

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



SPAIN Pyrenees & Plains 6 – 13 May 2017

TOUR REPORT

Leader: Richard Cash

This was one of the best birding and nature trips I have ever had the pleasure of doing. We saw a huge range of birds in many varied habitats – from spoonbills to wallcreepers! As well as birding we enjoyed seeing wild flowers, butterflies, other insects and mammals. The hotels we stayed at were excellent and perfect for the group. Above all the company was first class – huge thanks to the group for being such great people full of interest, knowledge, energy and fun.

Saturday 6 May 2017

The BA flight arrived on time at Bilbao airport and we were soon driving through the beautiful Basque countryside towards our first birding stop at Urdaibai. After lunch at a local bar we arrived at the very smart Urdaibai Birding Centre set at the beginning of an estuary overlooking tidal and freshwater marshes and wetlands which are an important overwintering and rest area for migrant birds.

Being early afternoon it was fairly quiet but even so we saw marsh harrier hunting over the reeds, greenshank, redshank, common sandpiper, a group of spoonbills, cattle and little egrets, grey heron, black winged stilts, pochard, wigeon and mallard. We heard savvis, great reed and Cetti's warblers – Reuben's great ear for birdsong came into it's own, as it would throughout the trip. black kite and buzzard made appearances and we saw the first of many serins and goldfinches in the centre car park.

We then drove for two and a half hours to our first base (seeing citril finch in the pines over a high pass) – Uncastillo – a beautiful medieval town set near the plains of Zaragoza and Navarre. Miguel and Inma made us really welcome at their lovely hotel - La Posada and we were soon having a welcome drink and doing our first species list before a superb dinner.

Sunday 7 May 2017

A beautiful morning dawned with hundreds of martins, swallows and swifts flying over the town which, with its many ancient buildings, has myriad nesting sites. Well-rested after a long day before, we set out after breakfast towards Sádaba. Driving through a landscape of cereal fields and flooded rice paddies we started seeing a spectacular range of birds – many white stork, excellent views of four pairs of Montagu's harriers hunting over the fields. Other raptors seen included short toed eagle, red and black kites and griffon vultures. Just outside Sádaba we stopped to see bee-eaters and an obliging melodious warbler perched on a dead elm and singing away. We had a fleeting view of a nightingale and corn buntings were, as always during the week, omnipresent.



We continued driving and, crossing the River Aragón, we had great views of grey heron, white stork and cormorant. We soon arrived at La Laguna de Pitillas – a marshy lake created hundreds of years ago as an

irrigation reservoir. On arrival we saw calandra lark and skylark and were soon spotting and hearing Cetti's and great reed warblers and zitting cisticolas calling in flight above their territories. Marsh harrier were swooping over the reeds and, on the water, we saw many pochard plus one red crested pochard, many mallard and coot plus great crested and little grebe. Across the lake a flock of black tern made an appearance and we started seeing many Purple as well as grey herons. There were some argus butterflies around as well as adonis blues, red admiral and red underwing skipper. Other insects seen were red veined darters and southern skimmer plus many zzure damselflys/bluets.



We enjoyed a good picnic while we scanned the lake and white and grey wagtails flitted around catching insects nearby. Afterwards we went to the North end of the lake and walked around its fringe through the fragrant thyme in the hope of seeing bittern. We didn't see one but it was fabulous to hear one as well as hearing Bearded tit. We saw a solitary ringed plover, many purple and grey herons, skylark and crested lark and more black terns. We also saw long tailed blue and common blue butterflies and an Egyptian locust.

On the way back we stopped near the river and had good views of goldfinch, woodchat shrike, a kestrel and a black redstart. Once back in Uncastillo we walked up to the castle which dominates the town and saw red billed chough while exploring the ruins.

We went over our species list enjoying a cool beer before another great dinner - stuffed olives and a delicious salmon dish. Inma is a great cook!

Monday 8 May 2017

Up well before dawn we were soon driving to get to Las Bardenas Natural Park in time to see the sun come up and, with any luck, see a Dupont's lark. As the sun rose over the amazing wild west landscape of Bardenas a pair of marsh harriers flew around a nearby promontory. We could hear and see Lesser Short toed and calandra larks very clearly and Reuben said he heard a Dupont's. Alas that was the only sign we had of this elusive bird! However it was wonderful to be in such a unique spot at the crack of dawn and we



soon started spotting many species in this seemingly desolate place – black and red kites, short toed eagle, a very elegant black eared wheatear, northern wheatear, whinchat, spectacled warblers, hoopoe, bee-eaters..... There were also hundreds of lizard orchids, a pristine Spanish swallowtail butterfly, and a turquoise blue butterfly.

