

## ARAGON: The Belchite Steppes, Los Monegros and the Pyrenees

Mike Cram & Neville Davies 30<sup>th</sup> April to 4<sup>th</sup> May 2008



We arrived on time in **Barcelona** via our scheduled *EasyJet* flight from **Stansted** (£89rtm each). We picked up our Fiat Bravo (*Diesel*) from **AVIS** (£58 each) and were on our way at 1145h. We picked up the A2 for the 3 hour journey to El Planeron in the steppe country. Along the way **Ring-necked Parakeet** flew over and **White Storks** were more numerous from **Alcarras** onwards.

Our first planned stop at **Llano De Las Menorcas** produced 3+ nesting **Lesser Kestrel**, 3+ **Spotless Starling**, **Rock Dove** and a **Red-billed Chough**. As we approached **Bujaraloz** by early afternoon the first of many **Marsh Harrier** and **Black Kite** were seen and 2 light-phase **Booted Eagle**. Along the B1105 to **Gelsa** we saw 2 **Black-eared Wheatear** and the first of many **Crested Lark** and **Corn Bunting**. As we approached **El Planeron**, we made our way slowly along the minor road and saw 25+ **Calandra Lark**, 12+ **Lesser Short-toed Lark**, 6 **Black-eared Wheatear** and a **Whinchat**.

We reached **El Planeron SEO** at 1845h. Would did not hear or see any Dupont's Lark, but we did see female **Montagu's Harrier**, a pair of **Stone Curlew** with 2 large downy chicks, 2 **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** and **Little Owl**. We checked in to our Hotel in **Quinto** as 4 **Bee-eater** flew over. After an excellent dinner, we took a walk near the local allotments nearby and saw 2 **White Stork** in a colossal nest, 4 **Black Kite**, 1 **Hobby**. We heard several **Cetti's Warbler**, **Nightingale** and **Serin**.

### Day 2 – Thu 01May08

We returned to **El Planeron SEO** at 0600h, well before dawn and were quickly rewarded with the song of 4+ **Dupont's Lark**. We scanned carefully for the next 2 hours. Although we did not see any Dupont's we did see **Lesser Kestrel**, **Woodchat Shrike**, **Southern Grey Shrike**, **Brown Hare** and **Red Fox**. After returning to Quinto for an excellent breakfast, we collected our picnic lunch, checked out of the Hotel Rioja and returned to El Planeron. At 0920 the Dupont's were still in song. We then chanced upon a group of ringers. They spoke no English, so I used my patchy French to chat to them. They invited us to watch and it soon became apparent that they were not only ringing in the bushes, but catching and ringing juvenile Dupont's Lark using traps buried in the ground. This large slice of luck allowed us to spend the next 2 hours enjoying views in the hand of **Dupont's Lark**, **Bonelli's Warbler** and **Pied Flycatcher**. We scanned the area in between the ringing and saw 18+ **Griffon Vulture**, 2 **Red-legged Partridge**, 2 **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** and several **Apollo** butterflies.



Calandra Lark

Bonelli's Warbler

Dupont's Lark

We moved off north. An immature **Bonelli's Eagle** was a good find over the steppe and a **Black-winged Stilt** was at some roadside pools near **Candasnos**. We headed towards **Ballobar** in search of Little Bustard in **Los Monegros**. Early morning was probably best for this area and although we explored well in to the afternoon, we dipped, but not before enjoying good views of female **Montagu's Harrier**, **2 Stone Curlew**, **6 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse**, **1 Great Spotted Cuckoo**, **3 Hoopoe**, **2 Black-eared Wheatear** and numerous **Calandra Lark**.

A short picnic stop at the bridge over the **Rio Alcanadre** at **Ontinena** was productive: **Night Heron**, **Common Sandpiper**, **16 Bee-eater**, **Common Cuckoo**, **Zitting Cisticola** and **6+ Nightingale**. We then moved on to **Sarinena Lake**. It took a while to find, but once there we enjoyed a busy hour with several **Little** and **Great Crested Grebe**, **8 Grey Heron**, **2 Purple Heron**, **6+ Cattle Egret**, **6 Black Tern**, **Water Rail** heard, a **Great Reed Warbler** and a **Bearded Tit** heard. By 1800h we reached the beautiful **Somontano** area. We travelled through the villages checking out the cereal fields and any perches for an outside chance of Black-shouldered Kite. No luck, but we did see **Crag Martin**, **Woodchat** and loads of **Crested Lark**, **Spotless Starling**, **Serin** and **Corn Bunting**.

We arrived at the **Boletas Birdwatching Centre** in **Loporzano** near **Huesca** at 1845. We were greeted by Esther who showed us our room for the next 3 nights. We enjoyed an excellent evening meal with some fine local red wine. BB&EM + picnic worked out at about £40 each per night. We cannot speak highly enough of the wonderful hospitality we received there. Apart from petrol, we spent little else, excellent value!

