



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

### **BOLETAS Birdwatching centre**

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### **Aragon, Sierra De Guara & Ebro Valley Steppes, Northern Spain 6/11/09 - 9/11/09**

#### **BACKGROUND**

This area of Spain, just below the Pyrenees, is well known amongst visiting birders, especially those staying at the famous Boletas Birdwatching Centre in the village of Loporzano, near the town of Huesca. However, at this time of year I failed to see another birder during my three days. From Boletas it is possible to visit the local low-lying Pre-Pyrenees areas around Sierra de Guara, the Pyrenees itself for alpine species, and further south the Ebro Valley Steppes. Most people visit Boletas at this time of year to see specialities such as Wallcreeper and Lammergeier, which can be relatively easy to see as they move down from higher ground in the Pyrenees to over-winter. David Gosney from Birdguides recently produced an article about this area at this time of year, and offered details of a number of Wallcreeper spots. My two target birds were predictably Wallcreeper and Lammergeier, both would be lifers for me. I was not massively expectant, and I had not expected to have much time to look for anything else really.

#### **BOLETAS BIRD-WATCHING CENTRE**

Josele & Esther at Boletas are quite excellent hosts. Josele possesses infinitely superb up-to-date & necessary knowledge regards sought-after species, and of course many people embark on the offered week-long or weekend tours of the area, with Boletas superb guides. At this time of year it is possible often to book in at the lodge on either a B & B basis, or with all meals included, and then go your own way with his advice happily given. There is an extra cost inevitably for a single supplement. If Josele is available you can pay for his guided services of course. The centre is situated at the end of the village of Loporzano, just a few kms east of Huesca off the N240 road. The lodge possesses rustic charm and is spotlessly clean but with no mod cons (how I prefer it!). The rooms are en-suite of course, and they also do have tea & coffee making facilities (which beats the New York Waldorf hands down on this score!). Josele & Esther welcome you as though you are one of their own, and I sat watching Chelsea beat Man Utd on the lounge TV on my final night. He said he quite liked Liverpool, but he hadn't even heard of my beloved Wolves !! Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised really. It must be buzzing when several birders are present, though I was the only one present during my stay. Before you leave the UK, Boletas rep Andy Howes will deal with your booking expeditely. Google the Boletas website if you are interested in staying as I did, or better still if you want to embark on one of their superb tours!

#### **GETTING THERE**

Most people use budget airline Ryan Air to book flights to Zaragoza from London Stansted. Return flights cost me about £60, and airport parking £27. I love small airports like Zaragoza, your luggage is virtually unloaded as soon as you get off (though I suspect this may be different if two or more flights arrive at

once!). I arranged basic car rental via Hertz for three days, at about a cost of £70. I opted not to pay the £100 excess CDW waiver, risking the £1000 excess charge for damage. That's the only drawback with Hertz!! I was on my way quickly, and the exit road possesses a petrol station, so you can fill your car back up before returning it to Hertz, which is certainly better than incurring a ludicrously-expensive petrol charge if you do not return it full. This exit road leads nicely onto the motorway system, though you have to negotiate a few roundabouts and junctions constantly following signs for Huesca. It then takes just over an hour to reach Huesca, and you will see several Red Kites en route. Reaching Boletas Birdwatching Centre is a little confusing if you are not familiar with the Huesca area. You can travel on the motorway north of Huesca and then take the N240 road eastward, but the alternative is the signposted 357 road that did not appear on my detailed map (Mapa Provincial HUESCA 1:200,000 scale £7.75). This leads you through the quiet town of Huesca itself, across a couple of roundabouts, and I went out onto the A131 'Sarinena' road. After a few miles out in the countryside, I took a left turn at the signposted "Bellestar" junction, a name you could never forget! This quiet country lane takes you through this village, under someone's balcony and then upto the N240 road, where you take a right turn. Loporzano is then clearly signposted a few kms further along. When you study the map what I have said will hopefully make sense!

