

North East Spain, Ebro Delta and Pyrenees. Spring 2015.

This area of Spain with the attraction of a variety of different habitats and spectacular scenery within a reasonable distance and many exciting bird species, was an obvious choice for a Spring visit. My third time to the Pyrenees, second to the Ebro, in the company of A.Mould and B.Bullough proved to be a highly successful trip with a wide variety of species seen.

Arriving in Barcelona, we headed first for a short stop at the Llobregat Reserve where species seen included Bee Eater, Great Reed Warbler, Serin, Cetti's and Fan Tailed Warblers, Stonechat, House Martin and Swallow. South next some 100km to the Ebro Delta, Spain's second most important wetland area after Coto Donana. Here on the north side of the Delta, where the habitats include sea shore and beaches, reed lined channels, freshwater pools, reedbeds, lakes and marshes, we saw many species including 10 Glossy Ibis, 7 Squacco Herons, Cattle and Little Egrets, Flamingos and Terns, including 30+ Whiskered, 20+ Black, 60+ Gull Billed and several Common. Gulls involved 10+ Slender Billed, 2 Audouins and many Lesser Black Backed, Yellow Legged and Black Headed. Also here were 60+ Swifts, 5 Kestrels, 50+ Cormorants, 15 Red Crested Pochard and several each of Spotless Starling, Black Winged Stilt, White Wagtail and Stonechat. A short first day, we now headed for our cottage for the night in Deltebre, set in farmland, Stone Curlews could be heard calling in the evening.

Our first full day dawned warm and sunny, as we headed for the Riet Vell pool where a hide overlooks a reed-fringed lake which was crammed with birds. Migrating Swallows perched on reed stems only a few feet in front of the hide shutters, allowing superb photographic opportunities. A Purple Gallinule fed below the hide and 11 others counted. Feeding birds out on the water included 43 Flamingos, 5 Little Egrets, 8 Glossy Ibis, Spoonbill and Gadwall. Greenshank and Common Sandpiper in the muddy shallows, with a pair of Gull Billed Terns hawking overhead and Great Reed Warblers singing from the reeds. A very rare Brown Shrike had spent the winter in Deltebre in riverside gardens but despite an extensive search we failed to locate the bird, despite being shown the very bushes it had frequented, following a chance meeting with the finder's wife! We later learned the bird had recently departed. Good numbers of House Martins and Swifts seen here.

Heading on to Tancada, we found around 100 Flamingos, a Purple Heron, Little Egrets and 10 Great Crested Grebes. Two Sandwich Terns fished and Crested and Short Toed Larks noted.

Punta la Banya is a long, drivable, wide sand spit with the sea on one side and freshwater pools on the other. More Terns were here with 8 Little, 2 Sandwich and 2 Common watched. Kentish Plover nest here and several pairs gave close views near the car as rival males chased each other. Other waders were Turnstone, Avocets and Sanderling. Passage Wheatears numbered 4, with one splendid Black Eared among them. A Whitethroat and a Yellow Wagtail watched too. A dozen Audouin's Gulls and 4 Slender Billed loafed on salt-pans. Pools next, with more Little Terns and around 200 Gull Billed! 10 Ringed Plover, 3 Curlew Sandpipers, a Redshank and a Grey Plover and Curlew, several Sanderling and Kentish Plover added to the wader tally. A splendid Swallowtail butterfly flew by. Large numbers of Flamingos fed in the shallow water, with 450 estimated. We moved on to the Encanyassida Lagoons where Whiskered Terns commonly fished at very close range and a copse of trees held around 75 Cattle Egrets and 10 Night Herons. Grey Herons were common and 4 Purple Herons seen too. Many Glossy Ibis flew in to the area, over 400 in total, some landing in the trees. 2 Great White Egrets added to the spectacle as 3 "cream-crowned" Marsh Harriers hunted the reeds. Here we found 2 singing Savi's Warblers, more Great Reed and Fan Tailed Warblers and a Cuckoo. Little and Great Crested Grebes swam in the channels, with many Red Crested Pochard.

An evening visit to the local supermarket for supplies for our self-catering cottage, resulted oddly in a "life tick" for us all! A chap wearing binoculars approached and we asked him if he was enjoying the great birdlife of the Ebro. He was Dutch, I believe. He told us he had found a "Moroccan Redstart" just a few kms from where we were staying. I asked him incredulously if he meant a Moussier's Redstart and showed him one in the field guide. Yes, that was the bird! He showed us on the map where the bird had been and early next morning we arrived and joined several birders in a tower hide overlooking reed fringed pools. Within a few minutes a cry went up and there on a fence below us was the fabulously coloured Redstart! The Moussier's dropped to the ground and back up to feed in a bush and we enjoyed great views of what was the eighth record for Spain and a totally unexpected bonus. The sighting was somewhat soured by local Spanish birders/photographers who ran from the hide towards the bird, with obvious results! Other good birds in this area were 6 Temminck's Stints feeding on the pools below, 2 drake Garganey, Gull billed, Common and Whiskered Terns. 2 Wood Sandpipers and a Little Ringed Plover, 2 Common Sandpipers, a Hoopoe, Great Reed Warbler, Glossy Ibis and Grey Herons.

