

Spain's Sierra de Guara - Land of the Lammergeier

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Zaragoza and transfer Alquézar
Day 2/4	Sierra de Guara (southern slopes), from Alquézar
Day 5/7	Sierra de Guara (northern slopes)
Day 8	Fly Stansted

Departs

May

Focus

Birds, plants and butterflies

Grading

Grade A/B. Easy to moderate day walks, though some tougher options may be offered.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ESP13) or brochure

Highlights:

- Explore limestone cliffs, canyons & gorges for Lammergeier
- Haven for birds of prey such as Honey Buzzard & Short-toed Eagle
- Explore back streets of Alquezar for Hoopoe & Spotless Starling
- The most thinly populated region of Spain's Pyrenean foothills
- Look for Wild Boar, Polecat & Pine Marten at night



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

This is an 8-day holiday focusing on the birds, plants and butterflies of the little-known Sierra de Guara, the most thinly populated and under-developed region of Spain's Pyrenean foothills – a land of gorges, cliffs and canyons beloved of the Lammergeier.

On a recent autumn visit to this little-known sierra in the foothills of the central Pyrenees, we initially explored by car for a full day, almost circuiting the Guara using the back roads between the villages of Alquézar and Bara. During over twelve hours on these roads we encountered not a single other vehicle – an astonishing achievement in today's age, especially within Europe! However, as any map of Spain will indicate, the Sierra de Guara, protected as a parque natural since 1990, is one of Spain's quieter regions and, although it does become a haven for canyoning and climbing enthusiasts as the summer months approach, we hope to find plenty of peace and quiet, and an abundance of birds and plants, as we explore its valleys, gorges and upland mountainsides during the course of this holiday.



The Sierra de Guara is not a high range – Tozal de Guara, at 2,077 metres, being its highest summit – but, being protected by the high Pyrenees just to the north, its southern slopes, in particular, receive little precipitation and are consequently very dry. At lower altitudes it offers a pretty patchwork of rolling oak woods, almond orchards, olive groves and small, irregular wheat fields, traditionally farmed. Attractive limestone villages and their splendid churches ride the flanks of the sierra; their populations, like virtually all in rural Spain, dwindling today and allowing nature back in. Above them lies a rugged land, clothed in stunted oak forest and maquis scrub and characterised by numerous spectacular gorges, canyons, cliffs and pinnacles fashioned from limestone and conglomerate. This is a land beloved of birds of prey. Griffon Vultures are numerous, whilst other resident species include Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Red Kite and

Peregrine, and these are joined in summer by Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed and Booted Eagle, Honey Buzzard and Hobby.

On this two-centre holiday, we will explore each day on a series of gentle walks in the company of our expert guides, a botanist and an ornithologist, breaking each day with a traditional Naturetrek picnic lunch! It is the southern slopes of the sierra that we will focus on during the first part of this new holiday, and during it we will be based in the magical fortress town of Alquézar, built around a spectacular eighth-century Moorish citadel which sits on a pinnacle above the gorge of the Río Vero. This quaint and ancient town, with its narrow streets, sits like an eagle's eyrie on the shoulders of the sierra and is a perfect centre from which to explore on foot the surrounding valleys, gorges and higher slopes... and from which to watch for passing birds of prey. The fortifications at Alquézar are typical of many forts built in this area, to the south of the Pyrenees, by the Moors or Christians as they wrestled for control over these northern limits of Muslim Spain throughout the Middle Ages. Today, like many of

the deserted villages, they now provide a home for Hoopoes, Black Redstarts, Spotless Starlings and Rock Sparrows.



Marsh Fritillary

The maquis-like vegetation of the southern slopes is dominated by dense, low, evergreen oak scrub, mixed with junipers, pines, Strawberry Trees and Rosemary. It is a habitat favoured by such birds as Blue Rock Thrush, Red-backed and Woodchat Shrikes, Melodious, Subalpine and Bonelli's, Warblers, and Cirl, Ortolan and Rock Buntings. Overhead, Alpine Swift, Crag Martins

and abundant birds of prey are to be seen whilst, lower down, gorges and rivers lined with poplars support breeding Bee-eaters and Golden Orioles, and little fields hold Crested Larks, Thekla Larks and Tawny Pipits.

