



Birdwatching Holidays in Spain, Morocco & more...

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The Spanish Steppe & Pyrenees's. 14th -20th February 2009

Participants:-

A. Latham J. Jones
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General.

The trip was aimed at seeing the specialist species of the area from easily accessible sites within the region. The internet provided lots of information especially *Birdingspain.com* with suggested itineraries for most areas. Steve West's guide 'Where to find birds in N/E Spain' also proved to be very useful especially the line drawings at the rear of the book. The weather during the whole trip was excellent. The sun shone the whole week with some wind early on in the trip and low cloud on the high peaks on one morning.

Travel.

We flew Easyjet Luton-Barcelona and hired a minibus from Holiday autos. The only complaint was with the car rental company, we took nearly an hour to get served and finally given keys to the vehicle. Due to the delay with the minibus at the airport we used the AP2 (toll road) as far Bujaraloz to recoup some time.

Accommodation.

All the accommodation was pre-booked through Josele at Boletas (www.boletas.org). We had a 2 night stay in Quinto de Ebro near Zaragoza at the Hotel Rioja, a rustic simple room with meals served in the nearby restaurant. We then relocated to Boletas bird watching centre Loporzano near Huesca for 4 nights. Very comfortable and excellent meals. The accommodation was full board basis with an excellent picnic lunch each day (saving valuable birding time!).

Sites visited.

Astun Ski resort in the high Pyrenees gives easy access to high altitude species during the winter months, notably Snowfinch, Alpine Accentor and Yellow Billed Chough. The roads are kept clear of snow to allow access to the hundreds of skiers that flock to the region. San Juan de la Pena & Oreol located near to the town of Jaca are excellent sites for montane woodland species notably Citril Finch, Black Woodpecker, Crested tit, Short Toed Treecreeper and Crossbill.

Riglos village is a regular site for wintering Wallcreeper and Accentor but is worth a visit just for the magnificence of the Mallos de Riglos (sandstone pillars) which tower over the village below.

Vadiello is the place for wintering Wallcreeper. About 15km north of Loporzano the dam and small quarries at the road side often have Wallcreeper also reliable site for Lammergeir.

Loporzano village and especially the nearby cemetery provides excellent birding, Rock Sparrow in the village and Rock Bunting around the cemetery and quarry. Eagle Owl is possible in the quarry, not so reliable as it once was.

Montearagon near to Quicena is a reliable site for Black Wheatear especially on the approach road where the scree and boulders are easily visible.

Piraces south of Huesca has a communication tower just outside the village with an access track up to it, Eagle Owl favour the rocky out crops and nearby quarry.

Embalse de Serena near to the town of the same name is a good site for wildfowl and reed bed specialties, Penduline Tit etc.

Ontinena-Candasnos road is excellent for steppe species especially Sandgrouse. Both Pin Tailed and Black Bellied being recorded whilst driving various tracks off this road.

Candasnos lagoon located near to town is another site for wildfowl and Black Necked Grebe.

Bujaraloz and steppe areas to the south also produced Sandgrouse and Great Bustard.

El Planeron SEO reserve is a must for larks the highest concentrations of DuPont's Lark in mainland Spain reside here. A 20 minute drive from Quinto de Ebro.

Embalse de Torcas is a relatively new site, very good for raptors, Bonellis Eagle being the target bird here.

The Remolar-Fillipines reserve is located just south of Barcelona airport, not the easiest of sites to access but well worth the effort. The reserve consists of a series reed fringed pools and shallow lagoons also easy access to the beach and an information centre.

Daily Itinerary.

Day 1. 14th February.

Flight from Luton-Barcelona. We eventually left the airport after what seemed like an age then sped along the toll road towards the Spanish steppe. A comfort stop & quick lunch break at Bujaraloz then onto El Planeron near to Belchite.

We slowly drove the entrance track, stopping to scan every 50 metres or so. The first larks of the trip were seen. They included Crested, Lesser Short Toed & Calandra. Corn Buntings, chaffinch, and Meadow Pipits were in the damp areas nearby.

There was a Duponts Lark singing in the distance as we arrived at the car park, however the windy conditions made locating the bird impossible, just the general area was noted.

Feeling optimistic for the morning we decided to go to the Hotel Rioja and unload our luggage etc. Within 5 minutes drive from the reserve entrance track 91 Common Crane flew over the road to roost at the saline lake nearby, not a bad start to the trip!

Day 2. 15th February.

We arrived at El Planeron before dawn as advised, and it was incredibly cold! At least 4 male Duponts Lark could be clearly heard. As dawn broke their song diminished and our quarry eluded us again, lots of activity from the other lark species and the Cranes were seen as they left their roost site. Cold and frustrated we headed to Quinto for breakfast with a couple of roadside stops for Merlin, Marsh Harriers and Bramblings.

