



Birdwatching Holidays in Spain, Morocco & more...

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Aragón, Spain

28th February -
3rd March 2014



On Saturday 17th August 2013, David Brooks & Bill Kilby were sitting outside the beer tent at the Rutland BirdFair and happened to be talking about their trip to the Spanish Pyrenees earlier in the year - an excellent trip, even though David had missed out on his targets of *Wallcreeper* and *Snow Finch*. Sitting with them were Les McCallum (who had missed that trip on health grounds) and Richard Malin (another of the long-time members of the Richmond RSPB Group) and, before anyone really knew what was happening, they were planning a return trip.



In the event, most of the arrangements went very smoothly. The only real hiccup was entirely down to David when he wrote a cheque on the wrong account and, with the passage of time, it duly bounced all the way back from Spain. Plan B consisted of taking over € 2000 with him in cash, with the others acting as bodyguards - it was, after all, largely their money !

Once again, there would be two regular diary writers involved (David & Bill) plus, on this occasion, three photographers (David, Richard & Les) and two artists (Bill & Les). This surfeit of material would dictate the design of the following trip report.

Back in the previous August it had become obvious that, because of Richard's ski-ing commitments, the only possible departure date would have to be.

Friday 28th February 2014

North Norfolk to Aragón, Spain

Frost, fog & rain in UK. Very windy, very cold with occasional heavy showers in Spain.

David's notes :

After a typically restless pre-flight night, I was up at 04.30 and away by 05.00 hours. Had a good run to Stansted, amassing a wildlife list of one *Brown Hare*, three *Rabbit*, a *Muntjac* and a *Barn Owl*. I met Bill & Les in the carpark and we bussed in to the terminal to rendezvous with Richard; after the unusual experience of encountering a happy bloke on Security, we proceeded through to our habitual breakfast at Wetherspoons. We got away on time and had a good flight, apart from it being a little lumpy as we came in to Zaragoza, where we met up with Alberto Bueno (our guide once again) for a discussion on where to go that afternoon, given the recent lousy weather.

Our hire vehicle was to be a Peugeot 807, which presented an immediate challenge as we tried to work out how to switch off the child-locks on the electric rear doors. As we headed out onto the Gallegos plains, Alberto gave another demonstration of how much fun you could have with a hire car on rocky tracks and across fields !

Not having visited this area before, it obviously struck Les and Richard how 'unfinished' this part of Spain looked, the result of major construction projects which had simply run out of money.

Amongst thirty-three species, highlights included two of Zaragoza's burgeoning feral population of *Monk Parakeet* (spreading rapidly with supposedly 2500 in Madrid), superb views of a second-year *Golden Eagle*, a flock of 140/150 *Pin-tailed Sandgrouse* and seven species of raptor overall.



Birding did, however, present another challenge as it transpired that Richard's much loved (but somewhat ancient) binoculars had developed a fault and would not focus within about 35 metres; this would mean that any interesting bird at a closer distance would entail Richard back-peddalling rapidly backwards to ensure a clear view



After a bitterly cold, and totally blank, call at the local castle, we headed back to Casa Boletas to sort out our rooms (the same as last year, in my case), have a quick unpacking session, repair to the village bar for a few beers & a log session and then return for a delicious dinner and an early night.

Bill's notes :

David drove from Norfolk, Richard travelled from London and Les and Bill drove from Isleworth and met up at Stansted as arranged in plenty of time to complete the usual pre-flight procedures before 'retiring' to Wetherspoons for breakfast, prior to the flight to Zaragoza scheduled for take-off at 09.50. The aircraft took off more or less on time for the c.2 hour flight to Spain where on arrival, having completed the usual airport formalities, we met up with our guide and driver for the four days, Alberto Bueno who was the guide and driver on the previous trip by David and Bill in 2013. On take-off in the UK and on arrival at Zaragoza, it was raining but after we set off for an afternoon's birding before proceeding to the Boletas Birdwatching Centre this evening, the rain stopped and the weather improved.

On leaving the airport, our first destination was the Gallego Plains searching for sandgrouse and, after much searching, we were rewarded with excellent views of *Pin-tailed Sandgrouse*, the numbers of which we estimated to be in the order of 150 birds. During the journey and our wanderings, other species seen included a flock of *Cattle Egret*, three *White Stork*, both *Black* and *Red Kite*, *Marsh Harrier*, *Common Buzzard*, two *Golden Eagle* (both believed to be 2 c/y birds), *Common Kestrel*, a *Merlin*, a *Southern Grey Shrike* and a flock of c.40 *Red-billed Chough*. Passerines seen included a *Brambling* amongst a small flock of *Chaffinch*, *Goldfinch*, 200+ *Linnet*, *Serin*, *Corn Bunting* and the ubiquitous *Spotless Starling* and *House Sparrow*. At least three feral *Monk Parakeet* were also seen.