The northern slopes of the Sierra de Guara are very much damper, sustaining heavy winter snowfall. Consequently the vegetation they support is quite different from that of the arid southern slopes. The extensive oak forest and scrub here is largely deciduous, containing also beech and maple, whilst the higher slopes are awash with rose and bramble cover. To explore this area during the second phase of our holiday, we will base ourselves in the village of Nocito. This remote and isolated village is situated near the end of a very long and dead

end road right at the base of the beautiful Tozal de Guara Mountain. This village only has around a dozen inhabitants being just five who live there all year around! There are just a few local B&B's and two very cosy local-style pubs. From it, we will explore almost entirely on foot, using our vehicle for very short drives, though we may include a night drive to look for the Wild Boar, Polecat and Pine Martin



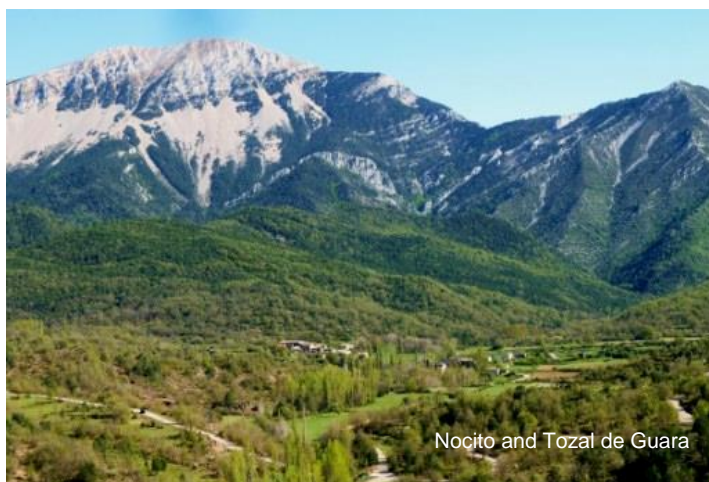
Bara

that may be seen on the road after dark. We will also enjoy a peace, solitude and magnificent night sky that are not easily found elsewhere in Europe.

Note – the following order may be reversed, staying in Nocito first and then Alquezar later.

Day 1 Fly Zaragoza, transfer to Alquézar & Sierra de Guara (Southern Slopes)

We depart London Stansted late afternoon (timings TBC) on a direct Ryanair flight to Zaragoza in the province of Huesca in northern Spain. From there it is a drive of less than a couple of hours to the magical fortress town of Alquézar, situated on the southern slopes of the Sierra de Guara and built around a spectacular eighth-century Moorish citadel which sits on a pinnacle above the gorge of the Río Vero. This quaint and ancient town, with its narrow streets, sits like an eagle's eyrie on the shoulders of the sierra, the impressive cliffs that surround it a haven for wintering Wallcreepers. It is the perfect centre from which to explore the surrounding valleys, gorges and higher slopes... and from which to watch for passing birds of prey. The fortifications at Alquézar are typical of many forts built in this area, to the south of the Pyrenees, by the Moors or Christians as they wrestled for control over these northern limits of Muslim Spain throughout the Middle Ages. Today, like many of the deserted villages, they now provide a home for Hoopoes, Black Redstarts, Spotless Starlings, Rock Sparrows and Blue Rock Thrushes which sing from the heights, parachuting down to rocky perches that tower over our heads.



We will check in at our lovely hotel in Alquezar, our base for 4 nights.

Days 2/4

Alquézar & Sierra de Guara (Southern Slopes)

The Sierra de Guara has been protected as a parque natural since 1990 and is one of the quietest of regions in the Spanish Pyrenees and its outlying foothills. It is not a high range – Tozal de Guara, at 2,077 metres, being its highest summit – and, being protected by the high Pyrenees just to the north, its southern slopes, in particular, receive little precipitation and are consequently very dry.



We will spend our first two full days in the sierra exploring these south-facing slopes. The maquis-like vegetation which covers them is dominated by dense, low, evergreen oak scrub, mixed with junipers, pines, Strawberry Trees and Rosemary. It is a habitat favoured by such resident birds as Blue Rock Thrush, Thekla Lark, Black Wheatear, Sardinian and Dartford Warbler and both Cirl and Rock Bunting, joined in summer by Red-backed and Woodchat Shrike, Black-eared Wheatear, Ortolan Bunting and warblers such as Subalpine, Melodious, Bonelli's and the scarcer Orphean Warbler.



