

TRAVELLING NATURALIST - EASTERN PYRENEES 2007

MAY 13 - MAY 20

Leader: Mike Lockwood

An excellent trip, much enjoyed by all. Although the weather was a little too hot on a couple of afternoons and, as such, precluded greater activity, we generally enjoyed the sun and did everything as planned. The first couple of days were a bit windy, but this had had the effect of holding up bird migration along the coast and the marshes of the Aiguamolls were full to bursting with waders and terns.

Elsewhere, the warm dry winter had left its mark on the flora, although the rains in April had generally provided enough moisture to allow the lavender and broom near the coast and the poppies and gentians to flower in profusion and to create a stunning visual impact.

A personal highlight were the numerous Whinchats at the Aiguamolls marshes - about 10 on a fence that shuffled along but not away as we approached - and the male Garganeys at the same site. Amongst the flowers, the unexpected wild tulips at Cap de Creus, the trumpet gentians up high and the sheer colours of the scrub were unforgettable.

The also unexpected Ocellated Lizards in the road near the Tortoise centre was a good find, especially as I was at that very moment commenting on how rare they had become. It was also good to see Griffon Vultures on three occasions, including a group of at least 9, a very confiding Rock Bunting and plenty of Bee-eaters, Golden Orioles (eventually!) and raptors in general.

We had a few good butterflies, essentially the species you would expect so early on in the season.

As Richard said, we made a good team and I think we all had a good time. The guide certainly did.

DAY 1 MAY 5 AIRPORT - BESALÚ & BESALÚ - MEADOWS NEAR RIVER BORRÓ

An uneventful and quick trip from the airport (only a Black Kite to highlight, briefly from the van near the rubbish dump at Banyoles) meant that we were in the hotel by three o'clock. After a light meal in the main square, we jumped into the van and headed to an area of abandoned terraces above the all-but dry river Borró.

The first flower as we got out of the van was *Dorycnium pentaphyllum*, a small white-flowered shrub dominating these abandoned meadows along with its congener, *D. hirsutum*. The commonest flowers were tassled hyacinth *Muscari comosum*, large speedwell *Veronica austriaca*, *Globularia vulgaris* and towards one end of the meadow, a patch of blue gromwell *Lithospermum purpureocaerulea*.

Our first orchid turned out to be *Ophrys catalaunica* [= *O. bertoloni* spp. *catalunica*], considered by some to be endemic to the north-east of the Peninsula, then a single pyramidal orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis* not quite out, and a small group of man orchids *Aceras anthropophorum*. Other flowers here included common snapdragon *Antirrhinum majus*, one of the taller flowers on a day when most flowers seemed to be fairly stunted, a golden-drop *Onosma tricosperma*, white flax *Linum suffruticosum*, spring cinquefoil *Potentilla taubernaii*, and clumps of both blue aphyllanthes *Aphyllanthes monspeliensis* (which gives its name to this plant community) and Montpellier milk vetch *Astragalus monspessulanus*.

In terms of the typical Mediterranean shrubs of the area, osyris *Osyris alba* and dogwood in flower caught our eye, along with lentisc (mastic tree) and lots of sloe, often the first species to take over an abandoned pasture. We eventually we caught up with a few more orchids, all rather small: sword-leaved helleborine, yellow bee *Ophrys lutea* and early-spider orchids *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *litigiosa*.

Arthropods included a red and black spider, male Cleopatra and Brimstones, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Grizzled and Dingy Skippers, Panoptes and a rather tatty Black-eyed Blues and a Small Heath. Our first bird turned out to be a cracker: a male Subalpine Warbler singing from a bush some 30 m away.

We headed off to a lower meadow where we parked next to a smart clump of monkey orchids *Orchis simia*. In the meadow we came across a fresh Ascalaphid, an aerial predator and denizen of sunny Mediterranean meadows, shining black as if it had just emerged. A Wood-lark flew up from the meadow as we approached a clump of trees to try and see a Bonelli's warbler that was calling incessantly. We got good views of the Bonelli's and as we were walking back to the van, the Wood-lark appeared in the sky and we were treated to a lovely serenade in the afternoon sun.

