

ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT
PYRENEES &
STEPPEES 2ND – 6TH
MARCH 2014

Sunday 2nd March

The group met early at Gatwick airport for our 0750 Easyjet flight to Barcelona which arrived on time at around 1100 local time. After some problems with the hire bus, which wasn't big enough for our luggage, we hired a second vehicle with Paul and Ashley driving one each and we set off on the 2.5hr drive west to the foothills of the Pyrenees and our hotel in the tiny village of Arbanies, nestling in the beautiful scenery of the Sierra de Guara. Red Kite, White Stork, Crested Lark, European Griffon Vulture, Corn Bunting, Common Buzzard, Marsh Harrier, Common Kestrel, Common Raven and European Serin were common species seen en route, with a coffee stop at a services adding a male Sardinian Warbler and Common Chiffchaff. Hotel check in was swift and after a quick freshen up we headed out for our first birding session in the nearby hills. Spotless Starling and Corn Bunting were common around the village and as we headed towards Vadiello Dam, at least 100 European Griffon Vulture were seen riding the updrafts along the mountain ridges with many birds seen visiting their nesting ledges. At the dam, we saw over 100 Red-billed Choughs passing over in several large flocks, and an adult Lammergeier slipped overhead. Thankfully a second bird, an immature, was seen much better and allowed us to get scope views. An adult Egyptian Vulture showed even better, and was our only sighting of the tour. Peregrine, three Blackcap and a superb singing male Firecrest were also seen, but there was no sign of the hoped for Wallcreeper at the dam. We returned to Arbanies for dinner and a good nights sleep ahead of a busy day tomorrow!

Monday 3rd March

A cold and breezy day with temperatures struggling above 4C and a few heavy showers around, turning to heavy prolonged rain by dusk. A Golden Eagle was hunting the low sierras behind the hotel after breakfast and several European Griffon Vultures could also be seen looking towards Vadiello, as well as the noisy Spotless Starlings on the rooftops. The puddingstone peaks of Los Mallos de Riglos were our destination for the morning, and with the best weather of the day here we scored heavily on all our target species. A stonking adult Lammergeier was seen circling low over the road just before the village, and we piled out of the cars to watch in awe as this magnificent vulture soared above our heads, allowing us to get ridiculous close views.



Lammergeier

We wondered how we could top that as we walked up through the narrow village streets to Riglos church, picking up a few Blackcaps along the way. Taking the stony path along the base of the cliffs, we began scouring carefully for the holy grail that is Wallcreeper, but our initial searches were fruitless. However, the supporting cast was good and as we flushed an Alpine Accentor from the path and went on to get great views of up to 5 different birds including a group of 3 which allowed really close approach. 3 Rock Buntings were very skittish and hard to observe clearly, but a male Dartford Warbler was more obliging and perched on top of a bush long enough for everyone to see it in the scope. Males of both Black Redstart and Blue Rock Thrush brightened things up, and a couple of Peregrine were seen over the crags above. Three of the group went back as the rest of us carried on looking for Wallcreeper, and as we were just about to give up after around 3hrs of searching, we located a female on the base of the cliffs right in front of us! We watched this wonderful bird for

around half an hour as it flicked its crimson spotted wings and grubbed around on the crumbling cliffs seemingly oblivious to our presence. What a stunning bird! Thankfully, by the time we returned to the car park and met the others, it was still showing distantly and we were able to get everyone scope views. This eureka moment was capped off in style as we could then hear Common Cranes calling, and looked up to see a flock of about 200 soaring in a tightly wheeling flock about to cross the Pyrenees on their Northbound migration.



Alpine Accentor

From here we decided to head North too, into the high Pyrenees and the ski station at Garbardito Refuge. Passing through the village of Siresa, we could see raptors circling and pulled over for a better look. They turned out to be a migrating flock of around 100 Black Kites, with a few Red Kites mixed in, but a snow shower was grounding them and they began to drop down into some paddocks where they perched in the trees allowing us to get brilliant views. At least 200 Red-billed Chough were overhead and an adult Lammergeier drifted over too. The road up to Gabardito was snow covered and only just passable to our vehicles, and it was snowing at the top too. We had lunch, and then took a short walk picking up many new species within 100 metres of the car park. Mistle Thrush, Eurasian Jay, Coal, Blue, Great and Marsh Tits, Goldcrest and some large flocks of Chaffinch were seen in this area, but we also had good views of two Crested Tits and a Short-toed Treecreeper. More big Chaffinch flocks and singing Firecrest were noted on the way back down.

Embalse de Sotonera was our final stop of the day and from our first watchpoint adjacent to the village of Montmesa we saw several Great Crested Grebe, Northern Shoveler, Common Teal and Common Pochard on the lake and mixed flocks of Corn Bunting, Common Linnet, European Goldfinch and European Serin. Two Black Redstart were flitting about and three Great White Egret were seen in flight. 8 Black Kites drifted over and the trumpeting calls of Common Cranes alerted us to the presence of a large number feeding the other side of the village, though several large flocks could also be seen in flight against the backdrop of mountains in the distance. We found a track that would take us closer, and we watched in awe as around 6000 Common Cranes were seen, including several birds in dancing display and constant coming and going of smaller groups. Calandra Lark was also seen in song flight here and also from the lakeside, where we ended the day with a Southern Grey Shrike perched and a small flock of European Golden Plover coming in to roost. A Little Owl on the way back to base was our last bird of the day as the heavens opened and we drove back through heavy rain.

