

Spain

Pyrenees

30 May–6 June 2010

Participants:

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Aguas Tuertas, Hecho Valley

Leader: Richard Cash

Birdfinders had an excellent week in the Pyrenees with a huge variety of birds from alpine species to steppe species and plenty in between. Amongst the many highlights were plenty of raptors, Alpine Accentors, Citril Finches and of course Wallcreeper. As well as the birds the flowers were exceptional, especially in the alpine areas we visited. The Lady's Slipper Orchids were even more spectacular than last year. A late freeze after some hot weather meant that there were hardly any butterflies to be seen which was disappointing. The group was always fun and interesting and it was a genuine pleasure to explore the area and show them the amazing bird life. The banter at meals and in the minibus was hilarious and we had a great time. Thanks to all for being such a great bunch of folks!

Day 1: The flight arrived on time at Bilbao and we set off east towards the Pyrenees. A quick stop at the motorway services outside Bilbao gave us the first of many Eurasian Griffons-vultures flying high above. We also saw a Short-toed Eagle – the first of many raptors spotted by Mathew – eagle eye – Santos! An hour later we stopped for the first of many excellent picnics at the Lumbier Gorge, which, with the nearby Arbayun gorge, is the site of Europe's largest Eurasian Griffon-vulture colony. During lunch we spotted Eurasian Griffon-vulture and Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed Eagle, plus European Serin, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch and Corn Bunting along the hedgerow. A walk along the gorge revealed Common Kestrel, a Blue Rock-thrush posing beautifully on a pinnacle, Grey and White Wagtails, Rock Doves, Common and Alpine Swifts, Black and Red Kites, Eurasian Crag-martins and House Martins, a Common Whitethroat, Red-billed Chough, Spotless Starling and above us a pale-phase Booted Eagle. An excursion into a nearby field revealed little at this quiet time of day but we were fooled by a 'bee-eater', which turned out to be a ribbon hung on the power line to warn off birds of prey! Not to worry though as we spotted some genuine European Bee-eaters on our way to our base at Casa Sarasa in Berdún. En route to Berdún we also saw Black and Red Kites, a Common Buzzard and on Yeas Reservoir, Great Crested Grebe. Peter Rich made us very welcome at Casa Sarasa with really nice rooms and an excellent dinner which catered to the groups varied tastes in food.

Day 2: Today we drove up to the Hecho Valley in search of alpine species and were not disappointed! A Western Marsh-harrier was spotted over the fields just past Berdún. On the way up the valley we saw many (30 plus) Black and Red Kites, some residents and some on migration, hunting for rodents in hay fields as were a few Yellow-legged Gulls.

Nearer Hecho we saw a pair of Egyptian Vultures patrolling above a herd of cattle and soon afterwards saw a Red-backed Shrike. First stop was the Gabardito refuge where we had great views of Citril Finches in the trees and in the pasture. Walking up to through the Beech and Pine forest we saw Eurasian Nuthatch, Coal and Great Tits and heard Firecrest and Goldcrest. Chaffinches were, as usual, omnipresent. Once at the Wallcreeper site, Alpine Swifts, Eurasian Crag-martins, House Martins and Red-billed Chough flew above us and we soon had excellent views of a Wallcreeper on the cliffs above us. Scanning the sky we had our first views of Lammergeier along with many Eurasian Griffon-vultures and Mathew spotted a Bonelli's Eagle. On the way down Eurasian Hobby, Common Kestrel, Northern Bullfinch, Eurasian Wren and Mistle Thrush were seen. Driving through the Beach Forest en route to the higher valley, we had a fleeting glimpse of a Black Woodpecker, unmistakable as it flew across the road. In the higher valley – a habitat of rocks and alpine pasture – we had a really productive walk seeing Northern Wheatear, Black Redstart and beautifully-coloured Eurasian Linnets. We had excellent views of Lammergeier in the 'scopes (in all we saw five different individuals today) and saw its nest platform high on a cliff ledge. European Serin, Dunnock, and Yellowhammer, Eurasian Skylark were plentiful but Water Pipit, usually two a penny here, were absent, most likely because of the late frosts. We didn't see any butterflies either. We had good views of Short-toed Eagle and more Egyptian Vultures and saw Grey Wagtail and a White-throated Dipper feeding in the mountain stream. We returned to Berdún seeing many more Black and Red kites, several Crested Larks and European Bee-eaters. Morning and evening walks around Berdún revealed Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers, Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrikes, Common Chiffchaff, European Robin, Common Wood Pigeon and Barn Swallows.