We left Quinto after breakfast for Candasnos and the steppe areas to the North & East. We drove various tracks from the road north out of Candasnos and the minor road to Ballobar. Southern Grey Shrike and black Redstart along with Calandra Lark were relatively common. Thekla had taken over from Crested lark in the Stony scrubby areas, Hoopoe and Little owl were showing well, Serins & Corn Buntings were very common. It was Brian who scored the first yellow jersey of the trip, with Great Spotted Cuckoo sat in a bare tree. The local Magpies didn't seem at all concerned, maybe they would be in a few more weeks!! Both PinTailed & Black Bellied Sandgrouse were seen, frustratingly flight views only. As the day warmed up larger raptors started to appear, Griffon Vultures and Golden Eagle gave

reasonable views as they drifted over, several Red Kites and Buzzard had already been seen along with Marsh harrier. Dartford and Sardinian Warblers were seen in the low scrub. We headed back towards Candanos, 2 male Kestrels caught our eye near the road side one of which seemed to show a flash of powder blue on the upper wing, yes, 2 stunning Lesser Kestrel gave excellent views in the sunshine. We watched these beauties for a while before continuing to Candanos Lagoon for our picnic lunch. There was plenty of wildfowl, Red Crested & Common Pochard, Teal, Shoveler, loads of Little Grebe and several Black Necked Grebe. The reed bed and surrounding carr held Cettis Warbler and Reed Bunting, even calling Water Rail and Marsh Harrier were displaying beyond the pool. Huge numbers of finches & Spotless Starlings were in the surrounding stubble fields.

We then drove to Bujaraloz to search for the remnant population of Great Bustard which are still to be found in the area. Slowly driving the tracks a Red Legged Partridge tried to fool us into thinking it was a Sandgrouse as it sat motionless in a bare field, 2 Black Bellied Sandgrouse saw us first and flew off calling, it was one of those days! Then to the west several Great Bustards were flying off towards the south presumably to roost. We never relocated them despite searching. The Hotel Rioja and a hot shower came next after a somewhat frustrating day.

Day 3. 16th February.

I did not dare suggest another predawn bash so the group settled for a pre-breakfast walk to the River Ebro in Quinto. The river was in spate, presumably from snow melt off the Pyrenees. Great White Egret, the only time we recorded it, earned Andy the Yellow Jersey, White stork were busy carrying sticks to their nests on the high structures around town and plenty of Cattle Egret were noted. Cettis calling from the tall stands of Papyrus, we think, bordering the river and also Chiffchaff & Cirl Bunting in the trees. Good numbers of White Wagtail and a single Grey in the surrounding fields, a Water Pipit playing hide and seek in amongst the Meadow Pipits was a Spanish tick for Helen.

El Planeron was the after breakfast venue, Duponts lark was still not seen however 2 Pin Tailed Sandgrouse on the deck earned Rebecca the yellow jersey. It was time to move onto the Embalse de Torcos for some raptor watching.

We arrived in time for lunch and almost immediately had crippling views of Golden Eagle directly above us, no more than 50mtrs away. Sue was extremely pleased having ticked Golden Eagle the previous day on the plains, for most of the group these were the best views they've ever had of Golden Eagle. Within the hour we had seen several Golden Eagle, Goshawk, plenty of Griffon Vultures and a couple of Crag Martins but no sign of our quarry species. With 5 minutes before our agreed departure time of 2.00pm a large eagle appeared over the woodland opposite, finally Bonellis Eagle, this was joined by a second bird, soaring together they drifted off over the nearby peaks. More than happy we left for the drive to Loporzano.

The new motorway past Zaragoza quickly led us to Huesca and a scheduled stop at Castille Montearagon, Quicena soon produced the expected Black wheatear. Conspicuous on the boulders and scree below the road, Dartford Warbler & Serin were also seen here. It was a short drive to Boletas where we unloaded the van. Birding around the cemetery produced a group of Rock Bunting, the only record, Woodlarks, Corn Buntings and Black Redstart.

Day 4. 17th February.

This morning was going to be devoted to Vadiello and its wintering Wallcreepers, so after breakfast we left Boletas with our picnic lunch etc. The habitat started to change as we drew closer to the embalse and surrounding Sierra de guarra. After we passed through a couple of tunnels the rock gorge was parallel to the road 2 Wallcreepers flew out from the rocks across the wind screen of the mini-bus, an emergency stop and orders to exit the bus followed. I drove a short distance to park in the quarry walking back to the group Sue was

already wearing the yellow jersey for locating a Wallcreeper on the rock face above. 'The Essex Crew' joined us and we watched this enigmatic bird feeding on the exposed rock faces above. Easy 'this birding innit', I could not believe how lucky we were, the Wallcreeper eventually flew off the rock face down the road and out of view. We continued to the dam and checked the cliff faces either side of the tunnel, apart from Crag Martin & perched Griffon Vulture nothing new. A ringtail Hen Harrier flew over the hillside nearby as we were chatting and admiring the views from the car park. From nowhere an adult Lammergeir sailed over us, so close you could pluck a feather from it! This was incredible, both of the days targets seen within the hour and brilliant views as well!! The Lammergeir gave exceptional views for the next 20 minutes and finally drifted down the valley following some Griffon Vultures. Now what, I was going to take the group to Saint Cilia to watch Lammergeir. No point now. We decided to bring forward tomorrows plans and try the ski resorts.