Towards the end of the afternoon, as we approached the Birdwatching Centre, we made a brief stop at the ruined castle of Montearagon to look for a *Black Wheatear* but failed in our search; nonetheless, we had a most enjoyable and productive afternoon of birdwatching.

On arrival at Boletas, Esther was there to greet us and, having settled into our respective rooms and had a 'wash & brush up', we made our way the short distance down the road to the local co-operative village bar to complete the day's 'tick list' over a glass of ale before dinner back at Boletas. Following an excellent dinner prepared by Esther, washed down with a glass or two of excellent red wine, we all retired to our rooms for a welcome night's sleep.

Saturday 1st March 2014

Aragón

Wind easing - reasonable a.m., foul p.m.

David's notes :

Les started the day in fine style when he trod on the cat on his way in to breakfast !



We started off at the Embalse de Veidillo, which produced plenty of *Griffon Vulture* and two brief views of *Lammergeier* but no *Wallcreeper*; our mood was not improved when we encountered a group of British birders who had just seen one ! Moments later, however, with a cry of 'Fantastico', Alberto found the bird which then behaved remarkably well, staying on the same rock feeding and preening, possibly for as long as five minutes.



Onwards to a gorge at the back of the little village of Chibluco, where we had fantastic views of a *Lammergeier* in flight. Following a picnic lunch in cold drizzle, we arrived at Riglos in proper rain. After a coffee (watching an obvious *Blackcap* passage through the café window), we braved the rain and scrambled up the rough path behind the church. - worth it as we found two *Alpine Accentor*.



Onwards to Loarre Castle, where the sleet drove us towards another coffee. Coming out of this latest café, we found that the cloud had come down and that it was raining steadily. Undeterred, we set off on a mountain goat-like scramble around outside the castle walls, an effort which failed totally in its aim to find *Rock Bunting* or *Blue Rock Thrush* - we decided to head for home !

The journey was enlivened when the car in front, presumably driven by a complete drunk, swerved sideways half into the ditch, destroying two posts and puncturing its front off-side tyre; it carried on nevertheless, almost going into the ditch for the second time, before stopping so that the driver could get out and stagger round to the back, presumably with the intention of changing the tyre. Alberto gave him a very wide berth and thus we retreated to Loporzano, to drape wet clothing over every radiator we could find.

Another log session in the bar, another delicious dinner and a reasonably early night.

Bill's notes :

After a welcomed night's sleep, we all sat down to an enjoyable 'Mediterranean style' breakfast prior to the arrival of Alberto at 08.30 for the first full day of bird watching. First destination was the dams in the vicinity of Vadiello for the first of our 'target species'. We made several stops along the road on the way to the dams searching the rock faces for a *Wallcreeper* but drew a blank; large numbers of *Griffon Vulture* and two *Peregrine* were seen prior to our arrival at the first dam where I had seen *Wallcreeper* on a previous visit but not this time so it was round to the next dam to try there. On arrival at the end of the road, a small group of British birdwatchers were already there and, having parked the car, we spoke to them and, in answer to our question, they confirmed that they had just seen a bird a hundred metres or so back down the road we had just travelled along, so it was 'best leg forward' to the spot indicated at the opposite end of the short road tunnel and, almost immediately, Albert spotted our target - success. !

We spent ten minutes or more admiring this 'gem' and, unusually for this species, the bird remained almost stationary on the rock face and it was only when making its way up the cliff that the wings were 'flicked', displaying the beautiful crimson, white and black plumage of the open wings. The *Wallcreeper* then flew through the tunnel so we followed and had brief views of it searching the tunnel wall before it flew out and we lost sight of it. Before leaving for our next destination, we walked up to a vantage point to look for *Lammergeier* and had brief and distant views of two of these magnificent birds.



Our next stop was at Chibluco. Soon after starting our walk in this area, three *Cirl Bunting* were spotted whilst, overhead, several *Griffon Vulture* were soaring, with some of these impressive birds passing low and quite close to where we stood watching. Alberto's shout "Lammergeier" resulted in four pairs of binoculars searching for the bird but optics were not really necessary for we had 'crippling' views of the 'Bone Breaker' as it flew low and very close to us watchers.

