

# Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

### Outline itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	Fly Zaragoza and transfer to hotel
<b>Day 2-5</b>	Sierra de Guara
<b>Day 6/7</b>	Gallocanta and Belchite from Gallocanta
<b>Day 8</b>	Fly Stansted

### Departs

February and October

### Focus

Birds

### Grading

Grade A. Optional short walks will be taken during the course of the holiday, but much of our time will be spent enjoying the avian spectacles

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ESP17) or brochure

### Highlights:

- Charming hotel close to the historic Alquézar
- Griffon Vultures, Lammergeiers & Wallcreepers in the Sierra de Guara
- Large concentrations of wintering Common Cranes at Lake Gallocanta
- First class steppe birding & possibility of Dupont's Lark at Gallocanta
- Magnificent winter vistas & light for photography



Wallcreeper



Alquezar



Cranes leaving Laguna de Gallocanta



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**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.**

**On occasions we may reverse the itinerary, visiting Gallocanta first, followed by Alquézar.**

## Introduction

This holiday offers an 8-day winter break, looking first for Wallcreepers, Lammergeiers and other birds of prey in the pre-Pyrenean Sierra de Guara, (Europe's Wallcreeper capital), then at the spectacle of Cranes and waterfowl at the Laguna de Gallocanta and for steppe species on the plains nearby.

First, we focus on the Sierra de Guara which, as any map of Spain will indicate, is one of the quietest of regions in the Spanish Pyrenees and its outlying foothills. On its rolling lower slopes, a pretty patchwork of oak woods, almond orchards, olive groves and small, irregular wheat fields, traditionally farmed, is to be found. 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 noted for its numerous gorges and canyons, and spectacular cliffs, columns and pinnacles fashioned from limestone and conglomerate. In high summer the region attracts French 'canyoners'; during the colder months this magnificent landscape becomes the winter capital of Spain's Wallcreepers! It is also a land favoured by Lammergeiers, large numbers of Griffon Vultures, Golden Eagles, and the occasional Bonelli's Eagle, Hen Harrier or Peregrine.



Just a few hours away, to the south of Zaragoza, lies a very different 'avian hotspot'. Laguna de Gallocanta is a giant salt-pan, the largest natural lagoon in the Iberian peninsula. It lies in a vast, shallow depression surrounded by distant hills and, although its water levels are dependant on regular seasonal rainfall, at the time of our visits (particularly in February) it is to be hoped that winter rains will have replenished them. Gallocanta attracts the greatest concentration of Common Cranes in western Europe. The

largest numbers, 20,000-50,000, come through on passage, but increasing numbers are staying to

winter here. Our late winter/early spring visit is timed to coincide with the more concentrated spring migration when, during late February, the largest concentrations are generally to be found, prior to the Cranes' northbound migration over the Pyrenees to their breeding grounds in northern Europe. Water levels permitting, Gallocanta has also sometimes been host to vast numbers of wintering duck. In the past up to 35,000 Red-crested Pochard (a staggering 80% of the European population) have been found here at one time, as well as tens of thousands of Gadwall, Pochard and Coot. The area also supports a variety of wintering birds of prey; amongst them Hen and Marsh Harriers, Red Kites, Peregrines and Merlins. October/November is the best time for these.



Lammergeier

The high páramo, or steppe, surrounding the lake is also attractive to birds. Here, Stone Curlews, small numbers of Great Bustards, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, and such lark species as Calandra, Lesser Short-toed and Thekla Lark may all be found. However, for the best steppe habitat we will visit Belchite, an hour or two to the east. Here, 40,000 hectares of steppe 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 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 (**due to our arrival time near Belchite, Dupont's is now most likely near Gallocanta**).

This two-centre holiday is designed to offer the best of these two magnificent regions. First, in the Sierra de Guara, we will either be based at the beautiful Hosteria du Guara, only a short drive away from Alquezar, built around a spectacular eighth-century Moorish citadel which sits on a pinnacle above the gorge of the Río Vero.

By contrast, at the Laguna de Gallocanta, we stay in a small family-owned hotel, close to the lake, that offers warm hospitality and good food. The movements of Cranes at dawn and dusk are spectacular and will be a highlight of the tour.



Alquezar

## Day 1

## Fly Zaragoza, transfer to Sierra de Guara

We depart London Stansted 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 Hosteria de Guara, situated on the southern slopes of the Sierra de Guara and our base for the next four nights. Closeby to Alquezar, a town which is both quaint and ancient, 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. Being within close proximity of the town, we have plenty of opportunity across our four days here to locate a Wallcreeper, plus explore the network of cobbled streets.