We now set off inland, north west through Hajar towards the Pyrenean foothills in steady rain. As the road climbed and the weather improved, we began to see

raptors with 19 Griffon Vultures counted, a Short toed eagle, Marsh Harrier, Red Kite and 4 Black Kites noted. Our first Bee Eaters of the week, with several flying by. We reached our cosy guest house for the night, and looked forward to the mountains to come next day.

The morning saw us heading north alongside the River Esera into the Pre-Pyrenees. A stop in scattered Cork Oak woodland, revealed a singing Woodchat Shrike on a tree top and singing Nightingales, Blackcap, Goldfinches and Greenfinches and above, Red and Black Kites and a few circling Griffon Vultures. As the road climbed, more Griffons appeared with 30 or so in the air at one spot. Then a pair of Choughs and a Raven seen. A crag nesting colony of 100 House Martins was nice and a few Crag Martins here with them. Another roadside halt gave us Firecrest, Iberian Chiffchaff, Garden Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, more Blackcaps, Grey Wagtail, Great tit and Wren. Swallows hawked above the tree-lined river and above them were 3 more Ravens and our first Egyptian Vulture of the week.

On a previous visit to this area in 2011, I had success finding a nesting Wallcreeper in a huge steep-sided gorge. We arrived once more at the spot but no luck on this occasion despite a good, neck-breaking search along the gorge walls. We did have 3 singing Black Redstarts, several Crag Martins, 12 Grey Wagtails and Griffons above. Emerging from the narrow gorge, we stopped once more for a walk along the scrubby riverbank. Here a cracking Western Bonelli's Warbler sang from a tree top, several Chiffchaffs called and Chaffinches, Robins, Wrens and Blackbirds were common. Several Nightingales here too and in the skies were Black Kite and 3 more Ravens. 4 Grey Wagtails on the river nearby.

As we climbed higher by road north of Ainsa, the fabulous sight of no less than five Lammergeiers circling together above crags greeted us! Incredible birds, they gave us great views. Two Egyptian and several Griffon Vultures in the air too. In the beautiful Pineta Valley, framed by towering peaks we enjoyed a passing Osprey which had paused on its migration to fish the azure blue lake here. High over the peaks, small specks were Choughs and Ravens, with 16 of the latter in total seen. A few more Griffons too. A Crested Tit called in the woods as did Short Toed Treecreeper, Chaffinches and Dunnocks. A Great Spotted Woodpecker seen, Coal and Great Tits were common, Song Thrushes, Blackbirds and White Wagtails were common. We retired to our excellent hotel at Bielsa for a good meal, a few beers and a review of an excellent day's birding once again.

The nearby Chistau Valley had on previous visits proved a superb site for raptors, so this was our destination early next morning. The wooded valley revealed 5 Bonelli's Warblers, Cuckoo, Song Thrushes, Blackcaps, Nuthatch, 2 Firecrests, Serins and a Rock bunting. A vulture feeding station has been established in the valley, providing year-round food in the form of mainly goat and cattle carcasses, and the air was filled with an estimated 300 Griffons circling lower and landing, with many perching on rocks or feeding on the ground. An amazing spectacle! 4 Lammergeiers here too, with a pair in display flight. Black Kite and Choughs and Ravens nearby. We enjoyed a couple of hours here taking in the sights. Butterflies seen in the warm sun included Brimstone, Large White and Orange Tips.

Reluctantly moving on, we headed for the French border and the ski resorts of Candanchu and Astun and the high Pyrenean passes. At this high altitude the temperature dropped to 11 degrees and a light drizzle fell on the remaining lying snow. Alpine Choughs are one of the star birds here and we watched 10 birds, calling as they flew by. A Rock Thrush sang from a crag and 10 Wheatears were feeding on wind-blown seeds and insects on the large snow patches. A Yellowhammer sang from a wire in the resort car park and over 20 Water Pipits seen, some display flying and singing. Common here too were Black Redstarts with 15 seen. A Redpoll flew over, calling and several Dunnocks seen too. Crag Martins were back at their nesting sites. A pair of immature Golden Eagles flew over together as did several Griffons.