During the journey to our next destination, Riglos, we stopped to have lunch and, by this time, the sunny weather we had enjoyed during the morning had been replaced by cloudy conditions and as we departed the picnic site it started to rain, regrettably. On arrival at Riglos, first priority was a cup of coffee in a local hostelry, during which we had good views through the windows of the establishment of several *Blackcap* in bushes in one of the adjacent gardens. After the welcome hot drink, we decided to 'brave' the damp conditions and go in search of a third of our target species, *Alpine Accentor*; there was always a chance that we might strike luck and find another *Wallcreeper*. Two accentors were spotted close to the bottom of the impressive red-coloured cliffs but the wet conditions somewhat distracted from what would have been good views of the birds had conditions been brighter. On our way back down into the village, we had better views of a female *Black Redstart* which had been seen earlier in our walk. Again, large numbers of *Griffon Vulture* were soaring above the cliffs, for this area has one of the biggest breeding colonies of this species. One final stop of the day was at Loarre Castle to look for *Blue Rock Thrush* and *Rock Bunting* but during our wanderings along the outer walls of the castle we saw nothing of either species.



During our journey back to Boletas, we saw several *Black Kite*, *Red Kite* & *Common Buzzard* and, on arrival at Boletas, Les, Richard & I went to have a look at the pair of *White Stork* which were nesting on the Bell Tower of the village church, during which a flock of up to a dozen *Raven*, seen flying over, were probably immature and unmated birds.

Again, after a 'wash and brush up' and before dinner, we made our way to the local bar for an ale whilst entering the day's sightings in the 'trip tick list'. An excellent dinner was washed down with a glass or two of red wine before retiring to bed at the end of another enjoyable and very successful day of bird watching.

Dry but with chilly wind; sunny a.m.

David's notes :

We were up at 05.45 hours, in the hope that the snow at higher altitudes would not prevent us getting to the high Pyrenees. In the event, although we drove through banks of cloud as we headed north, the roads were clear and we arrived at Astun in good weather. The place had an obvious impact on Les as he told us that he had never been in a snow area before (there was also to be an interesting contrast the next day, when he was standing in a desert !).



The birding looked quite quiet at first but then lots of *Alpine Chough* arrived, we had distant views of an *Alpine Accentor* and a single *Snow Finch* flew over, sparkling in the bright sunshine. We crossed over into France for about 30 seconds but then doubled back and parked up while we walked down the side of a road where we had fabulous close views of another *Alpine Accentor*.

By 10.00 hours, it was time for a coffee and some sticky pastries before we headed up the Hecho valley, aiming for the Garbadito refuge; the snow was to prove too much, however, and after an 'interesting' multi-point turn we retreated. We proceeded a way up the valley, past a big mixed flock of *Red-billed Chough* and *Alpine Chough*, looking for *Black Woodpecker* and *Lammergeier*. We saw neither but, with Alberto reckoning that there were 4000 - 5000 *Griffon Vulture* in the Pyrenees, we reckoned that we had seen most of them !



After our picnic lunch, eaten at a sort of rescue hut by a mountain parking area, we headed back through Hecho. Luckily, when Richard shouted "Lammergeier", there was room for Alberto to pull over and we were treated to the sight of an adult and juvenile *Lammergeier*, a *Common Buzzard*, a *Red Kite* and what was to be our only *Egyptian Vulture* of the trip (a good record given that migrant species such as *Egyptian Vulture* and *Lesser Kestrel* had only just started returning).

We carried on to San Juan de la Pena, which appeared a totally bird-free zone at first. We never did encounter *Black Woodpecker* but eventually did hear a *Greater-spotted Woodpecker* 'drumming' and, after hearing them call for some time, had a glimpse of two *Crested Tit* in flight. We had a long drive back to Loporzano to catch up with notes, start packing etc. etc.



After our last session in the village co-operative bar, we had a very good (and rather noisy) dinner and so to bed.

Bill's notes :

Today dawned sunny but cold. Breakfast was early before Alberto collected us at 07.15 for the drive up into the Pyrenees in search of Alpine species, in particular, *Alpine Chough* and *Snowfinch*. First stop was the ski resort of Astun but, regrettably, by the time we arrived it was already 'heaving' with skiers so our chances of finding *Snowfinch* did not look promising but good numbers of *Alpine Chough* were seen. However, luck was with us when we had good views of a single male *Snowfinch* in flight which did two or three circuits as it flew over our heads allowing us to admire the beautiful black and white plumage of this attractive species, lit to perfection by the sunshine. We decided to motor a short distance out of the resort to a quieter spot in the hope of perhaps finding another example and, although no *Snowfinch* was seen we did have stunning close views of an *Alpine Accentor* to add to one seen distantly on our arrival at the resort.

