

Spanish Pyrenees

2-8 May 2011

Participants: A.S. Jack, R. Dunn, R. Forster, J. Todd

Easy Jet,(now not so cheap flights).Newcastle - Barcelona

Hire Car, through Sixt Car Hire (excellent)

Hotels/Guest Houses booked through Top Rural web site

We visited a variety of habitats, from a sea watch, coastal woodlands and marshes, to the arid steppe lands of Los Monegros. Alpine pastures and high Pyrenean mountain passes. This gave us a weekly total of 160 species, including 16 species of raptor.

Weather conditions varied from 28 degrees centigrade and sunshine, to the cool thunderstorms of one day. In the high mountains, temperatures dropped to 11 degrees.

After collecting the roomy V.W. Touran, we headed straight to the nearby coastal wetland reserve of El Prat De Llobregat. Easy to find following the brown signs south of the airport. Hides overlooking lagoons, pine woods, and a walk to the sea shore gave us a good variety of species to start our trip list.

We found there had been a bit of a fall, as the woods held a good selection of migrant passerines, including two Wood Warblers, Redstarts, Pied and Spotted flycatchers, Chiffchaffs, and Willow Warbler, as well as Golden Oriole, Green Woodpecker, Coal Tit and Short toed Treecreeper. The beach revealed nesting Black winged Stilts, Ringed, Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers, Dunlin and Sanderling, as well as a male Wheatear. Offshore, we saw 2 Black Terns, 15 Little Terns and 30+ Sandwich Terns feeding with at least 40 Balearic Shearwaters. Then, a nice surprise, as a group of 5 Squacco Herons flew in off the sea, right past us. Several Audouin's Gulls flew north with the common Yellow- legged Gulls.

On to the hides now, where we added Red Crested Pochard, Great Reed Warbler, Wood Sandpiper and Purple Gallinule + young. Lots of hirundines, and Common Swifts hawked for insects. Gadwall, Shoveler and Mallard were among the ducks seen, also Little and Great Crested Grebes.

We now headed about 2 hours drive west towards Lleida. Our target for the evening was the well known "Ballobar triangle", an area of remnant steppe, much of which has been degraded, ploughed up and given over to cereal crops. Here, we immediately spotted 6 or 7 Black Eared Wheatears looking superb in breeding colours. As we watched them, a flock of Black Bellied Sandgrouse flew in and landed in a nearby field, allowing 'scope views. Short toed, Crested and Calandra Larks sang all around us. A halt further on saw us connect with several Pin-tailed Sandgrouse too, and a Short-toed Eagle perched on top of a pylon. A pair of Choughs called as they flew by.

Passing some huge cliffs at Alcolea, we stopped to watch the ariel mastery of dozens of Alpine Swifts, as they courted and flew into their nest cavities high on the cliff face, their loud twittering calls ringing out. Below us, 6 or 7 Nightingales sang from a tree lined river. As we approached the village where we were staying the night, a pair of Stone Curlews was disturbed from the road by the car, turned and flew right past us.

Arriving late in the evening at our accommodation in the village of Azanuy, our host kindly prepared an evening meal, and our days log was completed with a few beers.

Next morning, after a good breakfast, we headed off north towards a gorge I had read of, which was said to hold breeding Wallcreepers. A major target species for any birders visiting the Pyrenees. An impromptu stop as we crossed the River Esera, revealed a male Cirl Bunting, Golden Oriole, Nightingales, Cetti's Warbler and Firecrest. Two Alpine Swifts, a Thekla Lark and a Hoopoe.

As we approached the pre-Pyrenees mountains, raptors began to appear, with 4 Griffon Vultures being our first of the trip. A Black Kite was the first of many and 2 Common Buzzards soared overhead. A second halt was called, as we spotted a large raptor hugging the hillside-our first Lammergeier, soon joined by its mate . A lifer for two of the group! Several Booted Eagles, Sparrowhawk, Short-toed Eagle, and more Griffons were noted, before we headed on to the gorge.

We parked up, and divided our time between watching for trucks coming by on this very narrow road, and watching the neck breaking, sheer cliffs in the hope of locating a Wallcreeper. A migrating Honey Buzzard appeared high above, and a Peregrine showed once or twice . Dipper and Grey Wagtail fed along the rushing torrent below us. A handsome male Black Redstart sang nearby. Suddenly a movement overhead, an unusual, short tailed, broad winged bird, flew from one side of the gorge to near where we were standing, on the other. A shout went up, "Wallcreeper", and there it was, a superb male carrying nesting material, alighted on the cliff face not 20 yards from us, at eye level! This gorge was perhaps a mile long, and luck was with us, as we had parked right where the Wallcreeper was nesting. We proceeded to watch and photograph this enigmatic beauty, for an hour . What a way to get a lifer for 2 of our group. The bird came in to us, 6 or 7 times, disappearing into a crevice in the cliff face, carrying what appeared to be fur in its bill, actually below where we were standing, on the other side of the river. Looking like a huge butterfly, it constantly flicked its crimson wings, revealing the white spots on the primaries. What a bird!

