

Spain Pyrenees & Steppes

Trip Report

3 -10 March 2007

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References

Collins Guide to the *Birds of Britain & Europe with N. Africa & The Middle East*.

This report consists of 8 pages and will conform to the following format:-

1. A brief introduction.
2. A day-by-day account of the sites visited with birding highlights.
3. A consolidated species trip list.
4. Summary.

1. Introduction

The group consisted of six people, three of which booked through Birdseekers and three of which had booked privately with the leader Josele Sais.

Leaders: Josele Sais and David Moreno.

The Group: Mark Easterbrook, Mick Carr and Cliff Ross (Birdseekers).
Jeff, Jean and Jackie (Josele's party) – forgive the omission of Surnames.

2. Daily Itineraries

Day One

A 1530 flight saw us arriving at our accommodation in Quinto at approximately 1930, after seeing numerous White Storks en route from the airport in Zaragoza.

Day Two

An early start and off to the now famous Dupont's Lark site at Belchite – El Planeron. We arrived at 0705 and immediately heard birds singing. It did however take two more hours to locate one on the ground perched in scrub singing for the scope. As anyone will testify who has attempted to see this bird, patience and a little luck is required to get decent views.

The remainder of the day was spent searching the Steppe for Sandgrouse. Five Black-bellied were seen but no Pin-tailed. Southern Grey Shrike was added whilst numerous Larks were scrutinised revealing Thekla, Crested, Lesser-short Toed, Calandra and Skylark. A keen find was a Great Spotted Cuckoo closely followed by several Stone Curlews.

We progressed to Tosos Reservoir and raptor watch point. This location lived up to its billing delivering three Goshawk, Hen Harrier, a pair of Golden Eagle, pair of Bonelli's Eagle, Red Kite and Griffon Vultures.

An hour or so by the river and irrigated fields in Quinto produced Water Pipit, Tree Sparrow, Fan-tailed Warbler, Black Kites, White Storks, Kingfisher and a heard Wryneck.

The routine evening call over became synonymous with the phrase “Is common – tick it” – thanks Josele.

Day Three

A journey to the Monegros Plains to search for Steppe species was very productive and soon seven Great Bustards and a total of fifty one Little Bustards were located. Four Lesser Kestrels and a couple of Common Buzzard added to the raptor tally. Further searching the area revealed Stone Curlews and Red-billed Choughs in good numbers.

After a morning coffee, where we met another group who tipped us off to the presence of a Little Crake further north was a productive encounter. We paused at Candasnos Lake for lunch whilst viewing Red-crested Pochards, numerous Marsh Harriers a male Garganey and the only Sand Martin of the trip.

A stop at Ontinena Bridge produced Grey Wagtail and a dedicated Mick found the female Little Crake whilst Cliff heard Penduline Tit and four were soon located. A Green Sandpiper also flew up river.

A brief stop a Piraces searching for Eagle Owl revealed several Rock Sparrows a Southern Grey Shirke and a Blue Rock Thrush but no Eagle Owl.

We arrived at Loporzano – Boletas Ornithological Centre (Josele’s home) ready for dinner. The surroundings were homely, friendly and Esther (Josele’s wife) consistently produced dinners of a very high standard.

Day Four

The Wallcreeper site at Riglos must surely be one of the easiest places to see this species in Europe and two were quickly found along with at least three Alpine Accentors. The first Egyptian Vultures were seen at this site and the only Peregrine Falcons of the trip. One Black Wheatear was seen well and several Cirl Buntings sang from exposed bushes. The passage of several thousand calling Common Cranes was a spectacle to be remembered.

We arrived at Loarre Castle, added another male Wallcreeper and found Crested Tit, Blue Rock Thrush and Short-toed Treecreeper, whilst a Golden Eagle drifted above the hills.

The final stop of the day was at Sotonera Lake where several hundred Cranes that had not decided to attempt migration remained. A solitary Great White Egret was the only one of the trip as was a Great Crested Grebe.

Day Five

We departed for the Pyrenees and arrived at Portalet on the French border in heavy snow. A flock of fifty or so Skylarks were seen but little else. We headed back to our accommodation in Villanua amidst heavy rain. There was little chance of seeing any birds in the prevailing weather conditions so in true Spanish style we headed for a coffee and siesta.

We departed for the mountains once more at about 1400 and soon arrived in Astun Ski resort. Few birds were around so we commuted between here and Candanchu Ski resort in the hope of locating our quarry. Eventually in extremely lucky circumstances, three Snow Finches landed on the ski lift café where we attained good scope views.

On our return to Villanua several Griffon Vultures were noted at cliffs near the village and three Lammergeiers were also seen (one adult and two sub-adults).

Day Six

We headed for the Pyrenees once more in the hope of seeing Alpine Chough at closer quarters. At Candanchu we achieved our aim where about twenty five birds wheeled and called above us with two perching obligingly on a lamp post.

