

A BIRDING WEEKEND IN THE PYRENEES: MARCH 2004

BACKGROUND

Some months previously Gordon Wilson had read an article in *Birding World* [Aug 2003 p332] concerning Snow Finches offering a reasonable chance of being seen in winter and early Spring, in the Pyrenees. Apparently, flocks of up to 100 had been seen in recent years on roadsides but only when there was plenty of snow cover. This forces the finches into the only bare ground available and birds had been seen foraging with Alpine Accentors. Thanks to EasyJet now operating from Newcastle to Barcelona and at very reasonable prices, the prospect of a weekend exploration proved too tempting to ignore. The area also offered other superb possibilities e.g. Lammergeier and Wallcreeper.

BIRDERS

Gordon Wilson – the trip offered no ‘new’ birds but a chance to get better views of Snow Finch and pioneer a new weekend route.

Steve Holliday – despite living in Gibraltar for 4 years, Steve had never made it as far north as the Pyrenees and was looking for 5 ‘new’ birds.

Paul Cassells (Cass), Paul & Tony Stewart – first birding trip to Spain, so lots of ‘new’ birds on offer.

THURSDAY 4 MARCH

A mid-morning start from Newcastle saw us arrive at Barcelona at 1.30pm local time (a warm 18C). Cass was a very late entrant to the group but despite an upgrade in car being arranged in advance, we had an hours wait (pre-arranged car unavailable) and a further upgrade to a Chrysler Grand Voyager took place (well worth the hassle). Despite the odd wrong turning on leaving the airport, Tony took a steady drive up to our hotel in Berga, at the foot of the Pyrenees. The drive also took us past the very impressive high outcrop of Montserrat (just NW of Barcelona) and our target for the end of the weekend.

1.30-3.00pm: Airport area – Grey Heron, Collared Dove, Magpie, Common Starling, House Sparrow.

3.00-4.40pm En route to Berga – Little Egret 2, Kestrel 5, Moorhen, Wood Pigeon, Blackbird, Magpie, Common Starling. On arrival at Berga 2 Ravens were noted.

The very comfortable Hotel HC Ciutat de Berga was well placed on the NE side of ‘town’ (and very handy for a variety of tapas bars). A White Wagtail was seen in the carpark.

5.20pm: It was decided to go north and have a brief recce of our intentions for the following day. The maps for the area are extremely variable and we realised, after an unscheduled tour through the Tunel de Cadi and back again, that we would have to get into Baga to find the road leading up to the Coll de Pal. This was to be our principal target area for the next 2 days.

5.20-5.55pm: En route to Tunel de Cadi – Crag Martin 10, Raven 5.

A roadside pull in just north (Mirador Bac de Divi) of Baga provided an hours entertainment and familiarisation (or not!) with some of the bird songs.

5.55-6.55pm: Mirador Bac de Divi (mainly viewing north) – Lammergeier (Gordon & Tony only – so they say!), Griffon Vulture 6, Crag Martin 3, warbler sp. singing (!), Raven c.5, Chough sp 2. A few lifers here for some already. A Chambois was also picked up on the ridge.

We drove back to Berga, noting the need to get into Baga the following morning, and quickly familiarised ourselves with the local bars. Some of the following tapas were also lifers for 3 of the group – calamares, pinchitos (spelt pinxos), tortilla, olives etc. The whole evening (food & drink) cost only 20 Euros each (c.£13).

FRIDAY 5 MARCH

Plans for a very swift getaway the next morning were slightly delayed by phone alarms not being adjusted for the one hour time difference, however, breakfast was enjoyed between 7-7.50am, made up of meats, cheeses, yoghurt, tortilla, toast, fruit etc. Ordering the right coffee would prove to be a major challenge!

To 8.10am: Hotel area – Collared Dove, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Blackbird, Wren, Great Tit, Raven, Magpie, Goldfinch, Greenfinch.

8.10-08.35 En route to Baga – Raven 1.

From Baga we drove up the mountain road, sign-posted to Coll de Pal from the middle of Baga's town square. A number of stops, including low down, were made, though an obviously large ski lodge (right hand side of the road) proved very rewarding and scenic.

8.35-10.45am: Baga to Coll de Pal (2,070m) – Lammergeier (adult 9.10am, imm 10.00am), Griffon Vulture 7+, Goshawk female (all but Steve), Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Wood Pigeon, Wood Lark sg, Sky Lark heard, Crag Martin, Pipit sp heard, Wren, Mistle Thrush 2, Goldcrest, Long-tailed Tit, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Coal Tit (common), Raven/Chough sp 45 thermalling, Alpine Chough 2, Chaffinch (many, perhaps moving through), Serin male, Citril Finch (1 good flypast & 2 others elusive), Greenfinch, Crossbill many. Also 3 Chambois on the ridge.

