



## Birdwatching Holidays in Spain, Morocco & more...

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# Spanish Steppes & Pyrenees

## February 24th to March 2nd 2008

**Leader:** Josele Saiz

**Participants:** Martin Timms, Sheila Mallet, Bill Siggett, Brian Roberts-Wray Anthony & Sheila King, Granville

**Potter.**

### ***Sunday February 24th.***

After a two hour flight from Stansted arrived at Zaragoza airport at 1 p.m. (local time) where members of the group met each other and our host and guide Josele.

We were soon on our way in the mini-bus. After a short drive from the airport we crossed the River Ebro before taking a track through fields parallel to the river with a vertical escarpment of soft, bare calcareous rock rising abruptly to our left Josele was quickly on to an Eagle Owl lying in a probable nest site on the cliff face. Behind us a male Hen Harrier was seen quartering the riparian vegetation.

It was time for a break and we repaired to the nearby village of the river for lunch at a restaurant on the corner of a small square appropriately called 'La Cigüena' (The Stork) as just outside a pair of White Storks were nesting atop the church tower.

After lunch we returned to the site and found a Peregrine perched half way up the cliff face. A walk around the field onto a tree-lined embankment disturbed a flock of +40 Serins, which flitted down into a crop of purple-sprouting broccoli. Also logged in a walk around the fields were: Chaffinches, Great Tit, Common Buzzard, Linnets (including a very bright male perched on a stem) 10+ Crested Larks, 2 overlying White Storks and 2 Black Kites.

Late afternoon saw us driving around Zaragoza, with its motorways, newly opened high-speed railway (Madrid to Barcelona) and a big high-rise flat building project surrounded by a flock of cranes (of the metal kind).

Further on we passed more pairs of White Storks nesting on a communication tower and lattice pylons, including 5 on an industrial estate.

In the early evening we checked into our hotel at Quinto del Ebro.

### ***Monday, February 25th***

Departed the Hotel Rioja (while still dark outside at 6.30 a.m.) and headed out to the Steppes from the edge of town following a sign pointing to Campo de Belchite.

Driving down stony tracks in the darkness a sign 'El Planeron' was illuminated in the headlights and soon we stopped to hear larks already up and singing (the sounds were vaguely familiar). The light slowly improved but it was a grey dawn. A Lesser Short-toed Lark was identified in song-flight but the much sought-after Dupont's Lark remained elusive: a brief silhouette on the track; singing birds overhead (identified by Josele) no sooner found than it/they plummeted to earth in a vertical dive and disappeared into the Steppe vegetation. As the light improved the birdsong ceased and we headed to a nearby village for breakfast.

Driving back to the site the improving daylight revealed more detail of the landscape: gently rolling semi-desert with grasses and herbs providing plenty of cover for ground-nesting birds but EEC grants are encouraging farmers to encroach, clear the land, plough and plant crops, such as wheat, putting more pressure on this diminishing

habitat Overnight rain had dampened the sandy soil bringing out thousands of what looked like 3cm caterpillars but proved to be small curled -up millipedes providing abundant food for larks and others.

More Larks were discovered near the track: Crested up and singing; a Thekla here; a Calandra perched on a stone there; more Lesser Short-toed. A persistent two-note call led us off the track and in a sweep across the Steppe towards the sound but when we stopped it always seemed to be the same distance ahead but without any sight of its maker. Finally, looking up, the Dupont's Lark was discovered fluttering overhead -the source of the persistent call, and then it too plunged vertically to the ground, never to be seen again.

On departure a Golden Plover flew over, a female Hen Harrier was seen and a Raven nesting in an electricity pylon. During the lunch break, back at Quinto, in a field scanned from a railway bridge 10 Cattle Egrets were noted among cattle, a White Wagtail in an adjacent cattle byre and a Marsh Harrier standing in the middle of a field.

