

Swallow BIRDING

EARLY WINTER IN THE SPANISH PYRENEES
Friday 19th – Monday 22nd November 2010

TOUR PARTICIPANTS

WENDY & DAVID PRESTON
PAT BRAND & HOWARD MANNERS
TONY COOMBS

DAVID BROADLEY
PETER WEBSTER

TOUR MANAGER
ANNETTE ADAMS

TOUR LEADER
STEVE GRIMWADE



Lammergeier



Alpine Accentor by Tony Coombs



Wallcreeper by Tony Coombs

Friday 19th November

We all met at Stansted for our 9.25 flight to Zaragoza that was delayed slightly due to foggy conditions but soon made this time up on our flight south. We arrived at Zaragoza in overcast conditions but at least it was dry. After picking up our vehicle and loading up, we were soon navigating the Zaragoza ring road before heading north towards Huesca. Our journey soon produced several Red Kites, Common Buzzards and a few Kestrels and as we turned off towards Pamplona we saw our first Cattle Egrets. Our birding site for the afternoon was the magnificent Los Mallos de Riglos, these rock formations of conglomerate rock reach over 300 metres in height and are a very popular destination for rock climbers, although during weekdays it is much quieter and the birds can be easier to see. We walked up the steep road within the village towards the church noting Black Redstart along the way and reached the church, immediately finding three Alpine Accentors feeding right in front of us allowing excellent views. Overhead, a flock of 100 Red-billed Choughs flew calling and a smaller number of Griffon Vultures were seen. In the scrubby hillside vegetation we watched a Sardinian Warbler as well as Firecrest and several Cirl Buntings. A male Black Wheatear fed on the rock faces despite several climbers being nearby, when suddenly Pete and Steve spotted our main prize – a Wallcreeper feeding right in front of us allowing good views. Just as we thought it couldn't get any better, an adult Lammergeier flew over and was seen circling over a distant hillside. What a brilliant start to our weekend in Spain. As the light was going, we headed to Loporzano, home of the Boletas Birdwatching Centre where we were warmly greeted by Esther & Josele and shown to our rooms.

After a while to unpack and freshen up, we met in the lounge for a pre-dinner drink before settling down for a superb meal washed down with a glass or two of the local wine.



Black Wheatear by Tony Coombs



Black Redstart by Tony Coombs



Little Bustards by Tony Coombs



Calandra Larks in flight

Saturday 20th November

We awoke to find steady rain, which slightly disrupted our plans, but after a good breakfast we headed off west towards Castillo de Loarre, finding the rain had stopped but was still pretty cloudy. Good numbers of Red Kites, Cattle Egrets, and Common Buzzards were seen along the main road. We slowly made our way up the winding road towards the castle flushing several Alpine Accentors from the roadside. On reaching the carpark, the cloud base was pretty low although a walk around this 11th century castle did provide us with our only Great Spotted Woodpecker of the tour. A Brambling flew over calling, along with some Chaffinches and a few Robins flitted around the scrub. The cloud level dropped considerably and visibility was severely reduced, so with brighter skies in the east, we headed that way. Not far from the village of Bolea, Pete spotted a male Merlin sat in a ploughed field, which made us turn the vehicle around so that we could all get good views.

Once back in Loporzano, we headed for the cemetery where the weather was much better although cloudy. Good numbers of Chaffinches could be seen in the weedy fields along with a small number of Crested Larks. As we scanned through the flocks of birds we found several Rock Buntings, Cirl Buntings and a single Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting. Whilst scanning the hillsides, we picked up yet another adult Lammergeier soaring and although a long way, its' distinct profile could be made out.