We eventually dragged ourselves away, with much backslapping and high fives, and drove on up the valley to Benasque and the verdant Pyrenean foothills, where the birdlife was very much like being at home, with Jay, Spotted Flycatcher, Kestrel, Green woodpecker and Goldcrest being seen. However, the appearance of 5 Red Kites, 3 Black, and a pair of Booted Eagles and more Griffons reminded us where we were!

Next stop, was the Valle De Pineta, where a lake produced 14 Common Sandpipers, 3 Water Pipits,

Iberian Yellow Wagtails, several Crag Martins, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Bullfinch .High above, flocks of Chough harassed a Golden Eagle and 2 Lammergeiers.

A chance meeting with some Danish birders, and we exchanged our Wallcreeper site for what they said was a sure fire eyeball to eyeball encounter with a pair of Lammergeiers. Down to 100metres they promised, wow! We agreed that would be the first priority in the morning. We drove to our base for the night, a farm high in the hills at Ceresa. Up for a pre-breakfast walk at 6 a.m., Roger and I watched an early rising Egyptian Vulture over the village as a Cuckoo called. However, as soon as the village dogs spotted us, the peace was shattered, and we must have woke the entire village, as a chorus of 20 dogs barked at us.

We headed off, hoping for a close encounter with the Lammergeiers, and along the valley of the River Cinque, stopped at a bridge over the river. Here were plenty of Griffons patrolling the mountain tops, or perched on cliff ledges. We heard an Owl being mobbed by dozens of birds, but in thick cover could not see it. Among the mobsters, were 3 Rock Buntings, Short-toed Treecreeper, Bullfinches, Blue and Great Tits. Chiffchaffs and Sardinian Warblers. We walked around the area seeing and hearing 3 Western Bonelli's Warblers, Subalpine Warbler song-fighting, Sardinian Warblers and Cetti's Warbler. A variety of butterflies included, Swallowtail, Brimstone, Clouded Yellow, Small Heath, Walls and several unidentified skippers and blues, which sped past .However a lifer for us came in the shape of a cracking Camberwell Beauty.

As we ate our lunch, a sudden cry went up, as behind us, at no more than 200metres away at eye level was a superb adult Lammergeier slowly gliding by, scanning the rocky slope below for food. We could clearly see the "beard" of bristles which give it its other name! As if this was not good enough, as the bird slowly turned and flew back, it was joined by its mate, both birds scanning below .The rocky, boulder strewn slope looked perfect as a bone breaking site for the Vultures. In two visits to the Pyrenees, we have seen more than 30 Lammergeiers, but never like this. To be so close to this huge, beautiful vulture, was incredible and we felt privileged to be there. The Danes were indeed spot on! What a way to see what the day before, had been a lifer for Roger and John!

Delighted, we drove off to our next destination, the Anisclo Gorge, seeing as we went 15 Honey Buzzards passing through, Short-toed Eagle and 2 Booted Eagles. The temperature was now in the low 20's as we slowly drove this amazing gorge. The road, so narrow, with massive towering cliffs to the left and a huge drop to the raging river far below to our right. Luckily, we only met 2 or 3 cars coming the other way. At several miles long, the gorge allowed only limited chances for stopping, but when we did, we saw many nesting Griffons, another Short-toed Eagle, Peregrine, Common Buzzard and our only Goshawk of the week. A large flock of Choughs called above, acrobatically tumbling as only they can. More Swallowtails, Brimstones, Wall Browns and Clouded Yellows were on the wing in the warm sunshine.

Checking in at our hotel in Torla, that evening, we freshened up, then headed uphill to the famous Ordesa National Park. Spectacular indeed, but quiet this evening birdwise. The highlights were 2 more Lammergeiers, this time at the more accustomed distance of miles away! Also, a handsome singing Firecrest.

Next morning, we were heading to the high Alpine passes at 3,000metres, on the French border, in the hope of some of the specialities of the region. The roads were extremely quiet at this time of year, with very few tourists about. At the border at the Portalet Pass, very little snow remained. This year must have seen less snow than is usual, and a rapid melt early in the season, and we found this was the case all over the area.