We made a final stop by the river near the village of Argelaguer. As we approached the river, we startled a pair of Turtle Doves and then heard the first notes of a Wryneck's song. We stood and waited on the river bank and got a good earful, but alas decided that a good eyeful would have to be postponed for a couple of days or so. Singing elsewhere were powerful Nightingale and Blackcap. We also noted a fresh second brood female Holly Blue and henbane *Hyposcycamus niger*.

DAY 2 MAY 6 FIELDS NEAR RIVER FLUVIÀ- EL SEGUERÓ - SANT LLORENÇ DE SOUS - LA MARE DE DÉU DEL MONT

After a 15-minute journey from Besalú our first stop was in the fields near the river Fluvià, close to the small hamlet of Dosquers, in an area of open fields and riparian woodland.

As we parked we could hear a Melodious Warbler in song, but we decided to leave it for later. We headed into a patch of woodland and scrub bursting to the sound of three male Nightingales at full throttle, with a single Cetti's Warbler for good measure. Here we took note of the woodland, largely composed of small-leaved ash *Fraxinus angustifolius*, holm oak *Quercus ilex* and European nettle-tree *Celtis australis*, with shrubs such as Christ's-thorn *Paliurus spinachristi*, osyris and dogwood in full flower, with rosy garlic *Allium roseum* decorating the waysides.

As we crossed the fields to the sound of zitting Fan-tailed Warblers/Zitting Cisticola and approached the river we saw the first of two Black Kites on a tree way upstream. Once down by the river bank, crowded with great banks of the milk thistle *Silybum marianum* (with vicious spiny bracts), we had a quick glimpse of a Kingfisher, with another Melodious Warbler singing away in the background. Looking around, a fresh Knapweed Fritillary appeared and the grass held a single Beautiful Demoiselle (Iberian version) *Calopteryx xanthostoma* and two small damselflies, *Erythromma lindeni* and *Platycnemis acutipennis*, the latter a close relative of the British White-legged Damselfly. In the distance a single Griffon Vulture flew over on the foothills of La Mare de Déu del Mont, the mountain we were to climb later on.

After a circuit through the woods, we reached the van again and spent more time looking for the Melodious Warbler from before and were rewarded by quick but very good views of a very yellowy bird in the Christ's-thorn.

We headed back towards Besalú along a dirt track, stopping for a pair of Crested Larks, a group of eight Blue-headed Wagtails, three Black Kites, Rock Sparrow, a group of 25 Bee-eaters perched nearby and, finally, a pair of Turtle Doves.

We moved on to a set of overgrown meadows, this time a former olive grove, on the other side of Besalú near the impressive house of El Segueró. One the way down to the meadows we noted the pale yellow composite urospermum *Urospermum delachampii* and once in the meadows lots of tassled hyacinths *Muscari comosum*, pitch trefoil *Psorelea bituminosa* not quite in flower (leaves smell of white spirit), the pale yellow flowers of dragon's-teeth *Tetragonolobus maritimus* (despite being so far from the sea), common rock-rose *Helianthemum nummularium*, more osyris in flower, Mediterranean buckthorn *Rhamnus alaternus*, *Coromilla minima*, sage-leaved cistus *Cistus salvifolia* and the wicked thorny *Smilax aspera* draped everywhere.

The sun had brought out a number of butterflies, including Cleopatra, a single Provençal fritillary, and three blues: the minute Panoptes Blue, Green-undersized Blue and a first-generation Provence Chalkhill Blue.

From here, we headed uphill to lunch in the dry pastures next to the ruined monastery of Sant Llorenç de Sous. After our sandwiches, we headed off into the scrub between bright yellow clumps of *Genista hispanica*. Flower-wise, we found lots of matted globularia *Globularia cordifolia* and the attractive lilac flowers of false sainfoin *Vicia onobrychioides*, as well as white *Helianthemum apenninum* and common rock rose, which here is pink! Along the road we found Montpellier maple *Acer monspessulanum* with its tri-lobate leaves.

Before continuing uphill we made a quick visit to the ruined monastery, with a small spring full of Fire Salamander larvae and whose walls are covered by the delicate white flowers of mossy sandwort *Moehringia muscosa*.