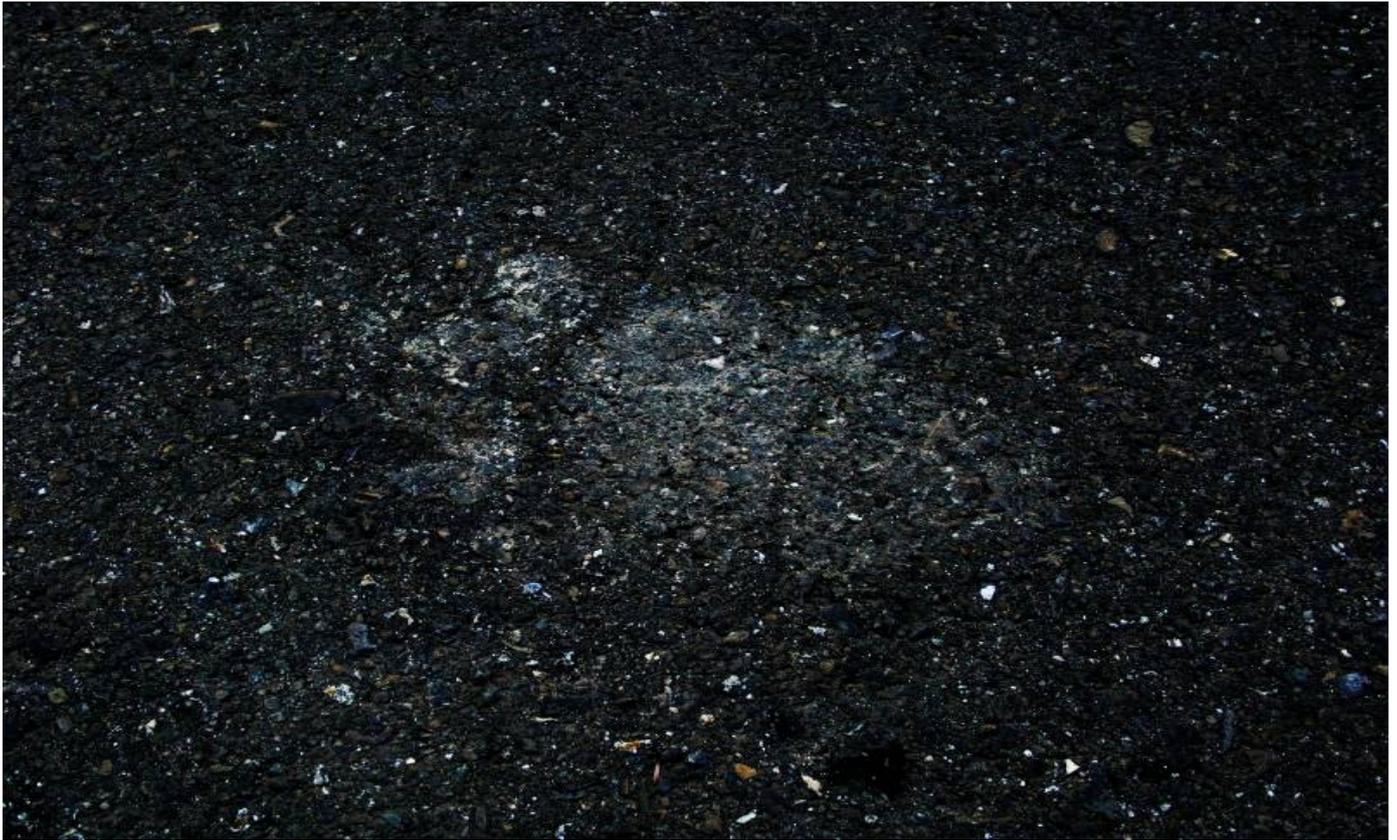
Day 3: We drove southeast towards the foothills of the Pyrenees with their rocky pinnacles, their almond and olive orchards and a Mediterranean/continental climate. On the way there we saw European Bee-eaters, Black and Red Kites, Crested Lark, Woodchat Shrike, Grey Heron and on La Peña reservoir Great Crested Grebe and, above the reeds a Western Marsh-harrier. We first went to an area of rocky pinnacles near Murillo, which is a reliable Black Wheatear spot, and were promptly rewarded with excellent views through the 'scopes. Numerous Eurasian Griffon-vultures soared above us and we spotted their young perched on their nest ledges. Rock Doves nest here also. Egyptian Vultures gave a magnificent flying demonstration and a Lammergeier was seen high above us. A Blue Rock-thrush posed beautifully on a nearby pylon. In the bushes and grass below the cliffs were European Serin, Common Stonechat and Black Redstarts in abundance. Cirl Bunting, Common Swifts, Barn Swallows, Eurasian Crag-martins and a Common Kestrel were also seen. We continued to Riglos where we had lunch and tried for warblers – we were in the hot early afternoon so things were fairly quiet. Even so some of us saw Sardinian Warblers drinking in an irrigation ditch and heard Cetti's Warblers. No sign of Subalpine or Dartford Warblers though. We saw the omnipresent Eurasian Griffon-vultures and a few Common Ravens. We returned to Berdún via the high forest of San Juan de La Peña which again was fairly quiet due to the very hot conditions. We saw Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Red-billed Chough, Tree Pipit and the obligatory Eurasian Griffon-vultures. We also saw a Booted Eagle near the village. In the early evening, a visit to the River Aragón gave great results with two good views of Eurasian Eagle-owls, Eurasian Golden Oriole and on the way back along the dirt tracks near the Aragón river no less than seven European Nightjars.