We scanned the impressive peaks, seeing up to 6 more Lammergeiers, 3 Golden Eagles together. Griffons, Red Kites, Short-toed Eagle and 30 Alpine Choughs, with many Red billed Choughs. We set off to walk a track to some alpine meadows, and rising to song flight was a superb male Rock Thrush, which gave us a great display. The meadows were alive with Wheatears, Linnets, Chaffinches, several Black Redstarts, and 4 or 5 Water Pipits, also song flighting. A piercing whistle came from an alarmed Marmot, the first of several we saw, as a Golden Eagle soared above. A Chamois lay on the hill above us near a pair of Alpine Choughs, engaged in mutual preening. A very high Egyptian Vulture flew by, followed by another Short-toed Eagle.

Descending through the town of Jaca, we headed for the monastery of San Juan de la Pena, a well-known Black Woodpecker site. We were not to be disappointed. A roadside halt on the way up the climb, proved fruitful, as a nice male Black Woodpecker called several times from the trees. It then flew by us three times, as a second called, showing the bright red cap. Green woodpecker also called here and up to 8 Bonelli's Warblers sang. Crested Tit, 4 Firecrests, Short toed Treecreeper and Nuthatch were also seen. 2 Booted Eagles and 25 Griffons patrolled the nearby hill tops.

We now headed for our base for the next two nights, in the Hecho Valley. Even in the village here, there were both Kite species, Egyptian vultures feeding in the fields below our hotel and Short toed Eagles, Honey Buzzards and Griffons passing through! Serins, Grey Wagtails, Swallows, House Martins and Swifts were present, as well as several singing Black Redstarts.

Day Five saw us head for the nearby Wallcreeper site we knew from our previous visit here, but this time to no avail, no show. However, as soon as we opened the car doors 5 or 6 Citril Finches were feeding on the grass and singing from the trees, another tick for some. A pair of Lammergeiers was spotted, followed by a third. A walk to nearby crags, produced 4 singing Firecrests, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crossbill, Mistle Thrush and Coal Tits. Above, we noted Alpine and Red billed Choughs, Kestrel, Sparrowhawk and many Griffons.

Leaving here, we set off for more high alpine stuff, and the French border once more, at the Pic D'arlas at the head of the Roncal Valley. As we parked up a tame Fox appeared, and

proceeded to beg for food, at times standing up on its two hind legs .At one point, it jumped onto the back of the open hatchback and grabbed a bag containing Roger's lunch, ran off up the hill, dropping food as it went .Then proceeded to bury some bread, we fell about laughing as Roger tried to rescue his lunch. Joking apart, it was rather unsettling to see a wild animal so very tame and dependant on hand outs.

A walkabout at the border saw us see a Ring Ouzel, several Wheatears, flocks of Chough species, as well as Linnets, Water Pipits, Crossbills and Black Redstarts. More Marmots and Chamois were spotted. We then crossed the border into France, and near an unopen chairlift, walked or rather staggered up the steep mountainside in the hope of Snowfinch or Alpine Accentor. The former eluded us, but as the group split up, we managed to locate 5 quite approachable Accentors. The males were singing and displaying and could be viewed down to 10 metres, allowing some good photo opportunities. Yet another lifer. A single Citril Finch was noted, more Wheatears and Black Redstarts, Water Pipits and both Choughs and a Raven. On the way back down the valley, we saw up to 25 Griffons, a Grey Heron and 2 Common Buzzards, also more Red and Black Kites.

The following day, we had to set off south, reluctant to leave this fabulous area. Our first stop was near Alastuey, where in light rain and strong winds, an Orphean Warbler was heard singing however, despite searching, we could not manage to see it. Here too, were Firecrest, Chiffchaff, and Nightingale. Overhead a Peregrine showed 3 times, and 30 Griffons soared by. From the car we saw a Honey Buzzard, male Marsh Harrier and heard Sardinian Warblers.

We arrived at los Mallos De Riglos, our next halt at the well known, huge pinnacles of red rock rising to hundreds of feet. In the village at the foot of the pinnacles, a pair of Rock Sparrows seemed to be nesting under the church roof, and Black Redstart sang nearby. Griffons soared above and a pair of Choughs was seen. Just outside the village a nice Melodious Warbler, sang from a wire and several Woodchat Shrikes were noted, as well as Stonechats, Mistle Thrush and a few pairs of Sardinian Warbler. Butterflies here included Swallowtail, Brimstone, Black veined Whites, and Large Blues.