10.45-11.30am: The road at the top was closed, apparently deliberately as further down the northward slope, the ski-slopes cross the road. No Snow Finches could be found in the area, indeed although there appeared to be lots of snow around, there was also many bare patches on the hill sides and thus it seemed like we had no chance of finding the main quarry. We decided, therefore, to try a second area (La Molina) for which information suggested a similar hope of Snow Finch.

We returned to Baga and en route see Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Magpie and another stop near the ski-lodge produced 7 Serins, one of which gave great scope views. The weather had been extremely bright and sunny – that night, we were all sporting suntans, of sorts!

11.30-12 noon: Baga – a small supermarket in the centre of Baga enabled us to fill up on water and snacks (less than £2). In the small town 4 Crag Martins circled and one even landed on the wall of one building; a White Wagtail was also seen.

The route to La Molina took us through the Tunel de Cadi (toll on north side). We made a roadside stop shortly after taking the La Molina turn-off and gradually made our way up to the ski resort.

12 noon-1.05pm: En route to La Molina – Common Buzzard, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Wood Lark nice views, Mistle Thrush 2, Great Tit, Southern Grey Shrike also nice views, Rock Bunting male near the top.

At the ski resort we were hoping to find Snow Finches around the car-parks and along the roadsides but again there was no sign. The whole area was alive with skiers and after hearing 2 Great Spotted Woodpeckers and enjoying a brief snack, we left the area, taking the loop south and back to Baga-Coll de Pal. Various roadside stops were made along the way, amid much snow covered ground.

1.25-3.30pm: La Molina to Baga – Griffon Vulture 7, Common Buzzard 2, Kestrel 1, White Wagtail 2, Mistle Thrush 7, Coal Tit, Carrion Crow 6, Crossbill several, Rock Bunting. A Chambois was 'picked up' sitting inside a small cave.

3.30pm – we arrive at Baga and decide to take the 40 minute drive back up to the top of Coll de Pal. On leaving Baga the temperature is 13C but falls to 2C at the top of Coll de Pal (2,070m). Here we 'chat' to a local ranger (and Steve & Gordon's knowledge of Spanish comes to the fore!). After much pointing at

field guides and maps, we deduce that the ranger had seen 3 Snow Finches the previous day but some 2km away and inaccessible. Apparently not many birds have been present this winter and we resigned ourselves to missing out. The same ranger also gave us an apparently good Black Woodpecker site (Greixer), for the following day. Pointing at Wallcreeper also resulted in the negative in winter but positive (and even higher up) in summer.

4.50-5.25pm: Ski-lodge area – another good stop here Treecreeper sp 2, Crested Tit showing well, Rock Bunting 2 showed very well; plus a pre-roost movement of Choughs over the ridge involved parties of 16, 26 and 45 which included both species (based on call).

A brief stop at Greixer en route back to Baga, produced Dipper, Long-tailed Tit, Blue Tit and Raven; and at 6.10pm we returned back to the hotel in Berga.

Later that evening... 'tapas ticks' included pollo (chicken), octopus, albondigos (meatballs), potatoes in a mustard/prawn sauce, and more pinxos. We also tried 2 bottles of Catalan red wine, actually served cool – very nice. A final round of paxtarine (pronounced 'pacheran', or very similar) completed an excellent day. Bad news though, the barman explained that he would be shut the following evening, not the result of having his stocks severely diminished by us but due to early closing on Saturday pm (we think!). Again, the whole evening cost us 20 Euros (£13) each in the kitty.

SATURDAY 6 MARCH

Breakfast commenced at 8.00am today, allowing a slight lie-in whilst Robin could be heard singing nearby. We left at 8.45am for Baga and following another inexpensive shop for lunchtime snacks, we were again on our way up the Coll de Pal road. A pair of Stonechats was just outside Baga, and our first stop was only a few km up the road. We decided to take a long walk in to the Greixer area, in search of Black Woodpecker as advised by the ranger on Friday. Although we failed on the main quarry the area was very scenic and produced a very alpine feel to the morning, especially as many birds were in full song e.g. Cirl Bunting, Short-toed Treecreeper; providing a few new birds for some.

9.40-12.10pm: Greixer walk: Griffon Vulture 3, Golden Eagle 2, Wood Pigeon, Crag Martin, Robin, Blackbird, Song Thrush 2, Mistle Thrush 3, Chiffchaff, Goldcrest 1, Firecrest 2, Long-tailed Tit, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Coal Tit, Crested Tit, Nuthatch 3, Short-toed Treecreeper 5, Raven 8, Chaffinch, Cirl Bunting male, Rock Bunting 1; Red Squirrel and probable Cleopatra butterfly.