## **BIRDING DETAILS**

**6TH NOVEMBER 2009** - in glorious sunshine I checked out VADIELLO DAM before checking in at Boletas. This wonderful area is easily reached from Loporzano. Despite scanning and scrutinising, I could not find any Wallcreepers on the huge dam wall or nearby. Parking is available immediately by it, and you then take a short walk of fifty metres to reach the dam itself, through a footpath tunnel. From there I could see plenty of Griffon Vultures overhead, and at distance over the highest peak I watched a couple of Lammergeier's (or Bearded Vultures) circling playfully. They are just starting to display now, as Josele was to inform me later. I was really pleased to get this species under the belt, but I wanted better views. Choughs and Rock Doves were prominent, and I also saw a few Grag Martins and juvenile Black Redstarts as I scanned the crags at various spots along the approach road to the dam. 'Croaking' Ravens were also easy to see, and as I returned to Loporzano to check in, I stopped to watch a Golden Eagle circling with several Griffons. A single Whinchat was also picked out. Plenty of common birds were encountered around the village like House Sparrows, Spotless Starlings, Collared Doves, White Wagtail, Dunnock, Blackbird, Robin etc. Most of these species were to be omni-present wherever I went. I checked in at Boletas where I received a warm welcome from Josele & Esther. We chatted about my target species, and Josele made a detailed plan for me each day, providing up-to-date specific detail so that I could maximise my chances of seeing my target birds. Without this current information, I think you could be clutching at straws, unless you know the area really well already. The detail provided by Josele was so specific that I felt fairly confident as I settled down for the night, after eating the first of many pot noodles! Serves me right for trying to bird 'on-the-cheap'!

**7TH NOVEMBER 2009** - I was up for breakfast at 8a.m. and after a chat with Josele (and the production of a hand-drawn detailed map of sites....thanks Josele !!), I set off to check these areas that all lie within a half hour drive, within the SIERRA DE GUARA range. Josele had produced a map showing five territories where Wallcreeper are 'currently' over-wintering this year, having moved down from the higher-Pyrenees (that's the Wallcreepers not Josele!). The weather was not that great today, varying between wind, sun and rain, but at least it was passing over quickly. First stop was the EMBALSE DE GUARA (also called Embalse de Calcon but signposted the former). This is easy to reach from Boletas, about a fifteen minute drive. At the turn off, a long, straight road takes you to the dam here, and once the dam is in sight you park up adjacent to a barrier (but NOT by a barrier to a private residence at the mini roundabout half a mile before). Make sure you do not block access. Alternatively you can drive on a few hundred metres, up the hill to the car park overlooking the dam itself, but this is too elevated to see Wallcreeper in my opinion. From the pre-mentioned barrier, walk down the road, and quickly you are