After lunch (of a thick slice of Spanish omelets and freshly squeezed orange juice at "Euro Catering") we were on our way through the town of Belchite with its ruined churches -remnants of the civil war 70 years past, on through Villanueva del Huerva through Fuendetodos and on up into the hills via a rough track, through woods until we suddenly came out into a high viewpoint overlooking a large reservoir, Embalse de Torcal, cradled below wooded mountain peaks.

As we arrived the sun was breaking through and we were immediately into raptors exploiting the rising thermals: several Griffon Vultures, a distant Golden Eagle and an adult Bonelli's Eagle drifted over the reservoir towards us before soaring upwards with a Goshawk joining it in the same thermal, but lower; both birds showing well as they climbed above us. By contrast a Griffon was discovered sitting in a small cave in a cliff-face below us. A peregrine flew over and landed on a distant promontory and a Black Kite departed in a different direction. 20 Cormorants swam in formation across the reservoir below.

Returning through the forest and down along the course of the Rio Huerva we eventually stopped at the old hillside village of Fuendetodos, (rather spoilt now by some overbearing wind generators) the birthplace of one of Spain's greatest artists - Francesco Goya. We stopped for refreshment at the trendy "Capricho de Goya" on the edge of town. In the newly ploughed field outside 3m & 2f Black Redstarts were counted.

We had only resumed our drive down the road for a minute or two before stopping for a very low flying Golden Eagle over the road which was being harassed by a Red-billed Chough right above our heads. On returning via Belchite and the Steppe country of El Planeron we logged a Southern Grey Shrike and searched unsuccessfully for Sandgrouse, then stopped to talk to a man who was hunting with a radio-tagged, immature Peregrine Falcon.

On returning to Quinto we drove down to an isolated oxbow of the Ebro where a Merlin flew off as we arrived and where a single Brambling remained perched in its tree for all to admire. Some found Tree Sparrows further down by the waterside. On the walk back to town 5 White Storks were observed distantly on the roof and tower of the church perched on a ridge above the town of Quinto.

## ***Tuesday, February 26th.***

Departed Quinto del Ebro after breakfast at "Euro Catering" and headed N.E. via Los Monegros towards the town of Bujaraloz and explored more former Steppe land now turned under the plough. Wheat appeared as a faint green haze over the landscape restricted in growth by an unusually dry winter and, by a big new grain silo complex 4 Great Bustards looked exposed standing on the rounded crown of one of these wheat fields and soon departed flying past the silos, We followed up and found 5 different birds standing in a group (immature males) also looking vulnerable.

After tangling with nose to tail convoys of trucks on the nearby highway we popped out by a reed-fringed lake - Candanos. The lake was populated with: Coot (+100), Pochard, Red-crested Pochard (15 pr.), Mallard, Shoveler, Wigeon (4), Teal (4pr.), Tufted Duck (4) Little Grebe (20+) Great-crested and Black-necked Grebe.

We moved on to Ontinena Plains (but in fact more like a series of flat-topped hills or mesas) where we parked and explored the terrain. Brief views were obtained of a distant Spectacled Warbler in a small bush by one observer, but could not be relocated. However 32 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were flushed distantly followed by 2 Black-bellied Sandgrouse and then 4 more much closer.

There were lots of displaying Calandra Larks plus Crested and 1/2 Theklas and Lesser Short-toed while Josele got onto a briefly singing Duponts. 2 Little Bustards were flushed and disappeared rapidly in to the distance. As we departed and dropped down from the plateaus a sudden stop was made for a splendid early migrating Spotted Cuckoo in a roadside bush. 2 Southern Grey Shrikes were also found in an adjacent field.

After stopping in an Ontinena village bar for tea we continued down the road before stopping for the amazing sight of 2 isolated (unconnected) electricity pylons with one playing host to 16 active White Stork nests with pairs in residence or soaring above. While admiring this 'Stork City' we came across Marsh Harriers and a Chiffchaff in a reed-bed.