We worked our way down the mountain valleys stopping at Santa Cruz near to San Juan de Pina. We were unable to go the monastery because of the road conditions so the large flock of Citril Finches were missed. However in the village a Firecrest and White-throated Dipper were seen. In the forest near Villalunga on our journey back to Laporzano, we stopped and could hear Citril Finches eventually good flight views of the birds were had by the group members.

Josele left us in Huesca to travel to Barcelona and a very able and friendly David took over the leadership mantle.

Day Seven

After a brief stop at the scrub on the hill by Laporzano cemetery and adding two Orphean Warbler to our lists, we headed towards Alquezar in the hills. Another adult Lammergeier was added en route and two early Alpine Swifts were noted over the viewpoint in the village.

From the viewpoint, six Alpine Accentors fed and four Mark sighted the first of four migrating Short-toed Eagle.

We departed after lunch for Santa Cilia and the Lammergeier feeding station. Seven or Eight were noted with one obliging adult sitting on a rock for the scope. Several Dartford Warblers were seen, two Golden Eagles an interesting male Siberian Stonechat (*maura*) and several Woodlark were seen at this location.

Day Eight

We left John at Laporzano and travelled towards Zaragoza. We had a 1900 flight so a whole day's birding lay ahead. We hoped to catch up with Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and Rock Bunting which had eluded us so far. On some fallow fields near the village of Villaneuva de Galliego, we found our first target with about sixty Pin-tailed Sandgrouse being seen, several well on the ground. Eleven Little Bustard were also flushed here which was a surprise and an Egyptian Vulture drifted overhead.

After dropping Jean and Jackie at Zaragoza bus station we headed off to Jusibol; a village near some cliffs and an oxbow nature reserve off the River Ebro. Three Black Wheatears, a Spectacled Warbler and a surprise adult Black Stork, migrating up the Ebro was also noted. This was the final bird of the trip, a fitting end but no Rock Bunting!

We returned to the UK via a fairly uneventful flight courtesy of Ryan Air that arrived fifteen minutes early.

3. Consolidated Systematic Species List

Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	At least 20 seen at Candansos Lake
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	1 seen at Sotonera Lake
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	At least 8 at Candansos Lake
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo senensis</i>	Numerous at Tosas with 1s & 2s seen in suitable habitat
Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	1 at Sotonera Lake
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Seen almost anywhere in suitable habitat
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	1 adult at Jusibol Cliffs - Ebro Oxbow
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	Numerous birds seen on nest sites atop electricity pylons – all over the Northern area
Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	26 at Sotonera Lake
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	A pair at Candansos Lake
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	2 at Sotonera Lake
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Candansos Lake & Sotonera Lake
Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	10 at Sotonera Lake
Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>	1 drake at Candansos Lake
Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	Sotonera Lake & Candansos Lake
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	15 at Candansos Lake
Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	Sotonera Lake & Candansos Lake
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	2 at Candansos Lake
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans migrans</i>	Large & small numbers noted on passage throughout the area.
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	Fairly common throughout the lowlands in small numbers
Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>	3 at Villanua, 1 at Villalunga, 1 near Alquezar and 7 or 8 at Santa Cilia feeding area.
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	1s & 2s noted at Riglos, Vadeillo, Loporzano, Alquezar and Zaragoza Steppe.
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	Common and widespread in large numbers
Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	4 migrating birds at Alquezar
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Very common at Candansos lake with 1s & 2s seen in lowland steppe
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1 ringtail from Tosos Res watchpoint & 1 male near Vadeillo
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentillis</i>	3 from Tosos Res watchpoint

Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Widespread but uncommon seen in 1s & 2s throughout
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	A pair near Tosos, 1 at Loarre Castle, 1 at Villanua & 2 at Santa Cilia
Bonnelli's Eagle	<i>Hieraetus fasciatus</i>	A pair from Tosos Res watchpoint
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naummani</i>	4 at Monegros Plains and 1 at Candansos Lake
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Fairly common seen anywhere in 1s & 2s
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1 on Monegros Plain and 1 at Sotonera Lake
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	2 at Riglos
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	1s & 2s seen throughout the lowlands
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	1 heard at Quinto river and 1 heard at Jusibol
Little Crake	<i>Porzana Parva</i>	A female at Ontinena Bridge was a very good record
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	2 seen near Loporzano
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	Seen in all wetland areas
Common Crane	<i>Grus Grus</i>	Several thousand seen from Riglos with smaller numbers seen migrating throughout the trip. C 500 noted at rest at Sotonera Lake
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax Tetrax</i>	51 seen on the Monegros Plains and 11 seen on the cereal fields en route to Zaragoza
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	7 seen on the Monegros Plains
Stone Curlew	<i>Burhinus oediconemus</i>	5 on the Steppe near Belchite, 2 at Monegros Plains and 2 at Ontinena Plains
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	Several at a pool on the irrigated fields near Belchite
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1 on the irrigated area near to Belchite and one a Ontinena Bridge
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	6 on the Monegros Plains and at least 4 at Lake
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	4 en route to Riglos and 2 at Sotonera Lake
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientais</i>	5 on the Belchite Steppe were the only sighting
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>	At least 60 in the fallow fields close to the village of Villaneuva de Galliego
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	1 convincing individual was seen at Vadeillo Dam
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	Fairly common in lowland habitat
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Common
Monk Parakeet	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>	4 in Zaragoza
Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>	1 adult male on Belchite Steppes
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	1 near Belchite
Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>	2 early migrants at Alquezar
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthisa</i>	1 on the river at Quinto
Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1 on Belchite Steppe and 3 on Ontinena Plains
Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	1 heard near the river at Quinto
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1 on the river at Quinto, 1 at Loporzano cemetery hill and one near to Loporzano
Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>	At least 6 heard at the famous site near Belchite and one seen well singing from a tussock.
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	Widespread in suitable habitat in small numbers – numerous on Belchite – El Planeron Steppes
Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>	The most common lark on the Steppes
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	Widespread and numerous
Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>	Less common than Crested but easily identified at Belchite Steppe and elsewhere
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	1 at Loporzano and at least 4 at Santa Cilia feeding site
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	Numerous in various locations at flock of 50 at Portalet was noteworthy

Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	1 at Candansos Lake
Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	Seen in reasonable numbers near cliff faces
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	2 at Lake and 1 at Jusibol River Ebro Ox bow reserve
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	2 at Jusibol River Ebro Ox bow reserve
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Common at low altitudes
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	1 at the irrigated fields behind Quinto
Grey Wagtail	<i>Morticilla cinerea</i>	2 at Ontinena Bridge, 2 at Santa Cruz and 2 at Alquezar
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla (alba) alba</i>	Seen almost anywhere generally near habitation
Black-bellied Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	1 at Santa Cruz
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	2 at Riglos and others heard in various locations
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	1 at Riglos
Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>	At least 3 at Riglos and 6 at Alquezar
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	Widespread in ones and twos
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochrurus</i>	Numerous seen almost anywhere
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	Numerous and seen everywhere
Siberian Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata maura</i>	A male individual at Santa Cilia was most certainly of the ssp <i>maura</i>
Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>	1 at Riglos, 2 at Montiaraton Castle and 3 at Jusibol Cliffs
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	1 at Piraces and 1 at Loarre Castle
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Numerous and common
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	1s and 2s at various locations
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	Pairs seen near Loporzano and Jusibol Cliffs
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	Widespread and numerous in suitable habitat
Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>	A pair on the Ontinena Plain
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	Widespread in scrubby habitat
Orphean Warbler	<i>Sylvia hortensis</i>	2 at Loporzano cemetery & 1 at Santa Cilia
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	The most common warbler seen in most locations
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Widespread and common in small numbers
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	2 at Villanua, 1 near Vadeillo and one at Santa Cruz
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus europaeus</i>	1 at Ontinena Bridge, 2 near Vadeillo and 2 near Loporzano
Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>	1 at Loarre Castle
Blue Tit	<i>Parus ultramarines</i>	Common in small numbers in lowland habitat
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	As above
Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	2 at Riglos and 1 at Loarre Castle
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	1 at Loarre Castle and 1 near Vadeillo
Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	4 at Ontinena Bridge
Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	This distinctive race noted in 1s & 2s at Belchite Steppe, Loporzano and Piraces
Magpie		Common and Widespread
Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrocorax graculus</i>	A flock of 25+ was seen well at Candanchu
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrocorax pyrracorax</i>	Good size flocks in all locations also 1s & 2s seen in flight
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	Circa 40 seen on Monegros Plain
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	Common and widespread
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1s & 2s seen in various locations - common
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	From 1 to 5 seen in Loporzano
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	The most common Starling in the lowlands
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Widespread and numerous
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	9 by the irrigated fields in Quinto
Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	Fairly common around Loporzano and Piraces, 2 at Jusibol cliffs
Snow Finch	<i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>	4 at Candanchu Ski Resort
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla spodiogenys</i>	Common and widespread

Serin	<i>Serinus menachensis</i>	Heard and seen almost anywhere and everywhere
Citril Finch	<i>Serinus (citronella) citrinella</i>	2 singing and seen in flight at Villalunga
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Common and widespread
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Not numerous but widespread
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	Large numbers seen in the Lowlands
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	Common in small numbers on scrubby hillsides
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	1s & 2s in suitable habitat
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>	Common and widespread in lowland habitat

5. Summary

An excellent trip! It was well led and accommodated that delivered all of the expected Alpine and Steppe specialities. I would recommend a trip to the North East of Spain for anyone wishing to see some of the difficult birds of Europe on a budget.