We hopped into the van for the quick drive to the top of the hill, where by now a full-blooded gale was blowing. After eventually finding somewhere to park and almost being blown over, we dropped down into the Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris* woods in the hope of a bit of shelter. The wind in the trees was slightly unnerving, but we did find a wild peony *Paeonia officinalis* in bud, a few *Valeriana montana* in flower and heard Crested Tits. Back up top, we struggled along the road in the wind and found that the rocks held a final few hepaticas *Anenome hepatica* and on

the south-facing side of the cliff the scree slopes were covered in rock soapwort *Saponaria ocymoides*. In a couple of crevices the rocks boasted a few flowers of the delightful fairy foxglove *Erinus alpinus*.

From here it was time to head downhill to go and meet Richard and Gale, and try and find somewhere out of the wind. This we did by heading for the humid pine and oakwoods on the north side of the mountain of El Cos, a place that Mike knows well as it is where he does his SOCC survey (Catalan equivalent of a common bird survey).

We were immediately greeted by a mixed group of tits, with Blue, Coal, Marsh and Long-tailed more or less together, as well the raucous sounds of Jay. Through a gap in the trees Richard spotted a number of Honey Buzzards migrating low northwards, a female Goshawk almost as large as the Common Buzzard with whom it was sharing air-space, and also a group of Bee-eaters. Wood White, Brimstone and Speckled Wood, the latter much more orange than in Britain, flew in the sun and flower-wise we enjoyed the clumps of columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris*, fly honeysuckle *Lonicera xylosteum*, blue gromwell and the legume with a name that sounds like a washing-machine, *Argyrolobium zanonii*.

More out in the open we recorded Greenfinch and Wood Pigeon, but by this now it was time to head for home.

DAY 3 MAY 7 AIGUAMOLLS de L'EMPORDÀ NATURAL PARK

Tuesday saw our first trip to the coast, to visit the marshes of the Aiguamolls de L'Empordà Natural Park. It turned out to be a bumper day's birdwatching, with 80 species recorded, largely thanks to the strong northerly winds of the previous days that had held up northwards migration.

We parked in the new car-park in the southern-most part of the reserve and picked up a small path through the woods with Nightingales singing and Bee-eaters overhead. Richard discovered why sharp rush *Juncus acutus* is so-called. Once out more in the open we had a Hoopoe and Black Kite overhead, and the first of the days many White Storks (which, as we were to be told at the Tortoise recovery centre, are responsible for the lack of Green Lizards here, which used to be common here). Somewhat in the distance, two recently arrived Rollers sat on a power-line. In the grass by the side of the track a snake stopped to examine us, lifting its head to give us all good views of a Montpellier Snake, famous for its bad-temperedness and its habitat of taking a good look at you before it finally decides to leave.

From the first hide we had excellent views of two Squacco Herons feeding in the wet fields below and Marsh Harriers quartering in the mid-distance. We quickly realised that the main area of marshes (former rice-paddies) of El Matà we were teeming with waders, the result of 4-5 days of strong northerly winds that had prevented the typical northward migration from continuing. Over the course of the morning we found many Greenshank, Redshank, Wood and Common Sandpipers, Greater Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers and dozens of elegant Black-winged Stilts. Rather less common were Ruff, a number of Spotted Redshank, some already in full breeding plumage, Dunlin and Curlew and Green Sandpipers.

As we walked towards the second hide alongside the flooded fields we recorded Little and Cattle Egrets, Sand Martin and Shoveler, whilst in terms of the flora- which inevitably took a bit of a back seat- we photographed an attractive clump of the purple-flowered *Iris spuria* next to a patch of a birthwort, *Aristolochia pistolochia*.

We spent a long time in the first hide. Richard and Gale were fascinated by the Coot and chicks and delighted to see also Little Grebe, Moorhen, Mute Swan and two very graceful Great White Egrets. An Eleonora's Falcon flashed by, allowing only the briefest of views.

Our route to the next hide, overlooking a lagoon and the main part of the reserve was accompanied by a cacophony of Serin, Great Reed Warbler, Nightingale and Cetti's Warbler. From the hide itself, we watched a now all-too familiar Red-eared Slider, an American species of terrapin that has established itself in Catalonia, a Kingfisher and a couple of distant Marsh Harriers. On the way back Gale noticed another snake just near the bridge: this time we identified it as a Viperine Snake, known locally as a Water Snake, which proceeded to slip into the water as its local vernacular name indicates.