A short comfort stop at Boletas to grab some warm clothing we drove to Astun ski resort, en-route warning signs were flashing to say Portalet was closed to traffic, would we be able to access Astun? Thankfully the road remained open and we arrived at the car park and winter wonderland scenes. The place was alive with skiers, lots of snow, the sunshine and ice hanging from the resort hotels made for a wonderful sight. Yellow Billed Chough were everywhere, on the roof tops, in the car park and calling from the mountainside. A single Meadow Pipit feeding on the mounds of snow looked completely out of place. We found 2 Alpine Accentors on the service road to the hotels nearby and several on the slopes where the snow had began to melt. The last target, Snowfinch failed to materialise, we suspect the recent good weather and snow melt allowed them access to the higher slopes. We left for a quick search of the woodlands of Oreol near the town of Jaca. Crossbill was soon added to the list along with Crested Tit, Nuthatch and Great Spotted Woodpecker. We decided to head back to Loporzano and another 'Jolly' at Boletas.

Day 5 18th February.

Back to the itinerary today with the planned trip to the ski slopes, unfortunately when we arrived low cloud shrouded the whole area, an hour later we still could not see any further than our noses so abandoned the idea and left for Jaca and the Oreol.

En route Griffons had started to soar from their perchs on some roadside cliffs poking above the pine forest, we stopped to look and picked out 1 then 2, eventually 6 Lammergeirs soaring amongst them. Wow, to top that a Goshawk got up and started chasing an immature Lammergeir!! Unbelievable, well that made up for dipping Snow finch. We arrived outside the cafe/bar at Oreol and parked, we checked the area beyond the cafe and were almost instantly onto Citril Finch, a pair were seen in the upper branches of a close by pine tree. They gave reasonable views the males' grey nape especially obvious in the sunlight. As quickly as they appeared they flew further down into the valley and lost to view. Crested tit again performed well along with Mistle Thrush, trip tick, and not a lot else really so we drove to San Juan de la Pena monastery and our picnic lunch. A black Redstart was sitting in the opening of the bell tower as we ate lunch at the picnic tables provided. We walked to the view point and the obligatory pictures of the Pyrenees were taken. Returning to the van we had excellent views of a male Firecrest displaying to a female and Short Toed Treecreeper. As we approached the car park we could hear European Cranes 'bugeling'. Looking into the clear blue sky, skeins of cranes were flying towards the Pyrenees, at least 2500 birds involved in loose flocks of 40-100 what a sight and sound. With time against us we headed towards the Mallos de Riglos having decided to try for another Wallcreeper, we dipped, but lots of Red Billed Chough and a few Crag Martins were welcome distractions. Hundreds of griffon vultures were returning to their roosts for the night we decided to do the same and travelled back to Boletas.

Day 6 19th February.

We decided to give the Monegros another go today for better views of the steppe specialities, after a diversion through Otinena (thanks to Garmin the sat nav.!) we arrived near to Bujalaroz and connected immediately with Great Bustard. We had excellent views for about an hour both in flight and strutting majestically on the ground. 2 Black Bellied Sandgrouse were also seen but distantly. We retraced our steps back towards Otinena and tried several tracks off the main road. Eventually we struck lucky, a large group of Little Bustard flew straight towards us and overhead until finally out of view, the only time we saw them, despite searching nearby areas. A little further down the track 40+ Pin Tailed Sandgrouse were located settled and feeding in a large field and then decent views of Black Bellied Sandgrouse, brilliant, this certainly made up for the frustration of previous efforts. More than happy we travelled to Laguna de Sarinena and a totally different habitat, freshwater lagoon and large reed beds. After our picnic lunch we soon located 4 Penduline Tits nearby and a local rarity, Bearded Reedling gave glimpses before finally giving good views near to one of the hides. Little Gull was also noted, the only sighting of the trip. We then moved onto Piraces where our next target was Eagle Owl. We walked up past the communication masts to over look the quarry. As we approached the summit we surprised a large Wild Boar which ran into the scrub and down the slope away from us, another first for most of us. Black Wheatear was performing on the slopes below and Crag Martins were soaring along the rocky out crops. We left as the light was failing but before we left the access track Helen saw an Eagle Owl sat on top of a Telegraph pole silhouetted against the sky as the sun was setting, a fantastic end to a fantastic day!!

Day 7 20th February.

Having virtually cleaned up in the steppes and the Pyrenees, we decided that the Remolar-Fillipines reserve just south of Barcelona Airport was worth the effort to see a complete set of new birds for the trip. This allowed for a shorter drive back to the airport for our afternoon flight. Again, Garmin the sat Nav proved invaluable.

Plenty of Hirundines greeted us hawking low over the pools. Early Swallow and House Martin were found amongst the plentiful Crag and Sand Martin. The lagoons held some species of duck, new for the trip and several wader species, notably Little and Temmincks Stint.

Time had the better of us, we left for the airport for our flight home. It's fair to say the trip was a great success and we would like to thank Esther and Josele for the welcome we received at Boletas and the excellent food and we hope we were not too rowdy in the evenings!!

Andy Latham.