Hosteria du Guara

## Days 2/4

## Sierra de Guara

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 four days exploring these slopes along quiet back roads and footpaths. 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 and both Cirl and Rock Buntings. Overhead, large numbers of Griffon Vultures and Red-billed Choughs, Crag Martins, perhaps an early Alpine Swift, and a variety of other birds of prey may be seen, including Golden and Bonelli's Eagles, Goshawks, Peregrines and Merlins. Lower down are gorges and river valleys lined with poplars, and little fields that hold abundant Crested Larks. In particular, though, we will focus on the spectacular cliffs and gorges where Lammergeiers and Wallcreepers, our prime targets, are most likely to be found.



To increase our time in this avian-rich land, from 2023 will see us have four nights in total here, ever increasing our chances of locating the spectacular Wallcreeper, amongst others.

## Day 5

## Gallocanta

Today we leave the rolling hills and canyons of the Sierra de Guara and head south-westwards for two or three hours into, and across, the Ebro Valley, to the high páramo (or steppe) that surrounds Lake Gallocanta.

En route will we drive through arable land, looking out for Red Kites, Marsh Harriers and Hen Harriers. Onward through Sarinena via Berbegal we'll explore an area of rice paddies, where we might stop to scan the flooded fields and bunds for Water Pipits, Skylarks, Crested Larks, Corn Buntings, Lapwings, Green Sandpipers, Black Headed Gulls, Cattle Egrets and Snipe. A short distance further on is Laguna de Sarinena, a 600ha lagoon managed as a wildfowl refuge since 1995, and an important breeding site for several species.



Continuing our journey south through Los Monegros the extensive arable farmland areas may yield more Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzards and Red Kites. Crossing the Ebro river we travel west towards Zaragoza then southwest to Quinto and on towards the steppe lands of 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 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, the 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. 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.



In the latter part of the afternoon we will head on to Gallocanta via Daroca. This is a charming and well preserved walled town that dates back to the eighth-century. We then continue on to the Laguna de Gallocanta, the largest natural lagoon in the Iberian peninsula, famed for the large numbers of Common Cranes which rest and feed in the area on passage. As many as 50,000 birds have been counted at peak times and several thousand can generally be seen throughout the winter period. South of the lake is a region of high páramo where Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and Dupont's Lark can be found (although all are very difficult to find), whilst in the fields around the lake we may see such lark species as Calandra, Lesser Short-toed and Thekla Lark.

Prior to settling in to our hotel for the night, we will head down to the lakeside to conclude our day with an evening at a viewpoint from which chevrons of hundreds, if not thousands, of Common Cranes may be seen gliding in to roost beside the lake, their plumage tinged orange by the setting sun (assuming the weather is clear!).

## Day 6/7

## Gallocanta



We will spend the whole two days at Lake Gallocanta, beginning with an optional pre-breakfast, pre-dawn visit to the roosting Cranes, to ensure that we are in place for their noisy awakening and to watch the magnificent spectacle of their dispersal to daytime feeding grounds as the sun rises and extends its rays though the chilly morning air and across the lake.

After breakfast back at our hotel, there will also be ample opportunity to look out for and enjoy the wintering raptors of the area,

amongst them Hen and Marsh Harriers, Red Kites, Peregrines and Merlins. Calandra Larks and Corn Buntings are two of commonest birds of the plains but we will also have a chance of finding Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Rock Sparrows, and perhaps Stone Curlew.



Our hotel near to Lake Gallocanta



Our hotel near to Lake Gallocanta

## Day 8

## Gallocanta, Fly London

This morning will provide our final opportunity to enjoy the dispersion of the Cranes at sunrise, and some final birding around the lake, before we must reluctantly pack up and leave Gallocanta and our wonderfully positioned hotel. The drive back to Zaragoza will take just an hour. Dependent on our return flight time, it may be an early start.

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## Tour Grading

Grade A. Much of our time will be spent watching and enjoying the avian spectacles either from watchpoints or during short, easy walks. However please note the itinerary includes two walks which cover some uneven terrain and steep descent and are graded B-C. These are optional activities. One walk is to a viewpoint by the Tozal de Mallata caves - about 1.5 km, mostly flat through woodland but a bit hairy for the last few hundred metres - most participants do this without a problem. The second walk is in to the Vero Gorge from Alquezar where there is a steep descent. Alquezar is lovely to wander around for those that can't undertake it.

## Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this two-centre holiday. For the first four nights we will either be based in a comfortable family hotel near Alquézar, and for the last three nights we will stay at a small hotel owned by our local guide Javier Mañas at Gallocanta. All rooms have private



facilities. Occasionally the itinerary is reversed and we go to Gallocanta first and then Alquezar, but it will always be four night in Sierra de Guara.

## 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](http://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 any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.