

# ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT  
PYRENEES &  
STEPPES 1<sup>ST</sup> – 5<sup>TH</sup>  
MARCH 2015

### **Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> March**

After an early start at Gatwick Airport we arrived on schedule in Barcelona at around 1030 local time and after picking up our vehicle, we were soon heading out to the nearby Llobregat Delta which adjoins the airport compound. The roads around the park entrance were very busy but we parked up and walked down into the Remolar Fillipines reserve where we were soon watching our first Crag Martins hawking and a selection of common waterbirds. A drake Red Crested Pochard flew along the canal and the waterside bushes were full of Common Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps. European Serins sang their jingling songs from the pines and Cetti's Warblers could be heard singing all along the canal, with a couple seen too. A scratchy subsong from thick reeds stopped us in our tracks – a Moustached Warbler, a skulking resident in these wetlands and difficult to see. We had some glimpses of this one, and then found another in the reserve proper by a small reed-fringed pond which also gave us superb views of two male Penduline Tits. Other species noted included Marsh Harrier, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler and a single Common Snipe before we decided it was time to make tracks up the motorway into Aragon. It took around 2.5hrs to reach Huesca, and we noted our first Crested Larks, Red Kites, White Storks and Eurasian Griffon Vultures along the way. With an hour or so of good daylight left, we decided not to head straight to the hotel but to detour slightly to the ruined castle at Montearagon. This was a good choice, as the sun was bathing the rocky slopes by the castle and we saw some good birds here in a short space of time. A male Dartford Warbler was virtually in the car park and many Griffon Vultures were spiralling on the thermals over the adjacent sierras. A Blue Rock Thrush was seen peeking over the castle walls and our first Black Redstarts were seen flitting among the rocks. Our two main targets here were found with patience – Thekla Lark, always tricky to separate from Crested, is often best identified by its preference for sloping stony hillsides. We had good views of one through the scope showing its darker streaked breast and colder toned plumage. Our second target, the altogether easier to identify Black Wheatear, showed really well as it flashed its white tail from among the boulders. A bonus was also added in the form of a Rock Sparrow which flew in and landed in our scopes while we were trying to get onto a male Blue Rock Thrush! The day ended with a flock of around one hundred Common Cranes heading over on migration before making a U-turn and heading back south, no doubt to the nearby staging area at Embalse de Sotonera. Reaching our accommodation around 1830, we checked in and enjoyed a typical Aragonese meal before retiring early for a long days birding tomorrow.



**Montearagon**

### **Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> March**

A sunny day but cool in the fresh winds, especially up in the pre-Pyrenees where we spent most of the day. We started with a short walk from our accommodation in Arbanies, where Spotless Starlings sang from the rooftops and a large mixed finch flock contained several European Serins. Two Blue Rock Thrushes were by a derelict shed halfway down the track leading out of the village, a Black Redstart was seen and our first singing Corn Buntings were noted. Looking north towards Vadiello, we could see a large kettle of Griffon Vultures circling over the crags. Our main site for the morning would be the impressive sandstone cliffs at Los Mallos de Riglos, a well known wintering site for Wallcreeper and an altogether stunning place to go birding. A Lammergeier drifted into view and circled the puddingstone peaks as we walked up through the narrow streets towards the chapel, and many Griffon Vultures could be seen attending their nest sites up and down the cliffs. As we walked along the stony path by the base of the cliffs, a small party of Alpine Accentors flew up and landed on the chapel roof. We saw these super little birds a few times during the morning with at least ten counted

at one stage, always staying close to the rocky outcrop below the chapel or perching on the ridge tiles. Cirl Bunting and Sardinian Warbler were both noted among the scrub, while the cliffs produced a male Blue Rock Thrush, three Peregrines and plenty of Crag Martins. Try as we might, we could not find a Wallcreeper here today though but the blow was softened somewhat by the almost constant overhead migration of bugling flocks of Common Cranes. Watching and listening to these birds thermalling up to gain enough height to cross the Pyrenees as they begin their long journey back to Northern Europe was a staggering sight. From Riglos we embarked on the drive north towards the Hecho Valley, stopping en route for coffee in a small town before continuing up the rough track to Gabardito Refuge which lay in deep snow despite the temperature being 7C! The beech woodland around the refuge was initially deathly silent, but we knew that patience would be the key in finding some of its inhabitants. We were soon watching a pair of Common Crossbills in the meadow, a male Black Redstart flitted to the refuge roof and a small party of tits included our first Crested Tit and Short-toed Treecreeper. Marsh Tit, Coal Tit and European Nuthatch were also added while overhead we had superb views of two Golden Eagle including a displaying male. Griffon Vultures could be seen all around and while looking skyward, we picked up a migrating flock of fifty-one Black Kites first spiralling very high before tailing off in a line across the mountain top to find their next thermal on their journey into France. Common Cranes were still at it too, and from our snow-clad position we watched in awe as three separate flocks of several thousand cranes passed overhead. Back down in the valley bottom we decided to drive the track up a bit further to Boca del Infierno to try another spot for Wallcreeper. Again we were unsuccessful, but we did enjoy the spectacular scenery and had decent views of two more Lammergeier over the crags above. Driving back down, we had two impromptu roadside stops, one for a Hawfinch and the second for a disappearing bunting which we couldn't re-find, but instead had excellent views of a singing Firecrest! The final port of call today was Embalse de Sotonera which is a gathering area for the flocks of Common Cranes before they push on over the Pyrenees. We must have seen 10,000 cranes here, a quite amazing sight and sound to cap off the day. A Great White Egret was also seen, and list additions included five Northern Pintail, a male Hen Harrier, Long-tailed Tit and some nice Calandra Larks. We returned to base around 1920 after a long but successful day in the field.