Western Bonelli's Warbler

Overhead, large numbers of Griffon Vultures and Red-billed Choughs, Crag Martins, Alpine Swifts, and a variety of birds of prey may be seen, the choughs twisting, dipping and gliding effortlessly in the air, whilst huge Griffons may occasionally sail by at almost eye level. Lower down are gorges and river valleys, lined with poplars where Hoopoes, Golden Orioles and Bee-eaters may be found, and little fields that hold Tawny Pipits and abundant Crested Larks. In particular though, we will focus on the spectacular cliffs and gorges where Lammergeirs, Egyptian Vultures, Griffon Vultures and even the occasional pair of Wallcreepers breed. We will also visit the Embalse de la Sotonera, a reservoir that can attract several species of heron, egret, duck, waders and occasional terns, whilst such species as Bee-eater, Penduline Tit, Great Reed Warbler, Tree Sparrow, Melodious Warbler and Cetti's Warblers may be seen around the shores of the reservoir.

Day 5

Sierra de Guara (Northern Slopes)

Today we will transfer to the northern slopes of the Sierra de Guara, exploring en route as we drive along some very quiet and isolated roads. As we cross over the spine of the sierra there will be a wide range and abundance of flora and butterflies to enjoy; it should also be a great day for birds of prey, especially if the weather is good. We should see Lammergeiers, Egyptian Vultures and numerous Griffons, also Booted, Short-toed, Golden and perhaps even Bonelli's Eagles, whilst such smaller species as Goshawk, Peregrine and Hobby may also be seen. These northern slopes and valleys are quite different in character from the southern slopes, being very much damper, and sustaining heavy winter snowfall. Consequently the vegetation they support is quite different. The extensive oak forest and scrub here is largely deciduous, containing also beech and maple, whilst the higher slopes are awash with rose and bramble cover.



Orchis militaris, Military Orchid

Our base in this extremely under-populated region will be the Nocito – Rodellar valley area, in one of the many remote villages situated in a beautiful valley at the end of a long, un-metalled track. In such

small and de-populated Spanish villages, it is all too frequent for the few remaining villagers to become divided by feuding. Our hotel has been completely gutted and recently renovated. It is modern and clean (all rooms with private facilities), hospitable and sufficiently comfortable, but it is simply and basically furnished. We are well away from all the trappings of the modern world here!

Days 6/7

Bara road & the Black Gorge

Being based in such a remote and peaceful location, we will try to avoid the use of our vehicles here if we can. It will be our aim on one day to set out on foot with a picnic lunch and to spend the day walking, and gently exploring the riverside meadows, woodlands and the slopes of the valley in search of flowers, birds and butterflies. Perhaps on another day we will take shorter, morning and afternoon walking excursions to allow us to join the villagers for lunch (and an optional siesta!)

Excitingly, the flora and fauna of this area is not well known, and our previous staff visits have taken place during the early spring and autumn. For this reason we do not list species here. However, we can be assured that there will be an abundance of birds, flowers and insect-life at this season, as we know only too well from our frequent visits to other valleys in the Pyrenean foothills at this time of year.



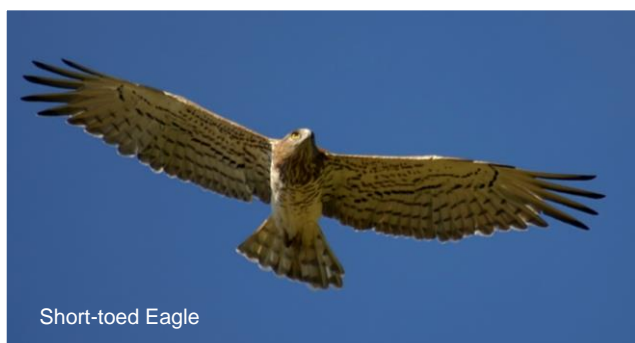
Spectacled Warbler

This is a magical place to explore on foot; however, we might just take the opportunity to drive some of the quieter roads after dark, on the off-chance we might encounter a Wild Boar, Polecat or Pine Martin, all of which are occasionally seen.