At 12.10pm we decided to take the 20 minute drive back up to the ski-lodge area to eat our snacks. In the same area as yesterday we again recorded Wood Lark singing, Crested Tit and 2 Ravens. Around 1.00pm we met a small group of ringers and held another dis-jointed but very useful conversation – during which period another Lammergeier flew overhead! Their information suggested that they last saw Snow Finch back in December but they did give us another very good site for Black Woodpecker. Whilst we were chatting they ringed a Mistle Thrush and 2 Coal Tits but said they had caught a Citril Finch that morning! At 1.30pm we set off back down the road to check the Black Woodpecker site.

1.35-3.40pm: El Mirador del President – we parked in the well sign-posted lay-by and trudged the 1km walk up the lane in deep snow. In no time at all we heard a Black Woodpecker calling and quickly found it flying straight towards us, landing just out of sight in a nearby tree. Unfortunately that proved to be the only viewing but we did have at least 2 more birds calling (virtually identical to Green Woodpecker) from the mirador, amid a gentle snow fall and some spectacular scenery.

Birds seen here – Griffon Vulture 8, Golden Eagle 1, Black Woodpecker 1-3, Mistle Thrush 8+ (some passage birds here ?), Coal Tit, Crested Tit, Raven 2 (stunning views), Carrion Crow calling, Jay – blue primary covert feather found, Crossbill 30+.

At 3.40pm, and as this was to be our last time on the hillside we decided to drive back up to the top of Coll de Pal – a final throw of the dice but with no realistic hope. After turning at the top, coming back about 1km and just about to leave the ski area (4.00pm), Tony (driving) noticed 3 birds fly across the front of the vehicle, also seen well by Paul. The rest jumped out of the car and watched the 3 birds fly

over the ridge showing white wings with black primaries, dark back, long white tail with very obvious black centre line extending right down the length – all sure that we had just seen 3 Snow Finches disappearing into the distance (perhaps the same 3 seen 2km away the previous day?). We walked the area in the hope of finding the birds feeding on the ground but with no luck. An adult Lammergeier came by through a snow cloud and we decided to take coffee and shelter in the restaurant at the very top. The restaurant was full to the brim, reminding someone of a ‘Star Wars bar’ – you had to be there! Unfortunately, their bill came to 478 Euros, which delayed our exit slightly!

Over the next hour or so, we birded the area between the top and our favourite ski-lodge. Sightings included – Coal Tit, Raven, Chough/Alpine Chough 22 overhead, stunning views of another Alpine Chough (now minus 2C) and 3 Chambois.

5.40-6.30pm – we take a steady drive back to the hotel in Berga (passing through Baga at 6.10pm). Highlights included superb views of another adult Lammergeier, Crag Martin 20+, Black Redstart male in Baga, Stonechat, White Wagtail 2 and small numbers of Common Starlings.

That evening – was spent in our second favourite tapas bar. The increased bill of 25 Euros (£16) each was a good indicator of what took place! With 3 members of the group sinking 4 bottles of red wine between them, the result was inevitable!

SUNDAY 7 MARCH

The morning started very foggy, in more than one way for some, however, a 7.15am exit from the hotel was very impressive, given the previous night’s excesses. NB We had settled our bills on the Sat evening. The morning involved a drive south towards Montserrat, the impressive outcrop just NW of Barcelona. Information suggested that Wallcreepers wintered here but at the very highest peaks.

7.15-8.20am: En route – Cormorants on rivers, Mallard 3, Common Buzzard, Wood Pigeon, large Lark, Magpie.

8.20-9.00am: coffee and sarnies in the tourist area at Montserrat refreshed the parts that needed it!

Using information from *Where to Watch Birds in Catalonia* p.95 ISBN 84-87334-00-8 [by Josep del Hoyo and Jordi Sargatal] we followed the route from the most western part of the monastery up to Sant Jeromi (Saint Jerome 1,236m) – the guide says allow 5 hours for this walk (mainly up steps) and it wasn’t far wrong! For future visitors we would strongly advise taking the funicular railway up the first 400m or so and then walking to Sant Jeromi (our return route). The 3km walk to the top (2-2.5 hours) is a potential killer and calf muscles were aching 3 days later. Gordon wisely turned back after 100m - well, he’d seen them all before. The remaining four arrived at the top at varying times from 11am to 11.20am, and stayed until 12.10pm. In that time we had awesome views of Wallcreeper on the cliff side below, not to mention the surrounding area, and good views of Alpine Accentor. We returned fairly promptly in order to catch up with Gordon. It was a swift one hour’s walk back to the top of the funicular railway (mainly downhill) and we joined up with Gordon around 1.30pm.