### **Day 3 – Fri 02May08**

A pre-breakfast walk around the village and cereal fields in **Loporzano**: **Griffon Vulture**, **Egyptian Vulture**, **2 Quail** calling, **1 Wryneck**, **1 Melodious Warbler**, **1 Redstart**, **1 Whinchat**, several **Nightingale** and male **Golden Oriole** were the highlights. After breakfast we moved up to the local cemetery, where we saw **Tawny Pipit**, **Woodlark**, **Black-eared Wheatear** and **Woodchat Shrike**.

En route to the **Hecho valley** in the Pyrenees **Griffon Vultures** became more numerous. We also saw several **Red Kite**, **Crag Martin** and a **Jay**. After a long drive up on a switchback track, we reached the refuge at **Gabardito** at 1140. We were immediately greeted with excellent views of a pair of **Citril Finch** in the car park. As we made our way up the valley we encountered several **Firecrest**, **Crested Tit**, **Treecreeper**, **Coal Tit** and **Chaffinch**.

We watched the steep cliff faces where Wallcreeper are supposed to be frequent. Our luck did not hold here, but we had some good birding nonetheless: **2 Lammergeier** flew over, numerous **Griffon Vulture**, **1 Egyptian Vulture**, **2 Booted Eagle**, **1 Alpine Swift**, **Green Woodpecker** (*sharpei*) heard, **Garden Warbler**, **Chiffchaff** and many **Red-billed Chough**. Back at the car park later on, as we picnicked, we saw a **Nuthatch** and then **3 Citril Finch**, **1 Camberwell Beauty**, **Orange-Tip**, **Painted Lady**, **Common Blue** and **Brimstone**.



**Subalpine Warbler**



**Serin**



**Nev at El Planeron**

We returned south and stopped off near Huesca at **Montearagon Castle**. Although it was 1730h, it was very hot. We quickly found a pair of **Black Wheatear** and enjoyed excellent views. We finished the day off in **Loporzano**. At the cemetery there was much activity, mainly in the scrub and we saw **1 Egyptian Vulture**, **1 Booted Eagle**, **2 Tawny Pipit**, **4+ Western Orphean Warbler**, **1 Subalpine Warbler**, **1 Sardinian Warbler**, a pair of **Cirl Bunting**, **Grass Snake** and **Brown Hare**. After dinner 2100-2200h we got very close to **4 Scops Owl** calling in the village but could not see any. Later we saw a **Barn Owl** which was screeching as it quartered the local fields.

#### **Day 4 – Sat03May08**

**Loporzano Cemetery** before breakfast: singing **Thekla Lark**, **Western Orphean Warbler**, **Subalpine Warbler** and **Stonechat**.

We made our way north to the French border at **Portalet**. There were still a few feet of snow in the pass, which was a good omen, even if the walk up was difficult. We saw several **Marmot** and **Chamois** as we made our way up the valley. There was plenty of bird activity around the streams and melted areas and we quickly noted **2 Black-bellied Dipper**, **6+ Water Pipit**, **20+ Northern Wheatear**, **3 Black Redstart**, **2 Red-billed Chough** and **30+ Alpine Chough**. After a mile or so we stopped to scan and I got on to some birds which flew down from on high, disturbed by some skiers. They were **3 Snowfinch!** They landed on the slopes and fed for about 45 minutes. Brilliant! To cap it all Nev found **3 Alpine Accentor** on an adjacent ridge, making it a very successful day out.

On the way back down we checked out the **Boca Del Infierno** where some birders had recently reported Wallcreeper. We also tried the **walls of both dams along the A136** where Nev had enjoyed great views on a previous trip in 2006. No luck at those sites. I'd had outrageous luck with this species on a previous trip to the French Alps in 2004. Neither of us were really too disappointed. I'd finally put to rest my unfinished business of Citril Finch, Snowfinch and Alpine Accentor from that trip!



**Snowfinch.....Celebration!**

We headed back to **Loporzano** and saw **2 Red Kite** near Sabinanago and re-visited **Montearagon Castle** to again enjoy prolonged views of the **Black Wheatear** pair. At 1530h Nev spotted a **Short-toed Eagle** near Loporzano village. We then drove up to **St. Julian de Banzo** and saw **Sardinian Warbler**, **Subalpine Warbler** and **Bonelli's Warbler** in the dense cover near the top of the valley. We also scanned across to **Salto de Roldan** and saw **50+ Griffon Vulture** and **2 Raven** soaring.

We took a late siesta back at **Boletas** 1700-1830h, then refreshed, birded **Loporzano cemetery** again. We saw pretty much the same as previous visits; it is really such a great stretch of habitat that can merit several hours' coverage. A male **Cirl Bunting** was singing there, but we could not locate any Eagle Owl at dusk. Tired, we did not bother searching out for any Red-necked Nightjar and as we drove back to **Boletas**, we flushed a **Quail** from the edge of a field, which proved to be Nev's only lifer of the trip!