We descended south to Jaca next as the rain worsened, seeing Red and Black Kites and a Common Buzzard on the way. Our next site was another Wallcreeper stronghold at Garbadito in the Hecho Valley, where towering cliffs hold a few pairs. Again though, we drew a blank on this trip, but had some obliging Citril Finches, with 4 at the car park here. We retired to our mountain village guest house for a home cooked evening meal in front of a log fire. The following morning, a walk in the village lanes produced Swallows, Crag Martins, Swifts and House Martins, 2 Jays, 2 Black Redstarts, Chiffchaffs, Wrens and 2 Grey Wagtails. After breakfast we set off for the peaks at the French border at the head of the Roncal Valley. At over 2,000 metres in altitude, plenty of snow remained and a very strong wind made birding difficult. We managed to see a single Alpine Accentor at a site where previously there were six (2011) and 45 or so Alpine Choughs. Several Wheatears and Water Pipits, Black Redstart, Kestrel, Yellowhammer, Linnets and Dunnocks. Slightly lower and we saw a Golden Eagle, Red Kite, Raven, several Griffons and 5 Choughs feeding in a grassy meadow. A pair of Redstarts too in roadside trees. Back down in the valley, in warmer, calmer weather we enjoyed 3 more Golden

Eagles circling above, 5 Egyptian Vultures together, 5 Red Kites, 4 Black Kites and more Griffon Vultures. Another Raven, and a Dipper added to the day's species. A singing Spectacled Warbler was enjoyed as a few Long tailed Tits flitted by. Swallowtail, Orange Tips, Brimstones and a Fritillary, probably Queen of Spain were among the butterfly species seen.

Just outside the village of Hecho, we saw a gathering of birds of prey where there appeared to be a carcass of some kind. Another superb Lammergeier was circling very low, just above the road and one of 8 Egyptian Vultures attacked it! Up to 25 Griffons circled above and then a Hobby sped across the valley. 4 Red Kites dropped lower towards the carcass. A Golden Eagle and 5 Short Toed Eagles could be seen over a nearby ridge. An amazing spectacle, summing up how good this area is for raptor watching. The nearby river held Common Sandpiper and a Dipper, with more Long Tailed Tits moving through the bushes.

The following morning, we explored the valley of the River Majones, where both Orphean (3) and Bonelli's Warblers were found, along with 2 Bullfinches, a Cuckoo, 2 Jays, Serins, Swifts and Swallows, House Martins and Song Thrush. A steep side gorge here revealed more singing Bonelli's Warblers and a few Crag Martins. A search of the cliff walls and one of our party was lucky to see a pair of Wallcreepers, but unfortunately despite a long search the birds could not be refound. We drove on through more open country where a group of 21 Bee Eaters passed through, some perching briefly on farm buildings and wires. 2 Nightingales were singing, as was a Subalpine Warbler. Another Orphean Warbler was heard singing from the car, we stopped and obtained decent views of the culprit. This area held good numbers of Corn buntings too.

The following day, our last in the mountains, we explored the lower Roncal Valley once again, where a pair of Griffon Vultures were sitting in a field with more in low trees. Here too were several Black and Red Kites and an Egyptian Vulture. The skies held more Griffons, a Peregrine and 2 Choughs. A crag held 2 male Blue Rock Thrushes and a colony of Crag Martins. The wooded lower slopes gave us Firecrest, more Bonelli's Warblers and Iberian Chiffchaff, Blue and Long Tailed Tits, with Grey Wagtails along the river below. We now headed up into the wooded hills at Oroel and San Juan de la Pena where as the road climbed and the temperature did likewise, a halt for some food and drink at a good viewpoint proved productive with Griffons in the air, a flock of 35 Choughs and a pair of Egyptian Vultures. Then a pale phase Booted Eagle put in an appearance, circling above. Yet another Bonelli's Warbler here, Nightingale, Blackcap and a Cuckoo. The hot sun encouraged a good number of

butterflies including Painted Lady, Brimstone, Clouded Yellow and several small unidentified Blues which refused to land.

Onward up to San Juan, a well-known Black Woodpecker site where we did indeed see and hear some birds. One flying past (two of the party) at close range and others calling and drumming. Common woodland birds were Short Toed Treecreeper with 5 seen/heard, Bonelli's Warbler (4), Nuthatch (4), Firecrest (7) and Cuckoo (4, 1 a female), Blackcap and Chiffchaff. House Martins, Swallows and Crag Martins all noted too. We headed south from here towards our guest house for the night calling at Alcolea which is dominated by a huge, towering, long sandstone bluff, with massive cliffs, which houses a colony of Alpine Swifts. We enjoyed over 50 of these ariel masters speeding into their nest holes or flying by in tight groups uttering their loud twittering calls. Swifts, House Martins and Kestrels nest here commonly with many seen. Also 10 Bee Eaters nearby, singing Nightingales in scrub and a Golden Oriole in trees. Another successful day complete, we headed for our last guest house and a welcome meal.

The final morning, we had an early start for the drive back to Barcelona. Turning off the main road, we drove a short way along a country lane for our last birding opportunity and some breakfast. A trip tick came in the form of a Melodious Warbler which sang from bush tops. 2 Woodchat Shrikes, one in song here. A Golden Oriole, 5 Bee Eaters, a Buzzard, Nightingale, Corn Buntings and Sardinian Warblers. This brief, impromptu stop summed up the number and variety of species which can be found in this country at any random site, and what makes Spanish birding so captivating.

A.S. Jack