We decided to slowly start the return journey, shortly stopping for a hot drink, following which we added *Eurasian Jay* to the 'tick list', as we departed for our next destination, the area of Jacetania where we intended to move up into the higher regions of the forest to look for *Black Woodpecker*. Although we started to drive up the narrow road to the high tops, making a brief stop on a bridge over the river for *Dipper*, as we reached the higher levels the road was still covered in snow and ice. Common sense prevailed for, although the weather was still dry, conditions became worse and it was decided to retrace our steps but first we had to turn the vehicle round. With apparently nowhere wide enough to turn round, things were getting a 'little exciting' to put it mildly but at last we found a spot a short distance back down the road where we thought, with care, we could turn the vehicle. With an excellent 'team effort' we managed to achieve our aim and slowly made the descent.

On reaching the main road, it was time to find a place to eat our picnic lunch, stopping en route when a mixed flock of *Red-Billed* and *Alpine Chough*, numbering well into three figures, was spotted followed shortly by another stop when Richard called "Lammergeier". Again, we had stunning close views of a magnificent adult which was joined by an immature bird and an *Egyptian Vulture* which also gave excellent views (the only example of this species we recorded during the four days) whilst overhead were several *Red Kite*, also a *Common Buzzard* performing its 'Roller-Coaster' display flight.



After lunch, we resumed our journey to our last destination for the day, the San Juan de la Pena Monastery, where it was hoped we would be successful in our search for *Black Woodpecker*. On arrival, our efforts to locate a woodpecker with the aid of a recording of its call was unsuccessful. During the remainder of our wanderings, we recorded a pair of 'fly-over' *Crested Tit* and three tiny birds spotted high in the trees were obviously either *Goldcrest* or *Firecrest* but views were so brief, in relatively bad light and with no calls heard from the birds, it was difficult to tell which. A *Nuthatch* was seen briefly and a calling *Great Spotted Woodpecker* was heard. We then continued our journey back to Boletas; throughout the day, our birdwatching produced innumerable sightings of *Griffon Vulture* and *Red Kite* which set one wondering how many of these scavenging birds could find enough food to sustain them !

This evening, our last in Spain, we again 'retired' to the local bar before dinner for an ale whilst filling in the 'trip tick list' followed, back at Boletas, by another excellent dinner washed down with a glass or two of red wine and, to accompany the chocolate pudding, a glass of Muscadet.

Monday 3rd March 2014

Aragón to north Norfolk

Sunny but very cold and very, very windy

David's notes :

Having said our farewells to Esther, we were away from Casa Boletas by 08.00 hours, heading first to the village cemetery in an abortive attempt to find some *Rock Sparrow*. Once again, we would spend our last morning on Alberto's "home patch", the Monegros desert, south of Huesca and east of Zaragoza.



To Les' delight, we started the morning with his No.1 target - a female *Eagle Owl*, tucked away in the rock face where we had seen one in 2013. The only drawback was the necessity of hanging on to the tripods to prevent them blowing over in the gale.

Onwards to another, rather more sheltered, rocky area which promptly produced a pair of *Black Wheatear*, a male *Black Redstart* and *Crag Martin*, *Serin* & *Robin*. Then across the steppes, hunting *Black-bellied Sandgrouse* and *Little Bustard*; this was very productive with at least five species of lark, several *Lesser Kestrel*, a 'ringtail' *Hen Harrier* and, eventually, thirteen *Little Bustard*.



A coffee stop at a bar attached to a service station was welcome as we could get out of the wind and sit in **warm sunshine**. Then an unsuccessful *Great Bustard* hunt (although including the sight of at least 400 *Common Crane* circling in the sky and views of two *Black-bellied Sandgrouse* which were far closer than the distant glimpses we had had earlier in the morning) and a battle through the heavy traffic back to Zaragoza airport.

An uneventful, if slightly lumpy, flight back to UK was followed, in my case, by an unpleasant and slow journey home, with lots of traffic, delays in roadworks, rain and fog. Wildlife records consisted of three *Brown Hare*, lots of *Rabbit* and a *Roe Deer*.

Bill's notes :

The day dawned sunny but very windy and it remained so during the rest of our time in Spain. Alberto arrived at Boletas c. 08.00 and, having loaded our belongings into the vehicle and said our farewells to Esther, we set off on the last day of the trip. First stop was the local cemetery to search for *Rock Sparrow* but we saw only *Corn Bunting*.