Tuesday 4th March

We awoke to overnight snow this morning and with strong Northerly winds it felt really cold outside. We could see that there had been a lot of snow in the mountains, and our plan to travel into the Pyrenees was thwarted by the motorway north to Jaca being closed through the bad weather. We had to swing plan B into action and head back to Huesca, visiting a small lake called Alberca de Loreto. Despite the wind, we battled out to the hide and began scanning the wildfowl. A small flock of Northern Pintail flew off as we arrived and we went on to pick out Gadwall, Common Teal and Eurasian Wigeon from the larger numbers of Northern Shoveler. Little and Great Crested Grebe and a fine drake Red-crested Pochard were also noted as well as 3 Common Snipe, Cattle Egret, Grey Heron

40 Northern Lapwing and 7 European Golden Plover. Water Pipits were very common at this site, with around 50 seen, including some great close up views and comparisons with Meadow Pipits. Reed and Corn Buntings, Common Stonechat and a brief Green Sandpiper were also seen.

Staying close to Huesca, Montearagon was our next stop and we huddled on the leeward side of the ruined Castillo to get some protection from the cold wind. Initially it seemed birdless here other than the superb views of Eurasian Griffon Vultures often passing at eye level. With patience though we were rewarded with some good birds as first two Black Redstart and then two Dartford Warbler were seen, followed up with three Thekla Larks which showed really well. Paul then spotted our main quarry, a pair of stunning Black Wheatears which flitted around on the rocks below us. A male Blue Rock Thrush shot off up along the crags, and a Black Kite was also seen well.



Montearagon

Our lunch stop was at the beautiful setting of Embalse de Guara North of the village of Aguas. We hoped for Wallcreeper here but were not lucky, though we did enjoy more excellent views of European Griffon Vultures at their nests and another singing Firecrest. We decided to head a bit further east to the hamlet of Santa Cillia to look for raptors with the weather improving dramatically, and made an impromptu roadside stop on the way which added Cirl Bunting and Grey Wagtail. Santa Cillia was an excellent watchpoint, and here we spent some time scanning the ridges and picking up stunning views of a pair of Golden Eagles. One of the birds drifted right over our heads while another locked talons in mid-air with a European Griffon Vulture! Perhaps this was even surpassed by the great views we had of Lammergeier again, with at least 4 birds seen topped off by a pair mating on a crag! A Yellowhammer was the only passerine of note here though back at Arbanies we finished the day with a large mixed flock of finches and thrushes behind the hotel which included two European Serin and a Redwing. 2 Red-legged Partridge, 3 Black Kites and 60 Common Raven were also seen here.



Embalse de Guara

Wednesday 5th March

Strong winds gusting over 50mph were the order of the day today, and made birding tricky at times but we still managed to see some great birds. We packed the vehicles and said farewell to our hosts at Casa Oliban and set off south towards Los Monegros, the area of steppe east of Zaragoza. On the way, we built in a birding stop at Sarinena Lake, which was a good move. Our first vantage point overlooking the lake was very exposed, but we could still see flocks of about 1000 Mallard containing a few Northern Shoveler and a single drake Tufted Duck. Marsh Harriers were everywhere, a Eurasian Sparrowhawk flashed by and flocks of Cattle Egrets blew past us on the wind. Taking a track down to the lake margins, we stopped as we heard a Penduline Tit calling from the vehicle. Sure enough a stunning male was located in bushes right by the track, followed up by Sardinian Warbler, a couple of Zitting Cisticola and more Water Pipits. A male Cirl Bunting was singing from a clump of Tamarisk and mixed finches and buntings in the fields included a few Reed Buntings. A small reed-filled ditch along the track looked like it could hide a Bluethroat, so we walked it just to check. Hearts were in mouths as a European Robin flitted out, but the second bird we flushed was a stunning male White-spotted Bluethroat which perched in the side of a bush long enough for everyone to see it well in the scope. Six Great White Egrets were also seen in the area and a couple of Cetti's Warblers were heard singing, before we made our way back to the main road and continued south.

Once in Los Monegros, we took a series of tracks passing through cultivated steppe dotted with Salinas, seeing flocks of Calandra Larks numbering many hundreds. Lesser Short-toed Lark was common but furtive, not helped by the winds, though we did manage some scope views and saw a few birds in song flight too. 4 Lesser Kestrels hunting in a field by the track was a big bonus and we spent some time watching them from the vehicles as they stooped onto insect prey in a stubble field. Two Red-billed Chough shared the same field and a bit further on, 3 Black-bellied Sandgrouse took up and flew strongly away not to be relocated. 3 large raptors approaching purposefully from the south turned out to be Short-toed Eagles, clearly on migration. Our last stop here was the largest of the Salinas in the area and after a brief Merlin by the access track we went on to see quite a few waders here in the saline channels viewed from a well-placed hide. 20+ Kentish Plovers were present along with 5 Common Greenshank, 4 Little Stint, 2 Dunlin and a Green Sandpiper.