By this time it was obvious that we were not going to do the whole circuit before lunch, and so we walked only a little way further after leaving this hide (and its contingent of school children) and recorded in the fields of La Matà Whiskered Tern and a group of Blue-headed Wagtails, and on the way back to the van, a male Pied Flycatcher and a Tree Sparrow.

On the way to lunch we had good views of a Purple Gallinule close by in the reed-beds. We stopped to picnic on the far side of the marshes, which provided just as good fare as the morning. Mike found Gull-billed, Black, Whiskered and Little Terns in the scope, a number of the swifts turned out to be Pallid Swifts; Purple Herons appeared as if from nowhere. As we were packing up to leave, a Short-toed Eagle came low over the marsh and when we actually finally managed to drag ourselves away, we had to stop the van for a spectacular Woodchat Shrike, Hoopoe and Crested Larks.

We drove off to the other part of the Aiguamolls reserve, the lagoon at Vilaüt. Walking along the dusty track we first noted clumps of French lavender *Lavandula stoechas* and the purple Jersey toadflax *Linaria pelisseriana* on the rocky outcrops and *Paronychia argentea*, a small ground-hugging plant with papery bracts on the track itself. We hunted for orchids in the dry areas, but only found common tongue orchid *Serapias lingua* and lax-flowered orchid *Orchis*

laxiflora amidst lots of yellow bartsia *Parentucellia viscoa*, proliferous pink *Petrorhagia prolifera* and ragged robin *Lychmitis flos-cuculi* in a much damper meadow.

Further down the track we were treated to the delightful sight of at least 10 Whinchats on the fence to our left, dancing in and out of the surrounding reeds and fields and back onto the fence. As we progressed they moved increasingly a little further along the wire, until they all doubled back and returned to their original place on the wire, now behind us. Elsewhere we recorded Pied and Spotted Flycatchers and Northern Wheatear.

We stopped to look at the two huge cork oak trees *Quercus suber* next to the path at the edge of the Vilaüt lagoon. Once in the small hide, we spent a long time enjoying the Marsh Harrier, egrets, Greenshank, Sand Martin, Blue-headed Wagtail and more Whinchats on the drying out lagoon in front of us. Mike found a male Red-throated Pipit in the scope, which we all saw briefly before it choose to fly off and disappear.

On the walk back the Whinchats were still there, but alas no nearer Rollers on the power lines.

Our final stop of the day was the sewage work near the holiday complex of Empuriabrava. The near lagoon had become much overgrown and there was little to see, except more Coot and lots of Common Sandpipers on the filtration tanks.

DAY 4 MAY 8 BESALÚ – PARC NOU (OLOT) - SANT FELIU DE PALLEROLS - COLL DE MALLA - EL FAR

We started the day with a wander around the old village of Besalú, noting a Rock Sparrow on one of the TV aerials and a Bee-eater over the main square. Once all temptation to buy a wooden spoon or a pound of potatoes had been avoided, we headed for Olot and the small urban park of Parc Nou, a remnant of the once far more extensive English oak *Quercus robur* woods that covered the floor of the lava flows of the Olot Basin. The ground flora was dominated by the leaves of species such as wood anemone *Anemone nebularia* that flower before the oaks get their leaves and the flowers of yellow archangel *Lamium galeobdolon* and a lungwort, *Pulmonaria affinis*, endemic to southern-central France and the northern Spain. Birdwise, we saw and heard many typical British garden species such as Robin, Blackbird and Wren, an indication that the micro-climate of the Olot Basin has a true Atlantic flavour to it. On our way back to the van we noted scented Solomon's seal *Polygonatum odoratum* in flower over the other side of the box hedge.

From here it was off to the Mediterranean pastures around the town of Sant Feliu de Pallerols, a good indication of just how quickly habitats (and the wildlife associated with them) changes in this part of the world. Unfortunately, our orchid-filled meadows had been a bit overgrazed and we only found a good collection of monkey orchids. As a consolation we had views of a Southern White Admiral that refused to settle and Scarce Swallowtails and, as we stood in the pastures wondering where the orchids were, three Crag Martins and a Green Woodpecker flew overhead. A Bonelli's Warbler sang heartily from the trees around.