Day 4: After a yesterday's heat we decided to head for the high mountains in search of Alpine Accentor. A longish drive up the Roncal Valley and we were in the clouds and seeing anything seemed a bit of a long shot! However it cleared a little once we crossed into France and off we set to find the accentor. To begin with Dunnock raised our hopes and there were a few Northern Wheatears and Eurasian Linnets appearing from the mist. Climbing higher we saw a group of three Alpine Accentors and for 25 minutes or so had excellent views of them through the 'scopes. This was a first for most of the group and an excellent result after not having seen them here last year. The long lasting winter and late freeze helped us here. With a warmer spring the birds would most likely have been higher than they were this year. Flocks of Yellow-billed Choughs – also a first for some - were frequently seen as were Black Redstarts. We headed down to a ski station set amongst mountain pine trees and had great, close views of Citril Finches. Having lunch just on the border we saw a group of eight Red Crossbills and wandering down the road saw Ring Ouzel (*alpestris*), Northern Bullfinch, Eurasian Nuthatch, Mistle Thrush and Goldcrest. Then the mist closed in again so we headed down to a Beech Forest in search of Black Woodpecker, which unfortunately didn't oblige. The forest did reveal a Short-Toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Nuthatch, Chaffinches and Grey Wagtails by a stream. We returned to Berdún fairly early to rest up before an early start the following morning. On today's walks around the environs of Casa Sarasa the following birds were spotted: Little Egret, Common Buzzard, Booted Eagle, Common Kestrel, Eurasian Collared-dove, Common Cuckoo, Common Kingfisher, five Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Green Woodpecker, House Martin, Barn Swallow, White Wagtail, Eurasian Wren, Common Nightingale, Cetti's Warbler

(heard), Garden Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Red-backed Shrike, Sedge Warbler (heard), Eurasian Golden Oriole, Corn Bunting, House Sparrow and Spotless Starling.