From here it took about an hour to reach the village of Lecera where we would be stopping for the night, and after check in we headed straight back out birding, to the nearby reserve of El Planeron which is internationally regarded as the best place in the World to see the endangered Dupont's Lark. Calandra and Lesser Short-toed Larks were both abundant and easily seen, but beyond this we really struggled with the strong winds and even as dusk fell, we didn't even hear a Dupont's. We headed back to base knowing that we would have another chance in the morning!

Thursday 6th March

We awoke early and by 0630 were back on the plains of El Planeron, parked in our vehicle under a starry sky waiting for first light. Even as we arrived, we could hear the distinctive song of Dupont's Lark, the only bird singing this early in the morning. Six singing birds were located, but as soon as there was so much as a glint of light in the sky, they fell silent and we did not hear them again. A Spectacled Warbler was a surprise, but somehow felt like scant compensation. Just as we were about to leave, we parked up at one last spot to listen for the lark. Somehow, Nick spotted a Dupont's right outside the window of the van on his side and we all bundled out to keep tabs on it knowing it would rather scurry away through the grass than flush. This is exactly what it did and most of us had brief but good views of the bird before we managed to completely lose it and could not relocate it again. We had to go back for breakfast, but after checking out and loading the vehicles we decided to head back for one last try. As we pulled up back at the spot where we had the brief pre-breakfast sighting, we could hear a Dupont's singing and amazingly there it was, perched in full view on the ridge about 50 metres away! We got out to grab scopes and it scurried away, but quickly reappeared in a tussock of grass where it remained for a full five minutes, singing in full view. A very lucky encounter, and one we would all savour for a very long time.



El Planeron

We didn't have much more time before embarking on the journey back to Barcelona, but we did take a drive around some tracks near Bujaraloz to look speculatively for Great Bustards without success. 4 Lesser Kestrels, lots of Lesser Short-toed and Calandra Larks were seen before we began heading east down the excellent motorway network. A House Martin and a fine Short-toed Eagle were the best birds seen en route and our flight departed for London Gatwick on time, arriving there around 1815.



Dupont's Lark

Systematic List

Birds

1. Great Crested Grebe
2. Little Grebe
3. Great Cormorant
4. Grey Heron
5. Little Egret
6. Cattle Egret
7. Great White Egret
8. White Stork
9. Common Shelduck
10. Mallard
11. Common Teal
12. Eurasian Wigeon
13. Gadwall
14. Northern Shoveler
15. Northern Pintail
16. Red Crested Pochard
17. Common Pochard
18. Tufted Duck
19. Red-legged Partridge
20. Black Kite
21. Red Kite
22. Griffon Vulture
23. Egyptian Vulture
24. Lammergeier
25. Short-toed Eagle
26. Marsh Harrier
27. Hen Harrier
28. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
29. Common Buzzard
30. Golden Eagle

31. Lesser Kestrel
32. Common Kestrel
33. Merlin
34. Peregrine
35. Common Quail [H]
36. Common Coot
37. Common Crane
38. Kentish Plover
39. European Golden Plover
40. Northern Lapwing
41. Little Stint
42. Dunlin
43. Common Snipe
44. Common Greenshank
45. Green Sandpiper
46. Black-headed Gull
47. Yellow-legged Gull
48. Black-bellied Sandgrouse
49. Woodpigeon
50. Collared Dove
51. Little Owl
52. Dupont's Lark
53. Calandra Lark
54. Lesser Short-toed Lark
55. Crested Lark
56. Thekla Lark
57. Skylark
58. Crag Martin
59. House Martin
60. Meadow Pipit
61. Water Pipit
62. White/Pied Wagtail
63. Grey Wagtail
64. Winter Wren
65. European Robin
66. Dunnock
67. Alpine Accentor
68. White-spotted Bluethroat
69. Black Redstart
70. Stonechat
71. Black Wheatear
72. Blue Rock Thrush
73. Common Blackbird
74. Redwing
75. Song Thrush
76. Mistle Thrush
77. Zitting Cisticola
78. Cetti's Warbler [H]
79. Dartford Warbler
80. Sardinian Warbler
81. Spectacled Warbler
82. Blackcap
83. Common Chiffchaff
84. Firecrest
85. Goldcrest

86. Blue Tit
87. Great Tit
88. Long-tailed Tit
89. Crested Tit
90. Marsh Tit [H]
91. European Nuthatch
92. Wallcreeper
93. Short-toed Treecreeper
94. Penduline Tit
95. Southern Grey Shrike
96. Common Raven
97. Eurasian Jay
98. Western Jackdaw
99. Black-billed Magpie
100. Red-billed Chough
101. Carrion Crow
102. Common Starling
103. Spotless Starling
104. House Sparrow
105. Chaffinch
106. Greenfinch
107. Goldfinch
108. Linnet
109. European Serin
110. Bullfinch
111. Reed Bunting
112. Yellowhammer
113. Cirl Bunting
114. Rock Bunting
115. Corn Bunting