9.00am-1.30pm: The walk & monastery area – Kestrel 1, Crag Martin, White Wagtail, Alpine Accentor 1-2, Robin, Blackbird, Firecrest many in dense areas up the slopes, Blue Tit, Wallcreeper 1, House Sparrow, Jay 2 at the top, Raven, Chaffinch, Serin singing,

At 1.50pm we left to head towards the coast south of Barcelona for some water birds. A fuel stop in Montserrat town produced an obliging Short-toed Eagle (lifer!) performing well for some time (2.10pm). Another roadside stop (2.25pm) then produced Cormorant, Cetti’s Warbler, Sardinian Warbler male (another lifer) and Blackcap male. Our aim was to reach Llobrogat marshes, close to the airport and just south of Barcelona. We arrived on the coast at 3.15pm and took on some food and drink in a café – the lomo bocadillo’s were very popular. Unfortunately we were unable to find the approach track to the site (a small lake in the woodland) we were looking for, due to a great deal of building work taking place but we could see large numbers of waterfowl in the air. Despite this, a spectacular movement of Mediterranean Gulls and a large raft of Balearic Shearwaters lifted our spirits.

3.15-5.00pm: Coastal area – Great Crested Grebe 1, Balearic Shearwater 150+, Cormorants, Little Egret 3, Common Buzzard, Mediterranean Gull 100+ moving south, Yellow-legged Gull, Crag Martin, Meadow Pipit 2, White Wagtail 2, Robin, Black Redstart 2, Stonechat 1, Magpie, Common Starling, House Sparrow, Greenfinch.

Upon driving away from the area, in search of the lake, we came across 2 Monk Parakeets (an established population now thrives, alongwith Ring-necked Parakeets, in the Barcelona area).

At around 5pm, we had a look at the river estuary area and found lots of birds resting on the rocky tidal barrages, including Cormorants 200+, Red-breasted Merganser female in the bay, Black-headed Gull 80+, Mediterranean & Yellow-legged Gulls 200+ of each, Sandwich Tern 3, Crested Lark 2, White Wagtail 1. A final drive into the ‘marshes’ (5.45pm) saw us find Cattle Egret 1, Little Egret 1, Mallard 1, Moorhen 6, Swallow 1, Chiffchaff 6, Common Starling and Goldfinch.

We made it back into Barcelona and were checking into the Hotel Oasis (next to the main railway station) at 6.45pm. Despite the extra cost, the Italian restaurant just didn’t have the ambience of any of the bars in Berga and so it was off to the nearby Irish Bar where the locals were still rejoicing from the 19-13 beating of the England rugby team the day before.

MONDAY 8 MARCH

We needed to be at the airport by 12noon and time didn’t really allow another sortie into the Llobragat area, so we settled for purchasing some duty free goods in La Rambla (though the perfume was cheaper at the airport). Our walk around produced several sightings of both Monk and Ring-necked Parakeets, the former in nesting sites, and a Jackdaw. The drive back to the airport saw Mute Swan added to the list, for those that missed it the first time. All in all, a terrific trip and special thanks to Gordon for making all the arrangements.

COSTS (per person)

	£
Flight – Easyjet	101
Car Hire	40
Fuel	5
Hotel HC Ciutat de Berga – 3 nights excludes ? breakfast	66
Hotel Oasis (Barcelona) – 1 night	38
Total (excludes daily food & drink)	250

CONTACT INFORMATION

Flight - Easyjet	easyJet.com
Hotel HC Ciutat de Berga	hotelnet.com
Car hire	Hertz.com
Hotel Oasis (Barcelona)	Octopustravel.com

CHECKLIST: 4-8 MARCH 2004

Great Crested Grebe	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Great Tit
Balearic Shearwater	Crested Lark	Nuthatch
Cormorant	Wood Lark	Wallcreeper
Cattle Egret	Sky Lark	Short-toed Treecreeper
Little Egret	Crag Martin	Treecreeper spp.
Grey Heron	Swallow	Southern Grey Shrike
Mute Swan	Meadow Pipit	Jay
Mallard	White Wagtail	Magpie
Red-breasted Merganser	Dipper	Chough
Lammergeier	Wren	Alpine Chough
Griffon Vulture	Alpine Accentor	Jackdaw
Short-toed Eagle	Robin	Carrion Crow
Goshawk	Black Redstart	Raven
Sparrowhawk	Stonechat	Common Starling
Common Buzzard	Blackbird	House Sparrow
Golden Eagle	Song Thrush	Snow Finch
Kestrel	Mistle Thrush	Chaffinch
Moorhen	Cetti's Warbler	Citril Finch
Mediterranean Gull	Sardinian Warbler	Greenfinch
Black-headed Gull	Blackcap	Goldfinch
Yellow-legged Gull	Chiffchaff	Crossbill
Sandwich Tern	Goldcrest	Cirl Bunting
Wood Pigeon	Firecrest	Rock Bunting
Collared Dove	Long-tailed Tit	
Ring-necked Parakeet	Crested Tit	
Monk Parakeet	Coal Tit	
Black Woodpecker	Blue Tit	76 species plus 1 sp.