Walking back to the van, a small blue butterfly flew lightly over a patch of damper ground and once it settled we were able to see that it was a Provençal Short-tailed Blue, locally common and often found near water in southern Europe.

Our next stop was Coll de Malla a broad expanse of grazing pastures at over 1,000 m surrounded by vertical limestone cliffs. We first had lunch, which, as usual, produced a crop of sightings: a Short-toed Eagle overhead, a solitary Griffon Vulture and a Honey Buzzard. Passerines in the vicinity included Linnet and Cirl Bunting.

We walked up into the rather dry, but still colourful pastures, with lots of the familiar blue chalk milkwort *Polygala calcarea*, Montpellier milk-vetch, *Genista hispanica*, bushes of the very prickly (and delightfully scented) *Genista scorpius*, a single spring gentian *Gentiana verna* and a patch of the white flowers of a candy-tuft *Iberis amara* next to a cattle pool. Our only orchids were many early spider orchids, although on the way back we did chance across a good patch of what by now we had named as Catalan bee orchid (*Ophrys catalunica*). We walked across the cow-free pastures towards the edge of a cliff with clumps of rock soapwort *Saponaria ocymoides*, stopping at a small rock outcrop to get excellent camera-high views of *Ramonda myconi* (endemic to the Pyrenees and one of only a handful of species of this genus, the only European representative of the large tropical family Gesneriaceae), moss sandwort and a couple of ferns, wall-rue *Asplenium ruta-muraria* and *A. fontanum*, the latter a southern European species.

Birdwise, there were few birds aside Linnets in the pastures, although a Goshawk and a Common Buzzard overhead did distract us temporarily from the magnificent view north to the snow-capped Pyrenees.

We walked back to the van and continued on to the sanctuary of El Far, at the far (no pun intended) end of the rock promontory. We enjoyed the vast view from the cliff edge, alas with no alpine swifts to add to the fun. Mike and Jill went for a wander, enjoying the fine sticky clumps of *Saxifraga corbariensis* on the cliff edge and in the woodland not-yet-out Martagon Lily *Lilium martagon*, fly honeysuckle and hepatica, with Star of Bethlehem *Ornithogalum umbellatum* and meadow saxifrage *Saxifraga granulata* in a small meadow. Walking back Mike and Jill had views of two Hobbies overhead, but were not quite in time to get back to point them out to Gale and Richard.

By now it was getting late and time to return to Besalú.

DAY 5 MAY 9 CAP DE CREUS

On day 5 it was time to head towards the coast, to the Cap de Creus Natural Park. The weather was still fine and warm.

But first a morning jaunt to the river Fluvià near the hamlet of Dosquers. We walked down to the river, as Bee-eaters flew overhead and a Melodious Warbler sang from deep within the bushes. Down by the river ("where lots of folk go"), we stood and saw our only Cormorant of the trip as we listened to the Golden Orioles whistling tunefully from the other side of the river. Two Grey Herons flew by, but the Black Kites were not being very active. We returned to the van, had good views of a Melodious Warbler singing from top of a Christ's thorn, and headed back towards Besalú on a dirt track. Here, we had to stop for Corn Bunting, Common Buzzard and a Woodchat Shrike, before coming across a group of Bee-eaters sitting on a freshly dug bank by the side of the track. Excellent views!

After breakfast we headed back east towards the sea, this time to the rugged landscapes of Cap de Creus. Our first stop was a track that leads towards the radio-mast-topped peak of Montperdut, where we decided to do the main walk of the day before it got too hot. We soon picked up a solitary Black Kite and Corn Buntings in the open woodland, and heard yet another Golden Oriole –quickly becoming our bogey bird- calling from the woods below. At a junction we stopped and a male Common Restart flashed past and a Hobby cruised overhead. Warbler-wise, we had a view of a Subalpine, could hear Sardinian chattering away and heard many Orphean, the latter very Iberian with its "Ole, ole" call. We continued up to a small field, from where there were good views over most of the surrounding landscapes. Here, we had our first sighting of one of the area's specialities, Red-rumped Swallow, a very localised breeder in Catalonia. A couple flew quite close and we all had good views of its rump. Soon afterwards a couple of Alpine Swifts flashed by at great speed and a Thekla Lark called from overhead. Mike and Jill wandered off and had good views of two Short-toed eagles flying by at eye-level and Common and Scarce Swallowtails hill-topping (congregating on a high point to mate) over a small rocky outcrop. The other butterflies here were the very common Spanish Gatekeeper and Western Marbled White.