We left the cemetery and hadn't got very far when an Iberian Grey Shrike was seen on the overhead wires before flying off across fields. Our main venue of the day was a vulture feeding station at Santa Cilia de Panzano and although not far as the crow flies, it did take us a little while to get there. One distraction was the Griffon Vulture that sat on top of a pylon and gave good views. We arrived in the village and had lunch overlooking the valley where a few more Griffon Vultures were seen and Rock Bunting, Cirl Bunting and large numbers of Sparrows were watched in the small fields. Just as we had finished lunch, yet another Lammergeier was seen flying over the village but soon disappeared into low cloud only to come out again moments later and land on a cliff where two others already sat! Over the next hour or so we enjoyed great views of this rarest European raptor and another two more were seen making our tally, seven for the weekend. We walked up through the village towards a viewpoint, noting a female Sparrowhawk on the way. From the viewpoint itself, a very late Whitethroat was seen by Howard and David B in the bushes closeby as well as Dartford Warbler, Cirl Bunting and some Song Thrushes. We continued further up the village and spent some time going through the large finch and bunting flocks although nothing new was spotted. We watched the two adult Lammergeiers on the hillside in good light and at times they even mated! Whilst scanning the hills, an adult Golden Eagle landed in a tree where there was

already a Golden Eagle there and just below the tree there was a male Red Deer! Tony did well in locating the feeding station where a small number of Griffon Vultures fed on remains put out for them and four Ravens kept watch nearby. As the temperature was starting to drop and light slowly fading we headed back to base noting a Red Fox on the way close to the road. Once again, we tucked into another one of Esther's excellent meals and went to bed very happy.

Sunday 21st November

After breakfast, we drove south towards an area known as Los Monegros, an area famous for its chronic droughts and amazing rock formations. Common Buzzards, Marsh Harriers and Red Kites were the most common birds of prey and a brief Hoopoe that flew up from the roadside. As we neared the village of Ontinena, a low cloud or mist swamped the whole area making visibility very poor indeed. Parking at a junction of a track to get an all round view despite the fog provided us with three Red-legged Partridge and some Iberian Grey Shrikes that proved a bit skittish. The weather cleared somewhat so we moved up the track to an area that in the past has been reliable for sandgrouse. Just before we reached a good spot, Steve spotted five lumps in the field that turned out to be Black-bellied Sandgrouse. As we got the scope on them another eight took off. Another scan of the area produced what look like a large flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Quickly, we drove to the area where we thought the birds might be present and lo and behold, up flew a flock of 273 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse as well as 300 Calandra Larks – quite a sight indeed!

From this viewpoint, a 1st year Golden Eagle was seen perched on top of a distant barn and a couple of Red Kites flew by disturbing the mixed flock of larks and sandgrouse. Just to add more excitement, six Little Bustards flew past us and over the ridge giving excellent views as they did so. Hunters working the area with dogs flushed a young male Wild Boar that was well spotted by Pat. With time getting on and us feeling rather peckish we visited an area recommended by Josele. Although the hunters had been in this area, we quickly located another flock of 20 Black-bellied Sandgrouse as well as Merlin, Black Redstart, Red Kite and Thekla Lark. Lunch went down well especially as we were sheltered from the breezy conditions. With things going so well we chanced our luck and drove to Bujaraloz where after finding the right road we soon came across a flock of 10 Great Bustard. We had distant but good scope views but just as we were about to go closer, four different birds flew right past us giving unbelievable views. We got closer to the original flock of Bustards but did not risk flushing them so headed back round on the original road and found another 19 which gave more great views.



Wild Boar by Tony Coombs



Pin-tailed Sandgrouse

Further along the road, we visited a salt lake called Laguna de la Playa which looked pretty devoid of birdlife until Howard picked up a flock of small waders which when landed, turned out to be eight Kentish Plover and a single Dunlin which showed well for us. A third year Golden Eagle flew over the surrounding countryside but never managed to get that close.

We left the area and took the thirty minute drive to Candasnos and its small irrigation lagoon which was teeming with birdlife. Red-crested Pochard, Mallard, Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler, Gadwall and a few Pochard all looked really good in the evening sunshine and were constantly on edge from all of the patrolling Marsh Harriers which numbered around 20. Yet another Merlin was seen nearby and up to 12 Tree Sparrows were elusive in the long grass.

We returned to Boletas via the many bumpy roads that make up the area and once again enjoyed a brilliant meal washed down with the lovely wine.

Monday 22nd November

Our last morning and would you believe, the weather was dry and bright if not a little cold in the wind. After saying our goodbyes to Esther & Josele, we loaded up the van and revisited the cemetery in search of a few species we were missing.