Moving south to the Sontonera Lake, ominous black clouds approached .Before the heavens opened, we saw a dozen Bee Eaters, a pair of Marsh Harriers, Black-winged Stilt and Little ringed Plover. Several Little Egrets and one Cattle Egret fed at the water's edge. Calandra and Crested Larks were common here, with 2 Lesser Short toed also seen. Black Eared and Northern wheatear were noted, and as the rain now hammered down a Stone Curlew ran for cover in long tussock grass. Many Hirundines and Swifts dodged the downpour. We left, as the tracks were rapidly turning into a quagmire, and we feared we would get stuck.

Heading on, through the rain, it eased as we spotted some rice paddies to our right on the road to Ejea, and taking a minor road, we saw a nice male Marsh Harrier quartering the fields, and stopped as we saw and heard at least 10 Great Reed Warblers in the reed fringed ditches. A Bittern boomed, somewhere nearby and several Purple Herons were noted. 10 Yellow Wagtails fed, as 3 more Marsh Harriers sailed by. White Storks seemed to be nesting

commonly in this area, and 16 fed together in one paddy, as Fan-tailed Warblers song flighted above. We now drove on to our final night's accommodation In Moncayo, where as luck would have it, a party of 100 people were celebrating into the small hours, right below our rooms! Somewhat bleary eyed, we awoke early for our last day in Spain .We were told, the party was to celebrate the festival of the chickens, always held in September. I feel something was lost in the translation!

Our flight home was late that evening, allowing plenty of time to bird watch on the way back to Barcelona. Particularly, to find another of our main target species of the trip, Dupont's Lark. Not far along the road, we spied a nice male Montague's Harrier and stopped for a while to watch it hunting.

Along the way, we halted at a good looking spot, as the road climbed, with a good view all around. A loose, distant flock of raptors was 'scoped, showing them to be migrating Honey Buzzards, some 48 in total. An Egyptian Vulture and Common Buzzard flew by, and Bee Eaters and Cuckoo were heard. In the nearby scrub, several singing warblers were identified as Spectacled, Dartford and Sardinian, about 3 or 4 of each. Common Kestrel and Calandra Larks were circling above.

Los Monegros, is one of the best known steppe areas in Europe and is in parts protected with conservation zones. The Spanish Ornithological Society has one such reserve at El Planeron. This area of rough, stony grassland, in the lee of the grey, gypsum hills that look like old pit spoil heaps, is the best place in Spain to see the enigmatic Dupont's Lark, as well as a host of other lark species and other steppe birds. As soon as we stopped, we heard the strange metallic whistle that is the Duponts song. A notoriously shy and elusive species to see, most thinking is, for best result, to be on site at either dawn or dusk. However, this was ten in the morning, and 2 birds were in the air singing. We got on to one in flight, which was lost to view when it plummeted to earth, but after much searching, we managed to pick one out feeding on the ground, among the tussocks of grass and bare ground. Among its features, its distinctive de-curved bill could clearly be seen. Yet another life tick for two of our group.

All around us larks sang in the air and from the ground. The large Calandras being particularly obvious. Also, many Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed and Crested vied for airspace. A Honey Buzzard, circled low over us, followed by five more, on their way north. A male Marsh Harrier hunted, and several Bee Eaters called as they passed by. A pair of Choughs were also seen. Dozens of Spanish Marbled White butterflies were flying around our feet.

We dragged ourselves away, heading east, towards the Ebro River, halting when a pair of Lesser Kestrels were spotted from the car. A second emergency stop was called for, as a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos flew from a fence and landed in distant trees. Several Kites of both species and some Griffons were seen, then we passed a Bee Eater colony, followed by a Sand Martin colony in the river bank. Arriving at our final birding destination, the Saladas De Chiprana, an area consisting of several lakes near the Ebro River, the temperature now

reaching 28 degrees. We surprised a pair of Turtle Doves from the ground, as several Purple Herons flew around.

A pair of Montague's Harriers quartered the ground below us, as we viewed one lake and we counted 16 Shelduck, a Dunlin, a Redshank, 5 little ringed Plovers, Raven, Golden Oriole, Woodchat Shrike and 4 Hoopoes . Nightingale, a pair of Bee Eaters, Marsh Harrier and 8 Grey Herons. Our only Dragonflies of the trip were noted here, several Lesser Emperors.

Time to head off in the direction of Barcelona airport, for our evening flight home, with a stop for a meal on the way at Mequinenza. Here were our last notable birds of what had been a very successful week, 20 or so Little Egrets fishing the banks of the Ebro and several Griffons seen from the car.

A.S.Jack