Bielsa 'appeared' to be of the black-bellied race? - *C. c cinclus* or *C. c 'atroventer'* - the NW Iberian form?.
92. **Wren.** -
93. **Dunnock.** -
94. **Alpine Accentor.** - A single bird noted singing Col Tourmalet.



Alpine Accentor Site (Chris Knox)

- 95. **Robin.** -
- 96. **Nightingale.** -
- 97. **Black Redstart.** - Fairly common at altitude, 5+ singing Col Tourmalet.
- 98. **Redstart.** - A local bird, one seen in France, Col Beyreand and another near Ainsa on the Spanish side.
- 99. **Whinchat.** - One near St Lary in France.
- 100. **Stonechat.** - Fairly common.
- 101. **Wheatear.** - Regularly noted in right habitat - the adult male birds strikingly different to those back in UK, with the mantle much paler, and little / no buff on underparts, at first glance reminiscent of a pale throated form of Eastern Black eared Wheatear.
- 102. **Black-eared Wheatear.** - Western-Noted particularly around Monegros.
- 103. **Black Wheatear.** -A male seen well [eventually] at a cliff face near to Castell Florite in Monegros.
- 104. **Rock Thrush.** - A displaying male watched at Col Sagun.



Rock Thrush (Chris Knox)

- 105. **Blue Rock Thrush.** - Family party [5] near Barbastro, and seemed fairly common on sea cliffs at Garaff.
- 106. **Ring Ouzel.** - Two birds noted on the French side - at Col Beyreand and on the climb to the Accentors at Col Tourmalet.
- 107. **Blackbird.** -
- 108. **Song Thrush.** -
- 109. **Mistle Thrush.** - Fairly common.
- 110. **Cettis Warbler.** -
- 111. **Fan-tailed Warbler.** - Only at Llobregat.
- 112. **Reed Warbler.** - Only a single bird noted.
- 113. **Great Reed Warbler.** - 'Appeared' common at Sant Lucina paddy fields and Llobregat.
- 114. **Melodious Warbler.** - Widespread, most still in song
- 115. **Dartford Warbler.** - Family party noted near Ainsa.
- 116. **Spectacled Warbler.** - A family party noted near Black Wheatear site.
- 117. **Western Subalpine Warbler** - Fairly common in suitable habitat.
- 118. **Sardinian Warbler.** -Uncommon in Pyrenees.
- 119. **Western Orphean Warbler.** - Two birds seen fairly well, both feeding young, several more heard - a very loud and distinctive song.
- 120. **Whitethroat.** - Only on French side, near Col de Aspen- 2+.
- 121. **Garden Warbler.** -Several birds heard between Ainsa- Bielsa.
- 122. **Blackcap.** - Common.
- 123. **Western Bonelli's Warbler.** - Fairly common.
- 124. **Chiffchaff.** - Several noted singing - 'collybita'
- 125. **Goldcrest.** -

- 126. **Firecrest.** - Two birds seen, but probably common in altitude pinewoods.
- 127. **Spotted Flycatcher.** - Birds noted near Wallcreeper, plus several in Escuain Village.
- 128. **Long-tailed Tit.** - Party of 18 noted near Benasque.
- 129. **Marsh Tit.** - Single pair noted, favouring a Hazel wood.
- 130. **Crested Tit.** - Fairly common.
- 131. **Coal Tit.** - Common.
- 132. **Blue Tit.** -
- 133. **Great Tit** -
- 134. **Nuthatch.** - Single birds noted on French & Spanish sides.
- 135. **Wallcreeper.** - A male watched well on territory at roadside stop for almost an hour, affording excellent views down to 25metres.
- 136. **Short-toed Treecreeper.** -Bird seen well [and singing] near Campo.
- 137. **Treecreeper.** - Single noted on French side only near Col de Aspen.
- 138. **Penduline Tit.** - Two pair noted, probably fairly common if looked for.
- 139. **Golden Oriole.** - Fairly common.
- 140. **Red -backed Shrike.** -
- 141. **Lesser Grey Shrike.** - A bird watched near nest site at Alfes Aerodrome.



Photo Chris Knox

- 142. **Southern Grey Shrike.** - A handful of birds noted.
- 143. **Woodchat Shrike.** - Widespread in most habitats.
- 144. **Jay.**- Noted daily.
- 145. **Magpie.** -
- 146. **Alpine Chough.** - Fairly common, especially on French side- 10+ La Mongie.
- 147. **Chough.** - Fairly common.
- 148. **Jackdaw.** -
- 149. **Carrion Crow** - Noted daily.
- 150. **Raven.** -

- 151. **Starling**. -Breeding in Barcelona and on French side.
- 152. **Spotless Starling**. - 'The' Starling of Aragon.
- 153. **House Sparrow**. -
- 154. **Tree Sparrow**. - Single pair noted near Fraga, though probably overlooked.
- 155. **Rock Sparrow** - Two birds noted.
- 156. **Snow Finch**. - A handful noted at La Mongie Ski Resort on French side, nesting in Ski lift equipment and performing 'butterfly like' flight at close range.



Snowfinch (Tony Blake)

- 157. **Chaffinch**. -
- 158. **Serin**. -
- 159. **Citril Finch**. - Noted on both sides of border - 20+ in Pinewoods above Plan, and a handful noted around La Mongie Ski resort.
- 160. **Greenfinch**. - Only a few birds noted and probably overlooked.
- 161. **Goldfinch**. -
- 162. **Linnet** - Fairly common.
- 163. **Crossbill**. - A single noted in woods above Plan.
- 164. **Bullfinch**. - Pairs noted both sides of border.
- 165. **Yellowhammer**. - Handful singing Col de Aspen on French side only.
- 166. **Cirl Bunting**. - Fairly common.
- 167. **Rock Bunting**. - A single singing male near Col Sagun.
- 168. **Ortolan Bunting**. - A declining bird in Spain just two noted.
- 169. **Corn Bunting**. - Common.