Day 5: Up at 03.00 to get down to the Plains of Belchite for a chance of Dupont's Lark. We arrived at dawn and spread out to find this elusive lark. A few hours of intense search revealed many Calandra Larks, Greater Short-toed Larks, Lesser Short-toed Larks, Crested Larks, Thekla Larks (perched on bushes!) and Eurasian Skylarks. Of the Dupont's the only sign was a tiny burst of song but no view at all. How do they hide so well?! We also saw Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, European Bee-eaters, Western Marsh-harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Eurasian Griffon-vultures and Red and Black Kites. As the sun began to get hot we decided to leave the Dupont's Larks hiding and moved on towards Belchite. A stop by a pond gave excellent results with good views of a pair of Montagu's Harriers, a very obliging Southern Grey Shrike, a Woodchat Shrike, a European Turtle-dove, a fleeting but beautiful Western Orphee Warbler and a Spotted Flycatcher. We also saw Marsh Tits and European Bee-eaters, Eurasian Hoopoe, Barn Swallows and, in some nearby trees, Marsh Tits. We also saw more Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. By this time the sun was beating down so we had a cold drink in Belchite and drove off across the steppe towards the River Ebro. Nearer the Ebro irrigated crops had White Storks flying over them and we saw many Red and Black Kites. Once on a bend of the Ebro River, we unpacked our picnic in the shade of Poplar trees and settled down to eat and watch for birds. A Great Reed-warbler appeared first followed by excellent views of a Little Bittern catching fish. A Purple Heron flew along the river and was soon followed by a Grey Heron. Eurasian Golden Orioles flew between the Poplars, a Common Kingfisher came and went in a flash of blue and a Spotted Flycatcher darted from its perch catching insects. We also saw a Eurasian Reed-warbler and heard Melodious Warbler, Zitting Cisticola and Common Moorhen. We could have stayed all afternoon but some fishermen appeared and as we had been on the go since 03.00 we got into the van and headed for the hills. On the way back we saw White Storks aplenty and a European Roller just outside Huesca. One of the group saw a Lesser Kestrel. Nearing Berdún, we had excellent, close views of Booted Eagles circling over a village. In the evening one of the group saw a Eurasian Wryneck among the other regular birds around the village. All in all an excellent day despite not seeing Dupont's Lark!

Day 6: Today we decided to revisit the higher Hecho Valley again to try and see Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush and other alpine birds and raptors. On the drive up we saw Booted Eagle, numerous Black and Red Kites and Yellow-legged Gulls patrolling recently cut hay fields for rodents. Crested Larks and Corn Buntings were frequently seen along the road and arable fields. It was a beautiful day so we walked up the track towards Aguas Tuertas seeing Black Redstarts, Dunnock, Yellowhammer, European Goldfinch, Common Stonechat, Northern Wheatear and above us Eurasian Griffon-vultures soared and a pair of Egyptian Vultures flew above the herds of cows grazing in the valley. The flowers in the valley were stunning, with numerous orchids – Elderflower, Early Purple and Burnt Orchids and countless other alpine flowers most spectacularly Trumpet Gentians and Dragons Mouth including a rare white and purple sport. Of butterflies there was barely a sign due to the late freeze in the second week in May, just a few Piedmont Blues. A Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush obliged by appearing at its regular spot and posed for us beautifully. We saw three male individuals around this spot but, strangely, no females. There were numerous brightly-coloured Eurasian Linnets but still no Water Pipits. We saw House Martins which here nest in the cliffs along with Eurasian Crag-martins. White-throated Dipper and Grey Wagtail were seen in the river and Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs appeared in a mixed flock. On the way down the valley we saw Lammergeier, a distant Golden Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle and a hovering Short-toed Eagle. We also spotted the first Eurasian Honey-buzzard of the week. A walk along the Boca del Infierno gave us Eurasian Nuthatch, Coal Tit and Crested Tit but the afternoon was very quiet and everyone was very tired so we started to return to Berdún. We soon stopped as we saw a friend from Hecho village who told us that some Pyrenean Brown Bear prints had been seen – (bears are very rare here) so we went to where he bear had crossed the road and found the muddy paw prints which, it turned out belong to a male bear called Neré which was born in 1997 in the Val d'Aran. In the evening European Scops-owl and Little Owl, Eurasian Golden Oriole and Common Nightingale were among the birds seen by the group on walks near Casa Sarasa.