**Looking north to Montmesa from Embalse de Sotonera**

### **Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> March**

A calm and sunny day with temperatures reaching 16C, even well above the treeline! As we had missed out on Wallcreeper yesterday, we made it today's mission to try and find one and started by driving a short distance from our accommodation to Vadiello, where a winding road towards a dam passes several small quarries and steep cliffs by the roadside favoured by the species in winter. As we drove towards the first tunnel, a Wallcreeper flicked off the rock face and flew across in front of our vehicle, disappearing around a cliff! We parked up quickly and jumped out, and located the bird low on the cliff just beyond the tunnel. It was feeding very low down at the base of the cliff, mainly out of sight behind bushes, but it was very close. We waited patiently and began to piece together some superb

views, culminating in the bird hopping along the climbers path at the cliff base to within ten feet of two of us! These were really remarkable views, and the other species seen in the area – Firecrest, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart and Crag Martin, hardly got a look in!



**Wallcreeper, Vadiello 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2015**

Very pleased to have ‘bagged up’ on this iconic species, we carried on to the dam where we saw Cirl Bunting, before retracing our route back along the road. Another bunting which flicked off the road warranted an impromptu stop, and it proved to be our only Rock Bunting of the trip, showing very well as it hopped along the edge of the tarmac. We decided now we had plenty of time to head north towards the high Pyrenees above Jaca, and it took just over an hour to reach this lovely town nestled in the foothills. We stopped by the small park in the centre, and were soon enjoying good views of a Hawfinch singing in the treetops. After a coffee, we wandered around the old Citadel and added Tree Sparrow, big flocks of migrating Common Cranes, a few Black Kites and excellent views of two Firecrests. Back in the park, Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper and our only Goldcrest of the tour were also seen.



**Firecrest, Jaca 3<sup>rd</sup> March**

From Jaca we continued about half an hour north into the high Pyrenees at Astun ski centre, hoping for high alpine birds driven down lower by the snow cover. The thaw was in full swing though with the warm sunshine creating very pleasant conditions for the skiers! This also meant to accentors or Snow Finch could be seen, but we did enjoy great views of about forty Alpine Choughs while we ate our lunch. A little lower down the valley at Canfranc, a riverside walk produced a Dipper, while among spiralling Griffon Vultures over the crags we had good views of a brace each of Golden Eagle and Lammergeier. Our final port of call for the day would be the flat topped mountain south of Jaca called Oroel, and a rough track halfway up the mountainside to a picnic area affords magnificent views of the snow-covered peaks to the North. The pine woods around the car park hosted Crested and Long-tailed Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper, Common Chiffchaff and a few Black Resdtarts, but our main target here was Black Woodpecker. We could hear one calling as soon as we got out of the vehicle and with patience managed nice scope views of it perched on a dead tree, with two others calling in the distance. From here we made the trip back to base which took around 1.5hrs.



**Looking North from Oroel**

### **Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> March**

Strong gusty winds made for a much cooler day today, with temperatures struggling into double figures despite the sunshine. We said farewell to our hosts at Casa Oliban and made our way south towards the cultivated steppe area known as Los Monegros, stopping en route at Sarinena to check the area around the lake there. Along the approach track we heard Penduline Tits calling and saw our first Zitting Cisticola, while a female Cirl Bunting perched nicely on a post. It was windy at the hide, but we saw a Great White Egret, several Marsh Harriers and a few trip ticks in the shape of Great Crested Grebe and Common Pochard among the vast flock of Mallard, Common Teal, Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail. A Cetti's Warbler showed behind the hide and a Water Rail called but remained hidden. On to Bujaraloz and after a quick coffee stop we made our plan to tackle the vast steppe to the south. Amazingly, on the first track we drove down, we spotted two lumps in a field – Great Bustards! The Aragonese population is tiny, and the birds are notoriously difficult to find, so we were extremely lucky. A little further on, we found three more, and these gave better, closer views from the vehicle. We carried on exploring various tracks, stopping and scanning regularly. Eventually, we found a superb flock of 27 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse crouched among short vegetation at the roadside, and we enjoyed some really good views of these often sketchily observed birds. Three Little Bustards flew up from an adjacent field as we passed, and despite good flight views we couldn't relocate them. Calandra Larks were common on the plains and several large flocks were seen, while we also had good views of two Red-billed Choughs probing in the fields. Laguna la Playa was extremely windy, but we managed to battle our way into the hide and add Kentish Plover, Common Shelduck and Little Stint to the trip list! Southern Grey Shrike and a ringtail Hen Harrier were both roadside birds as we headed south to