faced with two tracks - one to the top of the dam, and a lower one that takes you down to the lower reaches. Both are good, and both are only five minutes walk from your parked car. I took the lower one and immediately picked up a Wallcreeper on the dam wall itself !! It was plucking food from one of the small 'portholes' & I can tell you I was also plucking overawed with joy!! I obtained reasonable views for 2-3 minutes before it flitted over the top of the dam and out of view. I walked up to the higher path, and from the top of the dam I watched several Griffon Vultures and 2 more 'superb' Lammergeier's patrolling the hillsides. I could not believe how easy things were panning-out, but I found this patch far more productive today than on a later visit. The overcast changeable weather here today seemed to generate more bird activity, certainly the Lammers were flying beneath the low cloud base today. Embalse de Guara is certainly the least known of recommended sites, but if a Wallcreeper is present here, I think the lay out and size of the dam and adjoining walls means that views will be far better than at other sites. I moved on to nearby SANTA CILIA (at km 25 marker), and a further 2km drive uphill takes you to the village itself. You may have to park below the village, but small cars can drive on through it and out the other side, where there is a small exposed hide in the tiny playground, and then a further drive of 200 metres approximately, uphill past an elevated graveyard leads out of the tiny village and onto a rough area of short grass where you can park up and turn (if you have to park just before the village because you have a large car, it is only a five minute extra walk uphill to this spot). This location apparently overlooks the Lammergeier feeding station, but it is hard to gauge just where the birds are located unless feeding has recently occurred. The birds tend to favour the crags on the mountainside half a mile away, but today I saw little in a howling gale, with rainstorms approaching. I briefly enjoyed views of 2 more Lammergeier's, but once again I yearned for better quality views of this stupendous bird. By mid-day, I decided to check out EMBALSE DE GUARA once again, a fifteen minute drive away. Common finches and Mistle Thrushes were on the approach road, and again I quickly found the Wallcreeper. This time it actively fed on the sheer rockface adjacent to the dam wall, just beneath the lower path that I mentioned before. I enjoyed 'crippling' scope and binocular views for upto ten minutes, noting every fine detail, including black spider-shaped feet, white eyering, smooth grey body plumage and 'eye-catching' crimson wing patches. It plucked a moth from a tiny crevice with its long black bill. Just superb! Though I doubt the moth was overwhelmed with pleasure! The Wallcreeper looked at me a couple of times as it fed just twenty metres away. Following the exhilaration of this sighting, I then returned to VADIELLO DAM for the afternoon, and in the approaching lowlands, stunning male Black Redstarts of the 'hispanica' race were seen in fields, a common bird at this time of year but beautiful nevertheless. I spent time checking out the small quarry before the three short tunnels, the dam itself, and the gully by the broken bridge after the dam (accessed via the further long road tunnel by the dam). These were all current wintering Wallcreeper zones according to Josele, but despite scrutinising these areas I could not locate any more Wallcreepers. It was not going to be as easy after all, and I was thrilled with my single Wallcreeper sighting of the day anyway. Choughs and Ravens were seen again, and a Buzzard and 2 kestrels too. I returned to Boletas for tea (pot noodle) and just before dusk I walked up to the walled cemetery on the hill above Loporzano as up to 7 Eagle Owls have been present in recent years- but not this evening! Though it was too windy for them to start calling, and another storm was encroaching. Again Josele will provide up-to-date information. Loporzano, the approach to Vadiello dam, and the river valleys on the road between Loporzano and Embalse de Guara/Santa Cilia would be excellent for passerine activity at migration times in my opinion. As I drove along this stretch of road many passerines were glimpsed, as well as Red Kite, Sparrowhawk, Merlin & Kestrel.

**8TH NOVEMBER 2009** - today I planned to go up into the Pyrenees, apparently it was just over an hours drive up to ASTUN where there was a very outside chance of Snowfinch, whilst Alpine Chough according to Josele were a virtual 'guarantee' at nearby CANATANU ski resort (I think that is the spelling). I had also planned to go to the new monastery at SAN JUAN DE LA PENA, as there was a remote chance of Black Woodpecker and Citril Finch. The first snow storms usually occur in November, and so they came today! I had managed to get half way to my destination (a few kms short of JACA), when the snow just