On our way down we concentrated more on the flora: the scrub was composed of narrow-leaved *Cistus monspeliensis* (white flower) and grey-leaved cistus *C. albidus* (pink flower), a gorse *Ulex parviflora*, French lavender *Lavandula stoechas*, Mediterranean honeysuckle *Lonicera implexa* and thorny broom *Calcithome spinosa*. At ground level we found a pink thistle, galactites *Galactites spinosa*, star clover *Trifolium stellatum*, a patch of *Sideritis hirsuta* with yellow flowers, a small yellow composite *Tolpis barbata*, daisy-leaved toadflax *Anarrhinum bellidifolium*, weasel's snout *Misopates orontium*, the deep pink mallow-leaved bindweed *Convolvulus althaeoides* and the foul-smelling narrow-leaved rue *Ruta angustifolius*.

However, our major botanical find was at the aforementioned junction, where we stopped to rest and Mike found a lot of the low red and yellow flowers of the rock-rose parasite *Cytinus hypocistis* pushing up through the soil. Many a photograph was taken of this unusual plant. In the same place we found a large number of dark feathers, obviously the result of a kill by a bird of prey. The sheer size of the wing feathers –Grey Heron, perhaps- made us think that perhaps it was a bird that had been killed by one of the local Bonelli's Eagles. Here too we had our best views of an Orphean Warbler moving around in the branches of a small oak.

Back at the van we decided to head uphill to a picnic spot, where we chose a spot under the pines. Jill asked Mike if there might be any Crested Tits here, to which he answered no. Thirty seconds later we were all watching a pair of Crested Tits in the pines above our heads, displaying their presence for all to see. A Woodchat Shrike also put in a close appearance.

From here it was uphill all the way, literally towards the wonderful monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes, perched high on the slopes of Cap de Creus. Once parked, our first birds here were Serin and then a very low Honey Buzzard, giving us the best views yet of its undersides and how to

separate this species from Common Buzzard. However, we were as taken by the flowers, with patches of the golden-flowered *Potentilla hirta*, a group of green-veined orchids *Orchis morio* and, best of all and one of the surprise of the week, clumps of wild tulip *Tulipa australis*. Mike had never seen them before here and this finally convinced him that this trip must always be run in the future in early May. Some were just going over, but there were still a number in perfect condition to be photographed. Other plants on the way to the monastery included large Mediterranean spurge *Euphorbia characias*, an invasive ragwort *Senecio inaequidens* that is taking over many of the pastures in the area, hairy tare (a vetch) *Vicia hirsuta*, small trees of Montpellier maple *Acer monspesulanum* and rather taller southern nettle trees *Celtis australis*.

Close up to the monastery we had more good views of a Nightingale in the scope, singing its little heart out, Black Redstart on the roof and a Bonelli's Warbler literally two metres over our heads in the young pines we were sitting underneath.

Returning we sat in the shade again and scanned the scrub below us. First we had excellent views of a male Blue Rock Thrush on the rocks below and then, two large distant raptors that through the telescope were easy to identify as Bonelli's Eagles. Unfortunately, they came no closer and we were left wondering if one of them was the origin of the feathers we had found earlier in the day. We also noted Jersey fern *Anogramma leptophylla*, under the overhang of a small rock.

From here it was downhill all the way home, with views of three Red-legged Partridges from the van, and a quick stop in a stream near the village of Vilajuïga to see if we could find any amphibians. Sadly none were showing themselves and we had to make do with myrtle *Mirtus communis*, more common tongue orchids and thread-leaved water crowfoot *Ranunculus trichophyllus*. We then continued home, as in children's books, tired but happy.

After dinner and after counting the Moorish Geckos on the old bridge (today five, on the following day six) we went out for a frog hunt along the river at Besalú. The cacophony of sounds was largely led by Iberian Pool Frogs, although there was a good number of Stripeless Tree-frogs calling as well. Back near the hotel a Midwife Toad repeated its characteristic bleeping call.