Our next stop was at a huge reed-fringed lake (Sarinena) with a bird hide where Shovelers were dominant (200+ counted), a few Mallard and, later, a flock of +50 Teal and 5 Garganey flew in. 2 or 3 Great crested and Little Grebes moved among the wildfowl. Waders were represented by +40 Ruff across the lake and a Snipe in nearby reeds. A flock of c200 Black-headed Gulls inhabited the waters and 2 Yellow-legged Gulls stood on the shore with 2 Little Egrets in attendance.

Above Sarinena Lake another adult Great-spotted Cuckoo was admired. 2 Mistle Thrushes. A Griffon Vulture and up to 5 Hoopoes were found.

From here it was an hours drive to Boletas guest House in Loporzano village.

### ***Wednesday, February 27th***

Departed Loporzano at 8.30, and after skirting the conurbation of Huesca, headed for the hills. Los Mallos de Riglos are a dramatic group of pillars of red conglomerate sandstone rising vertically from the surrounding countryside guarding the entrance to the valley of the Rio Gallego, where it emerges from the foothills of the Pyrenees. We parked near to the base of the rock face alongside climbers who were kitting up for an ascent and made our way along the -climbers path at the foot of the face. After 20 minutes Bill discovered a Wallcreeper in a crack some 20m up. It was watched moving up the face before being chased off by a rival.

At this time we became aware of the sound of bugling Cranes behind us and turned to see a large flock of Common Cranes streaming up towards the Pyrenees -the first of many sightings this day.

A walk around the terraced allotments by Riglos village produced sightings of Cirl Bunting and Blackcap, while a flock of c70 Griffon Vultures appeared the pinnacles above the village. Also overhead: Egyptian Vulture, Red Kite, Peregrine and a fast disappearing Golden Eagle as Crag Martins careered across the cliff faces.

After a packed lunch consumed in Riglos we headed off east below the foothills to the impressive Moorish/Romanesque Castel de Loarre, a former residence of the Kings of Aragon standing on an outlying hill. Exploring the environs of the castle Black Redstart, 2 or 3 Cirl Buntings and 2 elusive, but handsome male Rock Buntings were discovered but the cranes dominated our attention as they passed directly overhead, calling and spiraling upwards in the thermals to help them up and over the mountains.

On departure from the castle we noted Sparrowhawk, Red Kite and Common Buzzard and, after a drive south across the wheat prairies accompanied briefly by a Hoopoe flying alongside the minibus, arrived at a vast reservoir in the late afternoon, - the Embalse de la Sotonera, which was depleted somewhat after a very dry winter leaving extensive shallows on the northern shore where thousands of cranes were packed around its edge to roost. Even as we watched in the fading light long skeins approached in continuous waves from the south, over the rows of wind generators and down to add to the throng, estimated at c15,000. During the day we had probably seen another 10,000 heading towards the Pyrenees - an amazing spectacle of mass migration we were privileged to witness.

### ***Thursday, February 28th.***

A day to head to the high passes of the Pyrenees. First stop: Embalse Bubal where we birded the shoreline for common birds - i.e. Robin, Pr of Black Redstarts and a Green Woodpecker, calling and flying across the road into nearby trees (a higher pitched call than our own)

We continued up to the French border at Formigal/Portlet where we stopped at a shop and consumed our packed lunches in an adjacent car park noting Red-billed and Alpine Choughs in the vicinity.

Then a tiring walk up through patchy snow which often gave way causing us to sink knee-high. Among the surrounding snow-capped peaks a Chamois was discovered resting at the end of a bluff and 'scoped. 45 Red-billed Choughs were counted foraging in the vegetation between snow patches.

Cloudy conditions persisted as we headed down to a massive bare mountain (Oroel) rising above a forest. We parked and followed a trail through the woods for glimpses of Crested Tit, Coal Tit and Short-toed Treecreeper. A Black Woodpecker was glimpsed as it flashed by on three occasions.

Finally we headed on up through Jaca and a mountainous valley where we stopped for the night at the Reno hotel, Villamua.

### ***Friday, February 29th.***

From Villamua we headed up the valley with the steep walls of the valley closing in. At a layby (Astun) stopped and 'scoped the high ridge opposite. Lammergeiers soared out in the updraughts: 2 adults & 4 immatures; the 2 adults allowing good views as they perched in dead trees on the crest.