Sastago, and on to the SEO reserve near Belchite called El Planeron. This is the world renowned location for finding the threatened Dupont's Lark, and we knew this was going to be tricky in the very windy conditions. However, we almost immediately found one perched on a tussock singing, and everyone got on it before it slinked away – not the best of views, but a start! It was impossible to get out of the vehicle and use a scope due to the strong winds and blowing dust, so we opted to stay in and try driving slowly along the tracks. Great views of a mixed party of six Black-bellied and eight Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were a bonus, and we also saw two more Southern Grey Shrikes, song-flying Lesser Short-toed Larks and great views of a Black Kite. A Golden Eagle was hunting almost harrier like over the open steppe at the far end of the reserve, and gave really close views. Try as we might though, there was to be no further sign of the lark today. We retired to our nearby accommodation for the night where we enjoyed an excellent meal.



**El Planeron**

### **Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> March**

We were up and out before daybreak this morning, returning to El Planeron for another try at Dupont's Lark. Arriving just as the sun was beginning to warm the eastern sky, we could immediately hear a Dupont's singing. It was light enough to see though, and we peered intently into the gloom again opting to use the vehicle as a mobile hide. Two shapes could then be seen, flitting about a hard open patch of sand among the tussocky grasses, and as the light improved we could see they were our targets. Three or four views were had including one bird standing nicely in the open, and one more snatch of song was heard. Then, just as the sun came up over the hills, they disappeared and we did not see or hear of them again! This was a fairly typical scenario for the species, and we were not surprised – instead we headed back for a hearty breakfast before packing our things and heading back to the reserve for one last try. A Eurasian Hoopoe was seen by the road and our only Egyptian Vulture of the trip was heading north over the village of Codo. The sandgrouse were back too, in the same field as yesterday. We gave it another hour, and saw two different male Hen Harriers and some more views of Lesser Short-toed Larks, but the Dupont's did not show again. From here we made the rather arduous journey back to Barcelona, which took about 3.5hrs due to a motorway closure and slow lorries. We still arrived about on time and caught the early evening flight back to London.

### **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. Gadwall
13. Northern Shoveler
14. Northern Pintail
15. Red Crested Pochard
16. Common Pochard
17. Red-legged Partridge
18. Black Kite
19. Red Kite
20. Griffon Vulture
21. Egyptian Vulture
22. Lammergeier
23. Marsh Harrier
24. Hen Harrier
25. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
26. Common Buzzard
27. Golden Eagle
28. Common Kestrel
29. Peregrine
30. Water Rail [H]
31. Common Coot
32. Common Crane
33. Great Bustard
34. Little Bustard
35. Kentish Plover
36. Northern Lapwing
37. Little Stint
38. Common Snipe
39. Black-headed Gull
40. Yellow-legged Gull
41. Black-bellied Sandgrouse
42. Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
43. Woodpigeon
44. Collared Dove
45. Stock Dove
46. Little Owl
47. Black Woodpecker
48. Great-spotted Woodpecker [H]
49. Eurasian Hoopoe
50. Common Kingfisher
51. Dupont's Lark
52. Calandra Lark
53. Lesser Short-toed Lark
54. Crested Lark
55. Thekla Lark
56. Skylark
57. Crag Martin
58. Meadow Pipit
59. Water Pipit
60. White/Pied Wagtail

61. Grey Wagtail
62. Winter Wren [H]
63. European Robin
64. Dunnock
65. Alpine Accentor
66. Black Redstart
67. Stonechat
68. Black Wheatear
69. Blue Rock Thrush
70. Common Blackbird
71. Song Thrush
72. Mistle Thrush
73. Zitting Cisticola
74. Cetti's Warbler
75. Moustached Warbler
76. Dartford Warbler
77. Sardinian Warbler
78. Blackcap
79. Common Chiffchaff
80. Firecrest
81. Goldcrest
82. Blue Tit
83. Great Tit
84. Long-tailed Tit
85. Crested Tit
86. Marsh Tit
87. Coal Tit
88. European Nuthatch
89. Wallcreeper
90. Short-toed Treecreeper
91. Penduline Tit
92. Southern Grey Shrike
93. Common Raven
94. Eurasian Jay [H]
95. Western Jackdaw
96. Black-billed Magpie
97. Red-billed Chough
98. Alpine Chough
99. Carrion Crow
100. Common Starling
101. Spotless Starling
102. Common Starling
103. House Sparrow
104. Tree Sparrow
105. Rock Sparrow
106. Chaffinch
107. Greenfinch
108. Goldfinch
109. Linnet
110. European Serin
111. Bullfinch
112. Hawfinch
113. Cirl Bunting
114. Rock Bunting
115. Corn Bunting