kept on coming. Cars were sliding off the road, and eventually I made the wise snap decision to turn round and head back. As I did so I came across several crashes, and people were putting snow-chains on their tyres. I had none! I do not know what was scarier, going uphill and wondering if you would slide back, or going downhill and wondering whether you would stop at all ! It was essential you kept your tyres in the bare section of road where other cars had driven, or you would be off the road in an instant. Many Chaffinch flocks were witnessed by the road, along with a hardy Buzzard, a Carrion Crow, and a pair of Rooks. Hardly the alpine species I had been hoping to see, but at least I got back safely to lower reaches. As I got out of my car for a pee-break, my knees were shaking! As it was still only late morning, I decided to drive south (where it was sunnier but still very windy) to the EBRO VALLEY STEPPES. Josele had told me about this area, and I accessed it along the straight, fast, direct, little-used but potentially lethal A131 road from Huesca through Sarinena. This road takes you through cereal fields and wetlands known as LOS MOLINOS, where a few Kestrels, Red Kites, Griffon Vultures, & Marsh Harriers were seen. A single Rock Sparrow was seen well by the road side, as well as single Grey Heron and Cattle Egret. Undoubtedly this area holds a lot more, but I did not have time to investigate. After Sarinena, a right turn is taken off the A131 through ONTINENA, and on this road to CANDASNOS around 12km marker is an excellent small raised plateau on the left, maintained by Josele and colleagues, for Grouse and Larks. If you reach the left turn for Ballobar you need to turn back. The Steppes are open to the elements, wind, rain, heat haze. But excellent birding can be had. There is just enough parking on the mud-baked track at this location, though without precise detail from Josele you will find it hard to locate as the terrain is so unremarkable. I spent a couple of hours here, noting at least 30 Calandra Larks, plenty of Linnets and Corn Buntings, several Lesser Short-Toed Larks & Crested Larks, and around 40 Pin-Tailed Sandgrouse and several Black-Bellied Sandgrouse - the latter species being a lifer for me pleasingly. Josele advised that you walk up, which I did though I was virtually blown over . I found shelter behind an old stone ruin. I then returned to my car and drove up the track to the right just a short distance, though Josele advised against this as vehicles frequently get stuck in mud. I returned to the main road, where 2 'long-billed' larks with short tails flew in front of the car. I even dared that they could be Dupont's Larks, but clearly it was likely this was wishful thinking (even though the bills were distinctly curved downwards). They were probably just Crested Larks. I investigated a few adjoining lanes, but only Corn Buntings, Crested Larks, and a few Black Redstarts and Stonechats were encountered as well as groups of Magpies. Very few raptors were seen in this excellent 'steppe' area, disappointingly. I was back at VADIELLO DAM by 4pm, and again I failed to locate any more Wallcreepers at the recommended spots. I reckon that if Josele had been with me he would have located at least one of them. Vadiello is superb but the scale of things is immense, perhaps too much for one set of tired eyes! A passerine perched up on a bush at the top of a small quarry turned out to be a Kestrel! A 'possible' Alpine Accentor was in the footpath tunnel immediately before the dam (a good wintering spot apparently), but it flitted away quickly. Dunnock and Black Redstart were also seen here. An Egyptian Vulture was also possibly glimpsed as it drifted away behind a mountain peak. After my 3rd pot-noodle tea in three days, I walked up again to the hillside 'walled' cemetery above Loporzano, but again the rains ruined any chance of hearing or seeing displaying Eagle Owl.

**9TH NOVEMBER 2009** I had to be at Zaragoza Airport by mid-day at latest for my 13.25 flight, but after breakfast at 7.30a.m. I said my farewells to Josele and Esther. Typically, today was beautiful, and the snow-capped Pyrenees formed a perfect backdrop. I briefly visited areas nearby, but EMBALSE DE GUARA failed to produce the Wallcreeper or any Lammer today during a short visit. A couple of Yellowhammers were on wires, and Black Redstart, Robin & female Sardinian Warbler were in the gully where the Wallcreeper should have been! Flocks of Serins, Linnets & Siskins were in bushes on the approach road. Impulsively I decided that SANTA CILIA might be better today, the sky was blue and the wind was negligible. So I returned to the spot just above the village and beyond the graveyard, and I walked out with my scope to a spot ten metres from my car. Instantly, to my amazement, 2 Lammergeier's came to inspect me, perhaps they thought I was bringing food! They circled just twenty-three metres above me for at least a minute before drifting off, undoubtedly disappointed that all I had

to offer was my optics. One of the birds was a superb orange-breasted adult. As it peered down at me with its 'penetrating' pale eyes, its 'handle-bar' beard (or moustache) bristled in the wind. This had been a magical moment, and I was thrilled to have enjoyed such fantastic views of this enigmatic species. Over the next twenty minutes I enjoyed views of at least 6 Lammergeier's. At least 2 were adults (possibly 3), 2 were sub-adults, and 2 were all-dark brown juveniles. To be honest, this species is not difficult to find in this area if you know where and when to visit. Groups of Griffon's circled on the other side of the village. Overall, this was a great way to end my trip!

The drive back to Zaragoza produced several Red Kites but nothing out of the ordinary, and at the airport a melanistic Marsh Harrier was hunting over the airfield. Pale forearm patches betrayed its identity, but I have never seen an example so dark as this individual previously.

I certainly had not seen as many speciality species as many groups will succeed in seeing in this area, but I was thrilled to see Wallcreeper and Lammergeier so superbly. That's all that mattered to me, anything else was a bonus. November is clearly not migration time, but I came here at this time of year with those two key targets in mind. But again, without the expertise of Josele, I quite possibly would not have been successful. Hands up, I am certainly not a particularly astute or gifted birder, I know my limitations, but I felt privileged and rewarded for my efforts, even though just 47 species were seen.

Nick Moss