Onwards and upwards to the ski resort of Candanchu where we made our way up through the throngs of skiers on the nursery slopes to search for Snowfinches but after much climbing and scanning had to be content with just 3 MistleThrushes. We stopped for a Black Redstart and an elusive Crossbill near Candanchu before heading back down through Jaca and stopped at a camp site diner for a lunch of Aragon sausage and eggs.

There followed a long climb through forest to the impressive monastery of San Juan de la Pena where forest trails were explored for Nuthatch, Crested Tits and Short-toed Treecreeper. A Raven and 3 flocks of Cranes totaling at least 300 passed over before we continued higher to a communications tower where there were spectacular views of the surrounding countryside and mountains. 6 Black Kites and Griffons were observed soaring in thermals. On returning a site for Citril Finch was explored but without success; just a pair of Rock Buntings found.

### ***Saturday, March 1st***

Back in Loporzano a pre-breakfast excursion was made with Josele to the cemetery on the hillside above the village with scattered Holm Oak bushes and an Almond grove. On the way a Rock Sparrow was identified perched on an overhead cable at the edge of the village. A Dartford Warbler was noted as it briefly flitted between bushes but a Woodlark advertised itself with aerial song before landing obligingly on top of a small almond tree allowing everyone a good look.

After breakfast we drove up to Vadiello dam hidden away in a narrow gorge in the Pyrenees and approached by a partially tunneled road. On approach a Lammergeier was observed circling with a small flock of Griffons. An immature Golden Eagle was seen before it disappeared behind a crag, soon to be followed by an adult which perched in view. A third bird was then discovered high above as it performed a display routine. At least 2 Egyptian Vultures were noted as we parked up. The waters of the dam, impressively sited, were nevertheless birdless but Rock doves were found in the deep gorge below the dam wall. A Blue Rock Thrush was discovered, seemingly nailed motionless to a dead tree opposite. Other distractions included Red Squirrels in the pines below and a large toad at the roadside.

Near Huesca the ruins of the Castillo de Montearagon, perched on a barren ridge, dominate the landscape and it was to this site we stopped for a picnic lunch in the castle grounds and scanned the surroundings for birds. In the parched gullies and ridges a Blue Rock Thrush and 2 or 3 Black Wheatears were found before we headed back to the edge of the Pyrenees to the "Salto de Roldan" - massive sandstone and limestone pillars guarding the entrance to a deep valley cutting into the mountains. Some of us edged around an exposed ledge of the massive protuberance for fine views of its neighbor with Griffon vultures drifting by at eye-level and below. On return an Alpine Accentor was spotted foraging quietly on a ledge above and finally 2 more were seen further around allowing everyone to see them. Dartford & Sardinian Warblers were seen briefly in the nearby scrub.

### ***Sunday, March 2nd***

Early risers did some pre-breakfast birding around the village before departing Loporzano c9.15 to re-visit the Castillo De Montearagon site, stopping short to peruse the surrounding ridges and gullies. A pair of Meadow Pipits were flushed and a Black Wheatear dived o.o.s round a rocky corner. Eventually a pair were discovered and gave a tail-bobbing display flashing their white rear-ends.

From Huesca we were soon on the motorway heading for Zaragoza and the airport but stopped short by c20k to explore prairie-like farmland and after driving for 10 minutes along rough tracks. A pair of Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse were discovered in the middle-distance but soon departed. A closer pair were found but they too were soon on their way as were our group: finally saying our farewells to Josele at the airport after a most interesting tour.

