

Spain Pyrenees

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Participants:

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Egyptian Vulture

Day 1: After arriving at Bilbao Airport, we set off through a green northern Spain towards the Aragonese Pyrenees. On the way past Vitoria, we saw both Black and Red Kites as well as Common Buzzards. Arriving at the Lumbier Gorge for a picnic lunch, we watched Cirl and Corn Buntings, more Red and Black Kites and many Eurasian Griffons. After lunch we took a walk along the limestone gorge where were found Rock Petronia, Alpine and Common Swifts, Eurasian Crag-martins and House Martins, Egyptian Vulture, a Short-toed Eagle hovering above the gorge, a young Spectacled Warbler being fed by its parent, Black Redstart and Red-billed Choughs. We continued on to our excellent accommodation at Casa Sarasa in Berdun with a short stop at the Yesa Reservoir where we saw European Serin, Corn Buntings, Crested Lark and a Black Kite diving down to catch a fish in its talons. At Casa Sarasa a cool drink went down well before a delicious dinner.

Day 2: A drive up the Hecho Valley (many Red Kites perched on telegraph poles) to look for mountain birds took us to Gabardito with its pines, beech forest, cliffs and alpine pasture. On our way through the trees towards a regular Wallcreeper spot, we saw Crested, Coal and Marsh Tits and heard Firecrests. While waiting for the Wallcreeper we saw Lammergeier and Golden Eagle wheeling high overhead as well as Egyptian Vulture and Eurasian Griffons. We only heard both Green and Black Woodpeckers but saw European Serin, Rock Bunting, Alpine Swift, Eurasian Crag-martins, Black Redstart and Common Choughs. A beautiful male Wallcreeper finally appeared and we had excellent views of it on the cliffs above us. We also saw a Golden Eagle and Common Ravens. We ate our picnic in the meadow outside the Gabardito hut and saw European Serins, Common Treecreeper, Coal Tits, Mistle Thrush and more Eurasian Griffons. On the way to the high Hecho Valley we saw Great Spotted Woodpecker and Red-backed Shrike. Higher up the valley in area of alpine pasture it rained intermittently but we were still able to see Yellowhammer, European Serin, Eurasian Linnet, Northern Wheatear, Water Pipit, Dunnock, Common Raven and a Short-toed Eagle. We then had excellent views of a pair of Lammergeiers circling and landing up on the border ridge and saw a Peregrine Falcon sitting out the rain. On

the way back down the valley a pair of Egyptian Vultures were circling above herds of cattle and we saw Golden and Short-toed Eagles and a Grey Wagtail by the river.

Day 3: Unfortunately it rained for most of the morning and this combined with two mountain roads closed for improvements meant that we weren't able to head up to Arret on the French border to try for Citril Finch and Alpine Accentor (come back on Saturday!). However on our drive we saw Egyptian Vultures, Eurasian Griffons, Red Kites and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. A stop on the col overlooking Zuriza provided numerous butterflies (Scarce Swallowtail, Glanville Fritillary, Lesser Spotted Fritillary, Painted Lady and Piedmont Ringlet) but the only birds were just the ubiquitous Common Chaffinches. We drove on to San Juan de La Peña seeing Booted Eagle and more kites. In the trees around the monastery we saw Coal and Crested Tits in the pines, whilst a walk west revealed Melodious Warbler, Blackcap, a drumming Black Woodpecker, Eurasian Crag-martins and Eurasian Griffons. We also saw Blackcap, Mistle Thrush, European Serin, European Goldfinch and a Short-toed Eagle hovering on the afternoon updrafts. A highlight of the afternoon was the butterflies all over the Scabious and Thistle flowers: Clouded Yellow, Cleopatra, Marbled White, Black-veined White, Spanish Gatekeeper and Orange Tip. On the way back, a quick stop in a shady spot by the Rio Aragón yielded European Bee-eater, Common Sandpiper, White Wagtail and Cetti's Warbler.

Day 4: A 4am start to get down to the dry steppe area near Belchite in time for dawn. We arrived at a water hole, the only green area in a parched ochre landscape, just as the sun came up. We had a possible Dupont's Lark and saw Thekla Lark perched on bushes, flocks of Calandra Larks flying in to drink, and in the dry scrub Short-toed, Short-toed and Crested Larks. A Great Reed-warbler gave us an excellent display in the reeds whilst hunting over the fields we saw Montagu's Harrier, Western Marsh-harrier and Black and Red Kites. Forewarned by their calls as they approached the water hole, we saw small groups of Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse fly in to drink and just as quickly fly off again – what colours! In the drier fields we saw Black-eared Wheatear and an Eurasian Thick-knee. We tried another area for Dupont's Lark but they proved elusive. By this time it was getting hot so we went to the small town of Belchite for a cold drink and then to the old town, which was ruined during one of the toughest battles of the Spanish Civil War. The ruined church is always reliable Blue Rock-thrush whilst Eurasian Griffons soared overhead. We then drove across the steppe to the River Ebro where we had lunch by the river in the shade of the poplar trees. Here we saw Great Reed-warbler, Cetti's Warbler, Common Nightingale, Garden Warbler, Little Bittern and Barn Swallows. On the way back to Berdún, we saw many White Storks in the fields and on their nests. Nearer our base in Berdún, we saw both Red-backed and Southern Grey Shrikes.