Day 8

Belchite - Fly London Stansted

This morning we must reluctantly pack up and leave the tranquility of the Sierra de Guara and our wonderfully positioned hotel. A couple of hours' drive to the south-west, in the Ebro Valley, lies Belchite. Here, 40,000 hectares of steppe habitat – including within it the SEO's 645-hectare El Planerón nature reserve, part-funded by proceeds from the 1992 British Birdwatching Fair (which included £6,000 from Naturetrek) – present the best habitat of its type in northern Spain. This windswept, arid land of dusty, red, scrub-covered plains and eroded plateaux, more reminiscent of Morocco or Afghanistan than



Short-toed Eagle

Western Europe, holds large percentages of the Spanish populations of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Lesser Short-toed Lark and the elusive and enigmatic Dupont's Lark.

This is a tremendous area for birds, but, like all the surviving Spanish steppes, its future is clouded by the threat of agricultural development and at the new reserve we will be

able to see the work that is being done to make the public aware of the need to safeguard this unique habitat.

As well as those special species mentioned above, birds to look out for in the grasslands of Belchite include Crested, Thekla and Calandra Lark, Stone Curlew, and both Little and Great Bustard. The population of larks is the most important in northern Spain and Dupont's in particular is probably more easily seen here than anywhere else outside North Africa. We will hope to see as much as possible by driving slowly along the rough tracks that criss-cross the reserve, and the surrounding farmland and steppe of the area, and by getting out to make regular forays on foot into the scrubby plains to locate the larks, sandgrouse and bustards.

There are a number of excellent birding localities in the vicinity of Belchite and we will spend the whole of today investigating some of these, amongst them further stretches of steppe with more of the same species, and rocky ravines carved by the Aguasvivas river where raptors, Blue Rock Thrush and even Eagle Owl may be encountered.

Other bird species to look for during our day in the plains include Montagu's Harrier, Little Owl, Roller and Southern Grey Shrike, whilst, for the botanists, *Coris monspeliensis*, *Sideritis romana*, *Gynandiris sisyrinchium*, the intriguing miniature brown blubell *Dipcadi serotinum*, the fine leaved *Convolvulus cantabria*, sheets of Corn Poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*), Sainfoin (*Onobrychis vicifolia*), the white Round-headed Thyme (*T. mastichina*) and showy stands of grasses such as Albardine (*Lygeum spartum*) and *Aegilops geniculata* may all be seen. Roadside verges are particularly colourful, decorated by Spanish Broom, Lucerne and Common Mallow, amongst other species. They also attract numerous butterflies and other insects.



Griffons and Lammergeiers

A day at Belchite, and in the surrounding steppes, will give us a change of scenery and species. In the latter part of the afternoon we will head to Zaragoza airport will take 45 minutes, enabling us to catch a mid to late afternoon flight to London Stansted.



Naturetrek group at a vulture feeding station

Grading

Grade A/B. We will explore the hills of the Sierra de Guara on daily outings, enjoying their natural history by means of gentle walks (sometimes spanning the day) which will be easy to moderate in nature, though some tougher optional walks may be offered. Our pace will generally be slow, as we look for birds, plants and

butterflies, but we shall aim to be outdoors as much as possible covering perhaps between 2 and 6 miles each day, occasionally more. This holiday should suit those of all ages who enjoy natural history and mountain environments. We shall be accompanied by two leaders to allow us maximum flexibility, and to provide options to each day's programme.

Weather

We have chosen mid May as being an ideal time for the flowering plants, birds and butterflies of this region. However, although we expect plenty of fine, hot and sunny weather (especially at lower altitudes), in the hills the weather is never predictable and you must be prepared for such variability and bring a good range of clothing!

Focus

Birds, plants and butterflies.

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this two-centre holiday. For the first four nights we will be based in a comfortable family hotel in Alquézar; for our final three nights we will enjoy the novelty of staying in a simple, but newly renovated, gas-powered hotel in the very isolated village of Bara, beneath the northern slopes of the Sierra de Guara. All rooms have private facilities.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus 20% of any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.



Outside terrace dining area of our hotel in Alquézar