

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Madrid and transfer to hotel
Day 2/3	Gallocanta and Belchite from Gallocanta
Day 4/7	Sierra de Guara
Day 8	Fly from Barcelona to London

Departs

February and October / November

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:

- 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



Lammergeier



Cranes over Lake 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 Sierra de Guara first, followed by Gallocanta (fly into Barcelona and out of Madrid).

Introduction

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

To the south of Zaragoza lies Laguna de Gallocanta, a giant salt-pan and 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.

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 most likely near Gallocanta).

Then we travel to a very different 'avian hotspot', as 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.



This two-centre holiday is designed to offer the best of these two magnificent regions. First, at the Laguna de Gallocanta, we stay in a small, simple 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. By contrast, in the Sierra de Guara, we will either be based at the beautiful Hosteria du Guara on the outskirts of the village of Bierge, or in the Hotel Boutique Maribel in the centre of Alquezar, built around a spectacular eighth-century Moorish citadel which sits on a pinnacle above the gorge of the Río Vero.



Day 1

Fly Madrid, transfer to Gallocanta

We fly from London to Madrid on a morning flight, and from there it is a 3 hour drive to the small town of Gallocanta. Depending on our arrival time at the hotel, we will head down to the lakeside to 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!).

Days 2/3

Gallocanta



Cranes over Lake 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. This is 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.

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 and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Rock Sparrows, and perhaps Stone Curlew and even 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 Lesser Short-toed and Thekla Lark.



Our hotel near to Lake Gallocanta



Our hotel near to Lake Gallocanta

Day 4

From Gallocanta to Sierra de Guara

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

North of the town of Belchite there is 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.



El Planerón

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.

Continuing our journey north through Los Monegros, the extensive arable farmland areas may yield Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzards and Red Kites. 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. Onward through Sariñena and 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.



Sierra de Guara

Finally we arrive on the southern slopes of the Sierra de Guara and our base for the next four nights. We will either be close to or in 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.

Day 5/7

Sierra de Guarra

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.

Day 8

Fly London

It is a less than 3 hour drive to Barcelona, which we will break up with a birding stop along the way, and arrive at the airport for an afternoon flight back to London.

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 three nights we will be based in a small simple hotel in the village of Gallocanta, on the shores of the lake. It is the only accommodation in the village and is rather simple in its furnishings and décor, but the service and welcome from its owners is always appreciated. Whilst most of the rooms are en-suite, there are a couple which have separate bathrooms, although these are for private use (not shared).

For the other 4 nights of the holiday, we either stay in either a large converted mansion on the outskirts of the village of Bierge (February), or in a small hotel in the centre of the village of Alquezar (October), both of which offer good food and warm hospitality. All rooms have private facilities.

The order of the itinerary and hotels might be reversed depending on the departure, but the number of nights should remain the same.

Extensions and regional flights

We fly into Madrid at the start of the tour, and depart from Barcelona at the end, meaning that it would be very easy to extend the trip with some nights in either one of or both of these magnificent cities.

Both are also well served from regional airports in the UK, so please do ask at the time of booking if you would be interested in regional flights and / or extending your holiday.

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 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.