The area itself was very quiet, the only highlight with wings was an Airbus 'Beluga' flying over so we drove away until a small flock of birds were seen on overhead wires and Steve scoped them and they were all Rock Sparrows! All 58 sat on the wires and looked really good in the morning light before being disturbed by some Griffon Vultures flying by. Our last birding venue for the weekend was the world heritage site of Castillo de Montearagon. This castle situated high on rocks is an excellent site and this was to be no exception. A covey of Red-legged Partridge ran up the rocky slopes as we parked but unfortunately the wind was keeping the birds away. Walking around the other side of the hill provided us with several Thekla Larks, a pair of Black Wheatear and a male Blue Rock Thrush. The last highlight was our eighth Lammergeier of the weekend that flew past at eye level.

With a flight to catch, we drove towards Zaragoza noting a male Hen Harrier and Common Crane along the way. After checking in at the airport, the flight took off 30 minutes late but on arrival at Stansted everything was straightforward. We said our goodbyes after an excellent weekend as some outstanding birding.



Black-bellied Sandgrouse



Red Kite by Tony Coombs



The Group



Great Bustard by Tony Coombs



Great Bustard by Tony Coombs



Griffon Vulture



Marsh Harrier by Tony Coombs



Corn Bunting by Tony Coombs



Feeding Station by Tony Coombs



Thekla Lark by Tony Coombs



Thekla Lark by Tony Coombs



Red-crested Pochards



Spotless Starling



Iberian Grey Skrike



Rock Sparrows



Castillo de Montearagon



Egyptian Grasshopper

BIRD LIST

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|----|---|----|--|
| 1 | LITTLE GREBE – c.12 at Candasnos Lagoon | 33 | BLACK-HEADED GULL – 4 at Candasnos Lagoon |
| 2 | CORMORANT – Small numbers seen | 34 | YELLOW-LEGGED GULL – 1 near Riglos and 1 over Loporzano cemetery |
| 3 | CATTLE EGRET – Seen each day | 35 | LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL – 2 adults on Candasnos Lagoon |
| 4 | GREY HERON – Up to 14 roosting at Candasnos Lagoon | 36 | PIN-TAILED SANDGROUSE - 273 south of Ontinena |
| 5 | WHITE STORK – 1 flew south towards Huesca | 37 | BLACK-BELLIED SANDGROUSE – 33 south of Ontinena |
| 6 | WIGEON – 1 female and 1 juvenile male at Candasnos Lagoon | 38 | ROCK DOVE – Common |
| 7 | GADWALL – c.10 at Candasnos Lagoon | 39 | STOCK DOVE – 3 south of Ontinena |
| 8 | TEAL – 15 at Candasnos Lagoon | 40 | WOODPIGEON – Common |
| 9 | MALLARD – Good numbers seen at Candasnos Lagoon | 41 | COLLARED DOVE – Common |
| 10 | SHOVELER – 60 at Candasnos Lagoon | 42 | BARN OWL – 1 briefly in Loporzano |
| 11 | RED-CRESTED POCHARD – c.30 at Candasnos Lagoon | 43 | HOOPOE – 1 near Sarinena |
| 12 | POCHARD – 4 at Candasnos Lagoon | 44 | GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER – 1 at Castillo de Loarre |
| 13 | RED KITE – Good numbers seen each day | 45 | CALANDRA LARK – 100's seen on Los Monegros including flock of 300 |
| 14 | LAMMERGEIER – 1 at Riglos, 1 north of Loporzano, 5 at Santa Cilia and 1 at Castillo de Montearagon | 46 | LESSER SHORT-TOED LARK – 9 south of Ontinena |
| 15 | GRIFFON VULTURE – Good numbers present | 47 | CRESTED LARK – Common |
| 16 | MARSH HARRIER – c.20 at Candasnos was highest count | 48 | THEKLA LARK – Several in Los Monegros and seen well at Castillo de Montearagon |
| 17 | HEN HARRIER – 1 male flew over motorway to Zaragoza | 49 | SKYLARK – Several south of Ontinena |
| 18 | SPARROWHAWK – Seen each day | 50 | MEADOW PIPIT – Small numbers seen |
| 19 | COMMON BUZZARD – Good numbers seen | 51 | WHITE WAGTAIL – Small numbers seen |
| 20 | GOLDEN EAGLE – 2 adults at Santa Cilia, 1 1st year south of Ontinena, 1 west of Candasnos and 1 at Laguna de la Playa | 52 | WREN – 1 at Santa Cilia |
| 21 | MERLIN – 1 male near Bolea and 3 different males at Los Monegros | 53 | DUNNOCK – 1 heard at Riglos |
| 22 | KESTREL - Common | 54 | ALPINE ACCENTOR – 3 at Riglos and 5 at Castillo de Loarre |
| 23 | PEREGRINE – 1 male at Riglos | 55 | ROBIN – Small numbers seen |
| 24 | RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE – 3 south of Ontinena and 15 at Castillo de Montearagon | 56 | BLACK REDSTART – Common |
| 25 | MOORHEN – 1 on river at Ontinena | 57 | STONECHAT – Small numbers seen |
| 26 | COOT – c.150 at Candasnos Lagoon | 58 | BLACK WHEATEAR – 1 male at Riglos and 1 pair at Castillo de Montearagon |
| 27 | COMMON CRANE – 1 flew west over motorway to Zaragoza | 59 | BLUE ROCK THRUSH – 1 male at Castillo de Montearagon |
| 28 | LITTLE BUSTARD – 6 south of Ontinena | 60 | BLACKBIRD – Small numbers seen |
| 29 | GREAT BUSTARD – 33 south of Bujaraloz | 61 | SONG THRUSH – Several at Santa Cilia |
| 30 | KENTISH PLOVER – 8 on Laguna de la Playa | 62 | MISTLE THRUSH – Several seen |
| 31 | LAPWING – c.50 at Los Monegros | 63 | REDWING – A few seen |
| 32 | DUNLIN – 1 on Laguna de la Playa | 64 | DARTFORD WARBLER – A few seen |
| | | 65 | SARDINIAN WARBLER – Several seen well |
| | | 66 | WHITETHROAT – 1 at Santa Cilia |