#### **Day 5 – Sun04May08**

We headed back west via the vineyards and cultivated fields near **Gurrea de Gallego** and **Almoduvar** in search of Little Bustards, to no avail. However, we did see **2 Marsh Harrier**, a family group of **5 Little Owl**, **1 Yellow Wagtail**, **2 Zitting Cisticola** and **3 Whinchat**. **Ontinena Bridge** produced similar birds to Day 2 plus a **Little Ringed Plover**. We re-checked the cultivated areas east of Km 54-56 of the **A2214 near Ballobar**, again pretty much the same birds as Day 2 plus **2 Black-bellied Sandgrouse**, **3 Hoopoe**, **2 Great Spotted Cuckoo**, **1 Spectacled Warbler**, **2 Spanish Festoon**, **Painted Lady**, and no sign of any Bustards.

We stopped mid-afternoon at **Candasnos lagoon**. It was very hot, but there were plenty of birds there including **20+ Black-necked Grebe**, **1 Pochard**, numerous **Red-crested Pochard**, **2 Cattle Egret**, **30+ Black-winged Stilt**, **1 Wood Sandpiper**, **6 Black Tern** and several **Great Reed Warbler**. We finished birding around 6pm as **4 Ring-necked Parakeet** flew over the motorway near **Barcelona**.

We'd travelled 1,819km (1,091 miles) averaging 55 miles per gallon, costing £85 in total in diesel. Our flight was again on schedule and landed back at Stansted on time at 2315 courtesy of *Easy Jet*.

**Written by Mike Cram**

**The Trip List totalled 131** (including 10 species that were heard only).

Little Grebe	Black-necked Grebe	Great Crested Grebe	Grey Heron
Purple Heron	Cattle Egret	Night Heron	White Stork
Mallard	Red-crested Pochard	Common Pochard	Egyptian Vulture
Lammergeier	Griffon Vulture	Red Kite	Black Kite
Bonelli's Eagle	Booted Eagle	Short-toed Eagle	Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard	Marsh Harrier	Montagu's Harrier	Hobby
Common Kestrel	Lesser Kestrel	Common Quail	Red-legged Partridge
Common Coot	Common Moorhen (hd)	Water Rail (hd)	Black-winged Stilt
Little Ringed Plover	Common Sandpiper	Wood Sandpiper	Stone Curlew
Black-headed Gull	Yellow-legged Gull	Black Tern	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	Rock Dove	Wood Pigeon	Collared Dove
Ring-necked Parakeet	Great Spotted Cuckoo	Common Cuckoo (hd)	Barn Owl
Scops Owl (hd)	Little Owl	Common Swift	Alpine Swift
Bee-eater	Hoopoe	Green Woodpecker (hd)	Wryneck
Calandra Lark	Dupont's Lark	Woodlark	Crested Lark
Thekla Lark	Lesser Short-toed Lark	Crag Martin	Barn Swallow
House Martin	Sand Martin	Tawny Pipit	Water Pipit
White Wagtail	Yellow Wagtail	Grey Wagtail	Woodchat Shrike
Southern Grey Shrike	Alpine Accentor	Great Reed Warbler	Reed Warbler
Zitting Cisticola	Cetti's Warbler	Melodious Warbler	W.Orphean Warbler
Garden Warbler	Blackcap	Sardinian Warbler	W.Subalpine Warbler
Spectacled Warbler	W.Bonelli's Warbler	Willow Warbler	Firecrest
Common Chiffchaff (hd)	Pied Flycatcher	Spotted Flycatcher	Whinchat
Common Stonechat	Northern Wheatear	Black-eared Wheatear	Black Wheatear
Common Redstart	Black Redstart	European Robin (hd)	Nightingale
Song Thrush	Common Blackbird	Bearded Tit (hd)	Crested Tit
Blue Tit	Coal Tit	Great Tit (hd)	Wood Nuthatch
Common Treecreeper	Black-bellied Dipper	Winter Wren (hd)	Eurasian Jay
Black-billed Magpie	Common Raven	Carrion Crow	Eurasian Jackdaw
Red-billed Chough	Alpine Chough	House Sparrow	Common Starling
Spotless Starling	Golden Oriole	Common Chaffinch	Serin
Citrl Finch	European Goldfinch	European Greenfinch	Common Linnet
Snowfinch	Corn Bunting	Cirl Bunting	

**Mike had 12 lifers (14 European)**

**Nev had 1 lifer**

## **REFERENCES**

- 1 The Collins "Field Guide To The Birds Of Britain and Europe" was sufficient for the trip for occasional reference purposes.
- 2 The Michelin map of Spain and Portugal (2007) 1:400,000 – 1cm = 4km was sufficient for navigation and trip planning.
- 3 The Spain Province 1/200,000 map of Huesca was invaluable for more detailed directions and navigation. This was obtained with relative ease from "The Map Shop" in Upton-on-Severn.
- 4 "Where the birds are in northeast Spain" by Steve West was also a very handy trip companion and reference for trip planning.

## **THANKS TO:**

- 1 EasyJet and Avis for making life easy.
- 2 Mike to Nev for most of the driving. Ta butt!
- 3 Nev to Mike for his usual faultless display with the maps.
- 4 Andy Howes of Boletas in the UK for directions and general advice on finding birds in the region.
- 5 Esther Diago of Boletas in Loporzano for excellent communication and various site directions before the trip, the warm welcome and the wonderful hospitality, especially the food!