DAY 6 MAY 10 PLA DE FALGARS - LES PRESES INDUSTRIAL ESTATE (SIC) - LA MOIXINA

Inland again today and up to the high pastures of El Pla de Falgars in the western-most part of La Garrotxa.

After negotiating the bends on the mountain road, with just one stop for a relatively close view of a pale-phased Booted Eagle, we arrived at our departure point below the beech-covered slopes of Pla de Falgars. Whilst getting prepared, we had time to see a quick Hare, our first mammal of the trip, a Black Kite overhead and quick views of a Tau Emperor (or Nail-mark) moth as it flashed by, looking for all the world like a large fritillary.

We set off on foot through the grazing pastures dotted with dragon's-teeth *Tetragonolobus maritimus*, banks of *Genista scorpius* smelling sweetly and stinking hellebore *Helleborus foetidus*. On our ascent towards the woods, a couple of Rock Buntings provided fleeting views and three Common Rock Lizards provided great entertainment on a warm stone.

However, the main excitement was a sudden flurry of raptors: first one Griffon Vulture and then eight more in total, closely followed by three Honey Buzzards and three Black Kites, as well as Carrion Crow and Raven. From the first grassy knoll, we had stunning views north to the snow-capped Pyrenees as we sat amongst the spring gentians. Here, we also had quick views of another Rock Bunting, found a Badger latrine and noticed hundreds of tiny longhorn moths (*Adela* sp.), recognisable by their outsized antennae, on the surrounding bushes. Miek heard a Black Woodpecker in the distance.

From here it was up and into the beech forest, where not much was in flower, although it was interesting to see both green *Helleborus viridis* and stinking hellebores *H. foetidus* together. In a very shaded gully we found a lot of Pyrenean squill *Scilla lilio-hyacanthus*, wood-sorrel *Oxalis acetosella* and wood anemone still in flower.

We eventually reached our destination, the pastures of Pla de Falgars. As we arrived a Camberwell Beauty (Mourning Cloak) flashed by and we found our first orchid of the day, early purple *Orchis mascula*, in the woods. Once up on the Pla, we began to find lots of spring gentians and, more impressively, clumps of trumpet gentians *Gentiana acaulis*. We mooched around for sometime and, despite the abundance of gentians, found little else apart from Lady's Mantle *Alchemilla vulgaris*, and just a few elder-flowered orchids *Dactylorhiza sambucina*, one of our targets here. All except one robust plant were the yellow form.

Our return to the van was interrupted by a perfect male Rock Bunting singing in a bush but 20 m from us and a pair of Wood-larks that we were able to see in the telescope. A patch of the now familiar Catalan bee orchid also caught our eye.

After a late lunch, we started our way home, stopping at a small pond to watch a male Broad-bodied Chaser patrolling up and down.

Our next stop was the Les Preses Industrial Estate (sic), where a pool of water was providing entertainment for local herpetologists. Here, amidst the myriad of tadpoles we found a few recently metamorphosed Painted Frogs.

Continuing in an amphibious line, before returning to Besalú we stopped off at the marshy woodlands of La Moixina near Olot. Here a quick wander through the woods brought us more frustration in the form of calling Golden Orioles and Short-toed Tree-creepers, but no actual sightings.

DAY 7 MAY 11 LES ALBERES

Our first activity was a pre-breakfast stroll down by the river Fluvià near the village of Argelaguer: the aim, the Golden Orioles.

After first being briefly stumped in the van by a stump, we soon began to hear the male orioles calling. Our first view was a quick flash of pale green as a female flew overhead. Then a male gave us a similar quick flash, before all hell broke loose and a group of five chasing males flashed around the tree-tops we were concentrating on. It was a very impressionistic view, with yellow and black flashing like a Barcelona taxi. Fortunately, we also got a more conventional stationary view of a male through the telescope in a tree slightly further away.

Before returning to break our fasts, we approached the river and disturbed a heron, which Mike immediately called as a juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron, because they normally hole up in this corner of the river. Alas, it was 'only' a Purple Heron, although immediately a Black-crowned Night Heron did appear from the exactly same spot 10 seconds later!

We continued our day at the Hermann's Tortoise recovery centre near Garriguella, where Xavi explained to us the whys and wherefores of their work with this extremely threatened species of tortoise. He showed us round their installations, pointing out also the two species of native terrapins, as well as the introduced Red-eared Sliders that infest many Catalan wetlands and some of the exotic species of tortoise and terrapin that find their way to the centre.