- 67 BLACKCAP – Several seen
 68 CHIFFCHAFF – Seen south of Ontinena and at Loporzano
 69 FIRECREST – 1 at Riglos
 70 BLUE TIT – Common
 71 GREAT TIT – Common
 72 WALLCREEPER – 1 seen well at Riglos
 73 IBERIAN GREY SHRIKE – Small numbers seen
 74 MAGPIE – Common
 75 RED-BILLED CHOUGH – Very common
 76 JACKDAW – Small numbers seen
 77 CARRION CROW – A few seen
 78 RAVEN – Small numbers seen
 79 STARLING – Common
 80 SPOTLESS STARLING – Common
 81 HOUSE SPARROW – Common
 82 TREE SPARROW – c.12 at Candasnos Lagoon
 83 ROCK SPARROW – 58 near Loporzano Cemetery and 20 at Castillo de Montearagon
 84 CHAFFINCH – Common
 85 BRAMBLING – 1 flew over Castillo de Loarre calling
 86 SERIN – Good numbers at Castillo de Montearagon
 87 GREENFINCH – Common
 88 GOLDFINCH – Common
 89 LINNET – Common
 90 YELLOWHAMMER – 1 female at Loporzano Cemetery
 91 CIRL BUNTING – Small numbers seen
 92 ROCK BUNTING – Small numbers seen
 93 REED BUNTING – 1 in with finch flock at Loporzano Cemetery
 94 CORN BUNTING – Common

MAMMALS

- 1 RED DEER – Good numbers at Santa Cilia
 2 RED FOX – 1 near Loporzano and 3 south of Ontinena
 3 RABBIT – 1 at Santa Cilia
 4 WILD BOAR – 1 young male south of Ontinena
 5 SHREW/VOLE Sp. – Seen running across road briefly

INSECTS

- 1 EGYPTIAN GRASSHOPPER – 1 female at Laguna de la Playa