Day 5: Today by popular request we returned to the Higher Hecho Valley to try for Citril Finch again and to see the fabulous alpine flowers. Black and Red kite perched on nearly every telegraph pole on the way up the valley and a Common Buzzard flew through the trees near Gabardito. At Gabardito we sheltered from rain under a tree and 'called up' a pair of Citril Finch with the iPod. They were soon off but we had more good sightings later on. We also saw Green Woodpecker (Iberian), Great, Crested and Coal Tits, Mistle Thrush, Common Raven, Red-billed Chough, European Serin, European Goldfinch and Grey Wagtail. A Black Woodpecker performed its dipping flight in front of us down the road and then we returned to the higher valley where intermittent rain and a strong wind made it easier to see the stunning flowers than birds. In the high meadows and rocks however, we did see Northern Wheatear, a Common Raven ferrying back and forth, Dunnock, Eurasian Linnets, Water Pipit and House Martins, which nest in the cliffs here. European Serin, European Goldfinch and Yellowhammer were frequent in the wild roses along the track and we saw a hunting Common Kestrel and a pair of Golden Eagles high above us. A White-throated Dipper of a darker black form than those in Britain flew along the river.

Day 6: Today we could finally travel up to the French border at Arret to look for more alpine birds. As we climbed it got mistier and mistier until visibility was almost zero. We heard Citril Finch however, and saw Ring Ouzel (the lighter *alpestris* race), and had a glimpse of Alpine Accentor. Yellow-billed Choughs were everywhere but the mist meant that we only had one fleeting view. Returning down valley, we moved over to Linza where in the beech and Silver Fir forest we saw Green Woodpecker, Common Treecreeper, three

European Honey-buzzards, Egyptian Vultures and Eurasian Griffons. On the chance that the mist had cleared we returned to Arret where in better weather in the alpine pines we had excellent views of Citril Finch, Coal, Crested and Great Tits, Common Treecreeper, Ring Ouzel and Red Crossbill. A search for Alpine Accentor revealed only Dunnock where Alpine Accentors bred until a year or so ago (global warming?). Also seen were Water Pipits and Yellow-billed Choughs.

Day 7: Today, our last day, by special request we went up the Tena Valley to see one of only three sites with Ladies Slipper Orchids in the Pyrenees. They were in flower and looking absolutely fabulous, a real privilege to see something so incredibly rare and beautiful. We saw many other alpine flowers including the rare Pyrenean Fritillary and Pyrenean Buttercups. Birds seen were typical of this alpine habitat with Black Redstart, Water Pipit, Northern Wheatear and Egyptian Vulture, no Lammergeiers though. A return to the lower Ansó valley near our base was unspectacular bird-wise with European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch, Corn Bunting, Common Buzzards and Common Nightingales. The hoped for Western Orphean Warblers sometimes seen around here were quiet at this late stage in the day. The butterflies however, were magnificent with Lesser Spotted Fritillary, Lesser Marbled Fritillary, Esper's Marbled White, Marbled White, Great-banded Grayling, Spanish Gatekeeper, Dingy Skipper, Blue Spot Hairstreak and Ilex Hairstreak.

Day 8: With a mid morning flight, it was unfortunately time to leave Casa Sarasa after an early breakfast. The hotel was very comfortable with a nice Gardena and a very handy bar two minutes walk away. The breakfasts, dinners and picnics Peter and Melanie prepared for us were really tasty and generous. They did the vegetarians in the group proud as well – not always the case in Spain. Among the birds seen from the garden or on walks in the surrounding area were Greater Spotted Cuckoo, Subalpine and Melodious Warblers, European Stonechat, a Eurasian Wryneck just behind the house, Crested Lark, Montagu's Harrier, Booted Eagle, Red-backed and Southern Grey Shrikes, Spotless Starlings, European Serins, European Bee-eaters, Hoopoes, Black and Red Kites, Common Nightingales, Barn Swallows, Common Swifts, House Martins, Eurasian Crag-martins, House Sparrows (everywhere in this arable area) and Corn and Cirl Buntings.

Richard Cash