From here we headed off into the wild, to the monastery of Sant Quirze de Colera up in the foothills of the Alberes. However, on the way, Mike had to stop smartly to avoid a pair of beautiful Ocellated Lizards in the road, coincidentally just as he was saying how rare the species was getting in the area. We parked by the roadside and we entered the scrub in search of better views of these magnificent animals, but only Jill caught a further glimpse of them.

We parked outside the restaurant at Sant Quirze de Colera and, whilst wandering down to the stream, had our second wonderful view of a Nightingale in full song in the telescope. Turning around we noted a male Blue Rock Thrush heading for the monastery with food on its bill. Unfortunately we did not see where about the nest was.

The stream was being patrolled by an Emperor dragonfly and we also saw a couple of red-brown damselflies *Platycnemis acutipennis* mating, a male Red-veined darter and a single Broad-bodied Chaser. The streamside was decorated with common tongue orchids and ragged Robin, the odd shrub of green heather *Erica scoparia*, whilst the water itself had patches of thread-leaved water-crowfoot in flower. Richard spent time photographing the Iberian Pool Frog and what we think was a Painted Frog, much larger than the previous evening's froglets!

As Jill and Mike explored, a fresh Marsh Fritillary whizzed past and a Viperine Snake swam in the stream. A little further downstream by a wooden bridge, a patch of pomegranate bushes was in flower. As the heat start to increase we retired to the shade of the bar terrace for a picnic with cold drinks and views over the monastery, where we spotted the Blue Rock Thrush again on the roof of the small church next door. However, the highlight of lunch was not the ice-cream, but the group of 10 Wild Boars that came into views in the woods over the other side of the stream. In all we counted three adult females and seven piglets, all gently grazing and snuffling around in the small patch of sweet chestnut woods beyond the stream below. A peaceful bucolic scene for all.

After lunch we drove up the track, through a scrub ablaze with the colours of narrow-leaved cistus *Cistus monspeliensis*, a gorse, *Daphne gnidium*, French lavender and thorny broom. At Coll de Plaja we stopped with cows either side of the track and sat and enjoyed the view northwards. Two pairs of alpine swift screamed overhead amongst the common swifts and Goldfinches and Linnets called around us, and a Raven croaked its way over the mountainside

up to our right. A bright patch of *Potentilla hirta* shone bright at our feet along with a myriad spotted rock-rose *Tuberaria guttata*.

We dropped down from Coll de Plaja, noting the bloody crane's-bill decorating the scrub to a pool by the roadside next to the abandoned farm of Mas Pils. Here we found a Common Toad submerged in the stream with just its snout and eyes poking through the carpet of crow's-foot and on the road an Iberian Wall Lizard, with its noticeable bands on its flanks. Around the pool on the other side of the road, we watched a female Emperor Dragonfly laying her eggs in the emergent vegetation as the male continued to whiz up and down the pool, more Red-veined Darters and Broad-bodied Chasers and a solitary *Gomphus pulchellus*, a close relative of the more familiar (for British people) Club-tailed Dragonfly.

We strolled across the pasture, seeing Rock Sparrow, Wood-lark and Orphean Warbler (briefly), before returning to the van and Gale surrounded by a large herd of cows and horses that had come to the stream to drink.

Our penultimate stop was down to the river Orlina for a terrapin stake-out. We were in luck, for we had good views of one Terrapin just hauling itself out of the water. We went and sat by the water for a while and enjoyed the serenade of the Nightingales and pool frogs. A pair of Melodious Warblers flitted in the bushes over the other side of the river as we watched the suspicious heads of a couple of terrapins who just couldn't decide whether or not to come out of the water.

Our final stop was in the fields near the hamlet of Delfià. Here, as we gazed over the fields in the hope of seeing a hovering Lesser Kestrel, we came across our first and only female Montagu's Harrier. Seeing no kestrels here, we returned along the track and viewed a 4 or 5 Lesser Kestrels around an old building.

And so after a long day, we headed for home and to pack.

DAY 8 MAY 12 BESALÚ - BARCELONA AIRPORT

The return trip to the airport was, as it should be, uneventful.