After a welcome picnic breakfast we drove along the park tracks (around a Spanish air force firing range complete with jet fighters making attack runs!) seeing many crested larks, linnets, red legged partridge, greenfinch, yellow legged gull and serins. Approaching a farming village we started seeing many spotless starlings, corn buntings and, again, the sheer quantity of swallows, swifts and martins was amazing. We had a coffee (much needed after 5.15 am start!) and drove back towards Uncastillo seeing many white storks and black kites in the irrigated farmland. We stopped for our picnic at a small lake and saw great reed warblers, purple heron, black terns and great crested grebe.



A green underside blue and a common blue butterfly were nectaring on white asphodel. Hoopoe and cuckoo were calling as we set off after lunch. After collecting our luggage we continued driving towards our next base at Berdún at the foot of the Pyrenees. The scenery of open farmland, hills, trees and rocky

gullies is strikingly beautiful during the spring and the sound of nightingales could be heard over the engine noise as we drove north east. A couple of stops on the way gave us many lady orchids, a sombre bee orchid, a honey buzzard flying north, short toed eagle, kites and our first subalpine warbler which took some spotting as it skulked in the bushes. A stop at the amazing Paul Nash sculpture site near Berdún was rewarded with seeing a pipistrelle bat in one of the sculptures and a good sighting of a roller – wonderful! We arrived tired but happy at Casa Sarasa in Berdún and after settling into our rooms had a beer and went over our lists before a great dinner provided by our hosts Peter and Melanie.

Tuesday 9 May 2017

For our first day in the Pyrenees we decided to explore the magnificent Hecho Valley North of Berdún. Driving up the valley we saw buzzards, black and red kites and plenty of corn buntings. Once at the Boca del Infierno Gorge we walked along the road admiring the fabulous scenery of river, cliffs and trees. House and crag martins – both species nest in the gorge – were flitting along the rock walls and griffon vultures soared overhead. The main highlights here were the spring flowers – Pyrenean saxifrage rosettes growing on the rocks, rock soapwort, snapdragons in their natural habitat, blue lettuce and the lovely pink flowered pyreneicum subspecies of common rockrose.



Going further up the valley we stopped at a riverside meadow and immediately saw a pristine Camberwell beauty butterfly and an Iberian scarce swallowtail. We crossed the river and, while looking for green lizards saw grizzled and dingy skippers, orange tip, small tortoiseshell, Provencal fritillary and painted lady butterflies.

After patient searching around field boundaries – enjoying the Cowslips, Asphodel and Speedwell flowers- David found the first of several Green Lizards – stunning reptiles with their jewel-like scales and a Common Wall Lizard sunning itself.



Driving up the valley we had a very brief glimpse of a dipper and were soon admiring early purple and elderflower orchids growing on the alpine slopes. We walked up the track and Reuben saw a golden eagle which we saw later on high above the French border. Marmot were easy to see and we spotted a 30 strong flock of isard (Pyrenean chamois). Alpine and red billed chough wheeled around the valley and northern wheatear – recently arrived from the south looked wonderful with their fresh spring plumage.

We saw little blue butterflies, many drinking together. This species hibernates as a fully grown larva and is one of the first blues to emerge in spring. Nearby was a Pyrenean brook newt – wonderful to see this species exclusive to the Pyrenees. Down the slope was another local endemic – Pyrenean squill – one of the first flowers out in spring at this altitude (1300 metres). We had a brief view of a Peregrine falcon and good views of kestrel before we headed back down the valley to our lunch spot by the River Aragón Subordán.



After a delicious picnic of salad, local cheese and local sausage we drove up to Gabardito through the Scots pine and, higher up, Beech forest aiming to see wallcreeper on their nesting site there. The afternoon was quiet but other birders told us they had seen the birds so we settled down to wait, scanning the cliffs.



Our patience was rewarded after 40 minutes or so with a brief appearance of this amazing bird – this time a male (black throat and breast spring plumage) flitting across the rock face. We all saw it except for Thea so we waited a while longer for a better view. It didn't re-appear but two red billed choughs were seen mating and Reuben and I had good views of short toed treecreeper (distinguished by its different song) and of citril finch in the meadow around the refuge.



We then drove back down to Berdún commiserating with Thea about her lack of wallcreeper and decided we would try to get more and better sightings another day.

A fabulous day in the Pyrenees was rounded off with another great dinner from Pete and Mel and the sound of a nightingale serenading us in the garden.