Bear paw print on the road

Day 7: Many of the group wanted to go and see the Lady's Slipper Orchid site in the Tena Valley and so we set off east up into another high valley. We drove up to the French border and walked off on an old miners track. Glory be – we saw our first Water Pipit, normally so common, and saw Black Redstarts, White and Grey Wagtails. We had exceptional views of three Golden Eagles and a Booted Eagle which appeared much larger than usual. The flowers up here were spectacular and very different to those seen in the Hecho valley due to the different geology. Highlights were Pyrenean Fritillary and Pyrenean and Amplexicaule Buttercups, which flower just as the snow melts. We also saw the typical Eurasian Linnets, Northern Wheatear, Common Stonechats, Eurasian Skylarks and Red-billed Chough. A gloriously coloured Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush also made an appearance, posing for us for five or more minutes. We drove back down the valley to the Lady's Slipper Orchid site near Sallent and saw this amazing and incredibly rare orchid at its best with many flowers in prime condition. By this time it was beginning to get hot and the birds were making themselves scarce. We had a good picnic in a spot where we often see Rock Bunting but they did not appear. We did see Red Backed Shrike, Common Buzzard, Eurasian Griffon-vulture, European Serin, Greenfinch, Goldfinch and Yellowhammer. Visiting another possible Rock Bunting site we saw Goldcrest, Honey Buzzard, Goshawk and nearby a Woodchat Shrike. We returned to the Hecho Valley to a good Rock Bunting spot but it was a very hot afternoon and we saw little of note except Egyptian Vultures patrolling the herds of cattle. Back in Berdún Peter prepared us a delicious barbecue dinner and we just had time to eat it outside before a thunderstorm blew in!



Lady's Slipper Orchid

Day 8: For our last morning, we walked from the village towards the River Aragón. This was an excellent walk recording Little Owl, Common Nightingale, Grey Heron (6), Booted Eagle, Common Buzzard, Common Quail (heard), Common Cuckoo, Eurasian Hoopoe, Eurasian Wryneck (heard), Common Stonechat, Red-backed and Woodchat Shrikes, Crested Lark, Black and Red Kites, Eurasian Griffon-vultures, Egyptian Vultures, Cirl and Corn Buntings, Eurasian Linnet, European Serin, Spotless Starling and European Goldfinches. It was a also good morning for warblers as it was cool after last nights storm with Dartford and Subalpine Warblers and near the river, Blackcap, Cetti's Warbler (heard), European Reed-warbler, Garden Warbler (heard) and Common Whitethroat all observed. We also saw a Great Spotted Woodpecker, Long-tailed Tit and saw a European Penduline-tit nest but not its makers. A visit to another spot on the river gave an amazing spectacle of European Bee-eaters coming and going from their nest burrows. We also saw Spotted Flycatcher, Sand Martins, Grey Wagtail and Eurasian Golden Oriole. We set off for Bilbao Airport after lunch to make the return flight home at the end of the tour.

Richard Cash