## BIRD HIGHLIGHTS



**Dates:** Fmar 2nd

**Tour:** Wallcreepers & Cranes

**Sites:** Zaragoza , Belchite, Tosos, Bujaraloz, Ontiñena, Sariñena, Candasno Loporzano, Vadiello , Riglos , Sotонера, Oroel , Portalet, Astún, Cabdanchu ,

**our Leader:** Josele J. Saiz

**Tour Party:** John Siggins, Brian Wray, Martin Timms , Sheila Mallet, Granville Potter

**Number of Species:** 125

	SQUACCO HERON	1	EAGLE OWL		RED-BACKED SHRIKE
	LITTLE BITTERN	3	LITTLE OWL		LESSER GREY SHRIKE
	NIGHT HERON		LONG-EARED OWL	4	SOUTHERN GREY SHRIKE
10+	CATTLE EGRET -		SHORT-EARED OWL		WOODCHAT SHRIKE
3	LITTLE EGRET		TENGMALM'S OWL	55+	ALPINE CHOUGH
	PURPLE HERON		RED-NECKED NIGHTJAR	200+	RED BILLED CHOUGH
X	WHITE STORK		ALPINE SWIFT	X	SPOTLESS STARLING
	COMMON SHELDUCK		BEE-EATER	1	ROCK SPARROW
30+	RED-CRESTED POCHARD		ROLLER		SNOWFINCH
	RED KITE	11	HOOPOE	X	SERIN
11	LAMMERGEIER		EURASIAN WRYNECK		CITRIL FINCH
5	EGYPTIAN VULTURE	1	BLACK WOODPECKER	6	CIRL BUNTING
Xx	GRIFFON VULTURE		WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER	15+	ROCK BUNTING
	SHORT-TOED EAGLE		LESSER -S WOODPECKER		ORTOLAN BUNTING
	MONTAGU'S HARRIER	4	DUPONT'S LARK	Xx	CORN BUNTING
2	GOSHAWK	X	CALANDRA LARK		
6	GOLDEN EAGLE		SHORT-TOED LARK		<b>Other sightings</b>
	BOOTED EAGLE	X	LESSER SHORT-TOED LARK		Red Fox
1	BONELLI'S EAGLE	X	CRESTED LARK		Hare
	OSPREY	X	THEKLA LARK		Chamois
	LESSER KESTREL	X	CRAG MARTIN		Red Squirrel
3	MERLIN		TAWNY PIPIT		
	HOBBY	1	WATER PIPIT		
6	PEREGRINE FALCON	3	ALPINE ACCENTOR		Long-tailed Lizard
	ROCK PTARMIGAN		BLACK-ÉARED WHEATEAR		
	CAPERCAILLIE	3	BLACK WHEATEAR		Cleopatra
10+	RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE		ROCK THRUSH		Small Tortoiseshell
	QUAIL	4	BLUE ROCK THRUSH		Clouded Yellow
	SPOTTED CRAKE		RING OUZEL		Brimstone
20000+	COMMON CRANE	1	CETTI'S WARBLER		
2	LITTLE BUSTARD		FAN-TAILED WARBLER		
9	GREAT BUSTARD		GREAT REED WARBLER		
	BLACK-WINGED STILT		OLIVACEUS WARBLER		
	PIED AVOCET		MELODIOUS WARBLER		
	STONE CURLEW	6+	DARTFORD WARBLER		
	KENTISH PLOVER	1	SPECTACLED WARBLER		
	DOTTEREL		SUBALPINE WARBLER		
	GULL-BILLED TERN	5	SARDINIAN WARBLER		
	WHISKERED TERN		ORPHEAN WARBLER		
	BLACK TERN		BONELLI'S WARBLER		
6	BLACK-BELLIED SANDGROUSE		IBERIAN CHIFF-CHAFF		
32+	PIN-TAILED SANDGROUSE	1	FIRECREST		
5	ROCK DOVE	1	CRESTED TIT		
	STOCK DOVE	2	WALLCREEPER		
	TURTLE DOVE	1	SHORT-TOED TREECREEPER		
2	GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOO		PENDULINE TIT		
	SCOPS OWL		GOLDEN ORIOLE		

h/Heard \*/ Seeing ad/ Adult juv/ Juvenile f/ Female m/Male ++/ Common (?) possible  
 Money for conservation has gone to conserve Dupont's Lark habitat in Belchite