Wednesday 10 May 2017

For today's excursion we drove South to the Pyrenees foothills hoping to see some more Mediterranean species in the spectacular landscapes around Riglos and Ayerbe. There are few areas in the world which have such variety of habitats and species all so close together. Yesterday we were seeing marmots and isard on the alpine slopes with snow on them still and today we were aiming to see a whole different range of birds and flowers less than an hour's drive away.

First stop was by the village of Aguero with its amazing conglomerate pinnacles. We saw and heard Dartford warbler flitting around juniper bushes. This was followed by a booted eagle being mobbed by a chough and then we saw a subalpine warbler – paler than its cousin the Dartford. griffon vultures were flying in and out of their cliff nests and it was good to see an Egyptian vulture – strangely the first we'd seen on this trip. The usual serin and goldfinches were seen in number flying as were barn swallows and crag and house martins. As we were leaving we saw four honey buzzards flying North on migration – superb!

Passing through the lovely small town of Ayerbe we had a coffee and a delicious local cake. Simon bought himself a penknife made in the Pyrenees at a wonderful old hardware store.

We drove to an old chapel and tower high above the plains of Huesca seeing turtle dove, whinchat and stonechat along the way. On arrival we were greeted with a flypast by a lammergeier – wonderful to see and a species on everybody's list to see this week! Egyptian vultures and griffons were continually flying overhead and alongside. We took a beautiful walk around the 12th Century tower and chapel seeing rock bunting, tawny pipit, crested lark, kestrel corn buntings and a jewel-like white collared burnet moth



Driving on to our next spot – El Mirador de Los Buitres (The Vulture Lookout) we saw a Thekla lark – perched on a bush and a little less sandy coloured than the crested larks seen up to now. We ate our picnic overlooking the amazing rock towers of Riglos and the Gállego Valley while griffon and Egyptian vultures glided past to and from their nests on the nearby cliffs. Scanning the scrubby vegetation brought tawny pipit and stonechat and on the way to Loarre castle we saw a rock thrush.

After coffee and ice cream at the castle café we walked beneath the superb 12th Century fortifications perched on its limestone pinnacles and saw Sardinian warbler, red billed chough, rock sparrow and a pair of lesser kestrel - a wonderful surprise as they have never nested here before. We also saw a blue rock thrush

which flew out from its perch and did a complete backwards somersault in the air to catch a fly - what an artist!

We drove back to Berdún really happy with our fantastic day of birding in such amazing surroundings.

Thursday 11 May 2017

Today was predicted to be wet and stormy and I was worried about our birding prospects for the day. We decided to stay near our base and keep a weather eye out for the predicted storms. We drove down towards the River Aragón and, first off, saw a immature, male hen harrier with the beginnings of a distinctive white band at the base of its tail. It's not always easy to see all three harriers to be found in this area so we were really pleased.

Arriving at the bridge we disturbed about 30 cormorants and 30 grey herons which flew off in a flock together – wow! Less flighty were a great egret, little egret and a cattle egret which we all saw. Thea ventured across the bridge and spotted an unusual eagle which turned out to be a Bonelli's eagle – the first I've seen in this area and a wonderful addition to our local raptors. It turns out that six captive bred birds were released about 40 kilometres away last year and this is one of those.

Venturing through the Soto (riverside scrub and poplars) we heard garden warbler and saw long tailed tit and cirl bunting. Then a peregrine falcon was spotted with a pigeon in its talons and it proceeded to fly down to a field and pass its prey to another bird – we thought it was probably its chick - which then ate the pigeon. Wonderful to see!



In the Poplars we could hear golden oriole calling and we spied a little ringed plover on the river. Thea saw a nightingale – often heard, rarely seen! Further on we saw bee-eaters swooping out of the trees to catch insects over the river. At our feet we found bee ophrys, Early spider ophrys and yellow ophrys – a great selection in a tiny area.



H

A marsh harrier flew over the fields behind us and we saw several blue butterflies and marbled skipper before making our way back to the minibus enjoying the plants, flowers and insects. What a morning!

We drove up to a nearby gorge, seeing a fox on the way, and had our picnic while watching ravens, chough and griffon vultures flying around the cliffs. It was getting very overcast and threatening so we went back to Casa Sarasa for a rest and a coffee before driving out to Binies. We spotted a little owl on its perch on an old barn and a girl bunting in the hedge along the road. Our target this afternoon was the Orphean warbler (called the blackbird warbler in Spanish due to its similar song). Fifteen minutes or so scanning and we heard the bird and Reuben spotted it. We all had excellent views of what was a lifer for some of us.

A subalpine warbler was chattering away in a tree nearby but had no intention of showing itself! Returning to Berdún we saw turtle dove – such a beautiful bird.