Before driving to a location to hopefully see *Eagle Owl*, we called into Alberto's home to borrow a pair of binoculars for Richard (to replace his faulty pair) where we met Alberto's wife briefly before continuing to the spot to look for the owl. On arrival, Alberto soon confirmed the owl was present and 'put us on' to the horizontal fissure in the low cliff where the owl could be seen sleeping. We did not attempt to go too close and were content to view this magnificent owl through the 'scopes, giving Les enough time to prepare a quick sketch of the bird, before departing for other areas of Los Monegros to search for birds.

First stop was to look for *Black Wheatear* which produced a pair of these attractive birds and also a splendid cock *Black Redstart*, more *Serín* and some *Crag Martin* were also seen. The search was then on for sandgrouse and, during the two hours or more we spent in our search, we enjoyed some excellent bird watching starting with a second female *Merlin* for the trip, two lovely *Hoopoe*, four species of lark, seven *Stone Curlew*, *Red-billed Chough* & *Jackdaw* (this last species appeared to be quite scarce !) and the 'target species *Black-bellied Sandgrouse*. These sightings were followed by at least four *Lesser Kestrel*, a ring-tail *Hen Harrier* and then another 'target species', thirteen *Little Bustard* which gave excellent views as they slowly walked away from the vicinity of the car in which we were travelling.

It was then time to start the journey to the airport but calling into an area en route to have a final look for *Great Bustard*. Whilst looking for the bustards, a huge flock of high-flying *Common Crane* was seen, numbering several hundreds of these magnificent birds on their migration north to their breeding grounds, and, to close the 'trip tick list', another *Common Kestrel*, a pair of *Black-bellied Sandgrouse*, more *Cattle Egret* and, last but not least, the first ducks we saw during the four days - a pair of *Mallard* !

On arrival at the airport, we said our farewells to Alberto and thanked him for his efforts in finding the birds. Before facing the tedium of the check-in procedures, we had our lunch which Esther had kindly prepared for us. There was a short delay to our take-off but we made it safely back to Stansted and, after the usual passport checks etc., we said our farewells to each other before making our way back to the car parks. Les & I had a trouble-free run home apart from the heavy traffic and, having dropped Les off at his place, I arrived back at home c.19.30 hours.

So ended a highly successful and enjoyable trip, despite at times the 'less than helpful' weather, but at least we did have long spells of sunshine and the birds certainly 'showed well' for us.

Postscript :

Bill had done significant successful birding in the area previously so it was not surprising that he would not encounter any new species (he was aware in advance that it was the wrong time of year for his hoped-for *Citril Finch*). David successfully got his two target species (*Wallcreeper* and *Snow Finch*) and was heard claiming a ½ tick for feral *Monk Parakeet* !

Of the two newcomers to the area, both Les and Richard had accumulated a highly impressive total of eleven 'life ticks' each during the trip.

Once again, many, many thanks to both Esther and Alberto for all their efforts to make our stay comfortable and very successful.

March 2014



Systematic list of species recorded in NE Spain : 28th Feb - 3rd Mar 2014

Great Cormorant	Nuthatch
Cattle Egret	Wallcreeper
Great Egret	Southern Grey Shrike
Grey Heron	Jay
White Stork	Magpie
Mallard	Alpine Chough
Black Kite	Red-billed Chough
Red Kite	Jackdaw
Lammergeier	Carrion Crow
Egyptian Vulture	Raven
Griffon Vulture	Common Starling
Marsh Harrier	Spotless Starling
Hen Harrier	House Sparrow
Common Buzzard	Snow Finch
Golden Eagle	Chaffinch
Lesser Kestrel	Brambling
Common Kestrel	Serin
Merlin	Goldfinch
Peregrine	Linnet
Red-legged Partridge	Cirl Bunting
Coot	Corn Bunting
Common Crane	
Little Bustard	
Stone Curlew	Feral species
Lapwing	
Black-headed Gull	Monk Parakeet
Yellow-legged Gull	
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	
Wood Pigeon	
Collared Dove	
Eagle Owl	
Little Owl	
Hoopoe	<u>80 species overall</u>
Great-spotted Woodpecker	
Calandra Lark	
Lesser Short-toed Lark	
Created Lark	
Thekla Lark	
Sskylark	
Crag Martin	
White Wagtail	
Dipper	
Alpine Accentor	
Robin	
Black Redstart	
Stonechat	
Black Wheatear	
Blackbird	
Song Thrush	
Mistle Thrush	
Blackcap	
Firecrest	
Long-tailed Tit	
Crested Tit	
Coal Tit	
Blue Tit	
Great Tit	