We celebrated a superb day with a few beers while adding to our ever growing list and enjoyed another fine dinner at Casa Sarasa.

Friday 12 May 2017

Breakfast was enlivened this morning by a red kite swooping down to take a dog's bone just outside the dining room!

Today we had agreed to try for the wallcreeper again so Thea would get a view and, hopefully, we'd see some more species.

We made a detour to see if the little owl was on its perch and were amazed to see a young goshawk perched in the same place and the owl nowhere to be seen! Wow! Not something we see every day!



We continued across the flat barley and wheatfields towards the Hecho valley seeing Montagu's harrier, skylark, crested lark, woodchat shrike on the holm oaks and many corn buntings.

Walking up to the wallcreeper site above Gabardito we had great views of red squirrel and saw coal tit and black redstart. We settled down to wait for the wallcreeper along with a family of birders from Yorkshire (patient wives!) and we soon had some great views of the male – wonderful! We also saw a lammergeier fly over as an added bonus. Down at the Refugio we had some first class views of the citril finch family often to be seen here.

After eating our picnic we drove down the valley and had a walk around the fields, woods and paths of a lovely hilltop village – it was very quiet as the afternoon was very hot but we did see a pair of bullfinches, short toed treecreeper and spotted flycatcher.

We went over our final list at the end of the day and had a glass of Cava at dinner to celebrate a wonderful weeks birding in the Pyrenees and Plains.

Saturday 13 May 2017

We didn't have time for anything but getting to the airport in Bilbao. I was sad to see everyone go after a wonderful week. Thanks for coming and I hope to see you all again!

Flowers

We saw plenty of wild flowers during our days in the field. In the alpine areas there were few species as Spring had only just arrived. Below is a list of a few of the flowers we saw in the order in which we saw them day by day.

Clary - *Salvia amplexicaulis*
Tassel Hyacinth – *Muscari comosum*
Fumitory – *Fumaria officinalis*
Scarlet Pimpernel (blue flower) – *Anagalis arvensis*
Aphylantes – *Aphylantes monspeliensis*
Beautiful Flax – *Linum narbonense*
White Asphodel – *Asphodelus albus*
Wild Thyme – *Thymus vulgaris*
Wild Rocket – *Eruca sativa*
Mustard –
Fennel - *Foeniculum vulgare*
Musk Thistle – *Carduus nutans*
Marsh Thistle – *Cirsium palustre*
Spear Thistle – *Cirsium vulgare*
Lizard Orchid – *Himantoglossum hircinum*
Lady Orchid – *Orchis purpurea*
Sombre Bee Orchid – *Ophrys fusca*
False Vetch - *Astragalus monspessulanus*
Pyrenean Flax – *Linum suffruticosum*
Sawtooth Spurge – *Euphorbia serrata*
Spiny Starwort – *Pallensis spinosa*
Restharrow pink flowers, bushy– *Ononis tridentate*
White Rockrose – *Helianthemum appeninum*
Common Rockrose (pink flowered) – *Helianthemum nummularium pyreneicum*
Pyrenean Squill - *Scilla lilio-hyacinthus*
Early Purple Orchid – *Orchis mascula*
Elderflower Orchid – *Dactylorhiza sambucina*
Trumpet Gentian – *Gentiana acaulis*
Spring Gentian – *Gentiana verna*
Germander Speedwell – *Veronica Chamaedris*
Hepatica – *Hepatica nobilis*
Good King Henry – *Blitum bonus henricus*
Austrian Rocket – *Sisymbrium austriacum/pyreneicum*
Purple Bittercress – *Cardamine purpurea*
Pyrenean Lousewort – *Pedicularis pyreneica*
Pyrenean Saxifrage – *Saxifragia longifolia*
Meadow Saxifrage – *Saxifragia granulata*
Acanthus Leaved Carline Thistle (dry) – *Carlina acanthifolia*
Grape Hyacinth – *Muscari racemosum*
Cowslip – *Primula veris*
Common Storksbill – *Erodium cicutarium*
Blue Lettuce – *latuca perennis*
Corn Mignonette – *Reseda phyteuma*
Vipers Bugloss – *Echium vulgare*
Large Mediterranean Spurge – *Euphorbia characias*
Rue leaved Isopyrum – *Isopyrum thalictroides*
Giant Fennel – *Ferula comunis*

Rue – *Ruta graveolans*

Sweet pea (red flower) - *Lathyrus setifolius*

Paronychia – *Paronychia argentea*

Mountain Sanfoin – *Onobrychis montana*

Paniculate Saxifrage – *Saxifragia paniculata*