

Picos & Plains - The Best of Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 14 August 2006

Report compiled by Alan Miller and Peter Dunn



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Day 1

Saturday 5th August

Portsmouth Ferry Terminal and on-board the 'Pride of Bilbao'

A fine, clear, still and warm evening, the high temperature making the atmosphere feel sticky. Calm waters in the English Channel.

By 7pm all the party (except Marion, Susan and Philippe who joined the tour at Bilbao) had met up in the Ferry Terminal at Portsmouth. After introductions and booking-in, we then had to wait to embark. To try and beat the crush of previous years, P&O had introduced a new system to call forward foot passengers by cabin deck and cabin number but it still appeared chaotic and it was 9pm before the party cleared security and got onto the ferry 'Pride of Bilbao'.

The ferry was leaving port as Peter and Alan took the party on a tour of the ship to point out important features such as the restaurants and the observation area on Deck 11 behind the Bridge near the top of the boat where we would be spending many hours. Following the tour the group members were left to settle in to their new surroundings.

Day 2

Sunday 6th August

On-board the 'Pride of Bilbao' crossing the Bay of Biscay

A fine and dry day with light wind. The sky was mostly overcast with heavy cloud cover.

At 7am Peter and Alan positioned themselves on Deck 11 where they were to spend most of the day. Group members were free to come and go as they pleased and all spent some time on top. Although it was fine, the movement of the ship in open sea meant that there was always a fairly strong wind on the Observation Deck due to little shelter. At this time the Ferry was nearing the mouth of the Channel and during the day rounded the Brest Peninsular and headed into the Bay of Biscay.

The movement of birds was slow, most sightings being of Gannet and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. There were also small numbers of Kittiwakes and Fulmar, and two individual sightings of both Manx Shearwater and Great Skua.

As we moved further into the Bay we saw Harbour Porpoise and Atlantic White-sided and Bottle-nosed Dolphins. By the afternoon as we neared the deeper waters we started seeing Pilot Whales and Fin Whales, some close to the boat. There was also a large pod of Common Dolphins and one of Striped Dolphins.

As dusk was approaching people drifted away for dinner and the group convened at 9pm in the Posh Bar to talk over the day's events and do the log call. This got into a routine with Alan recording the days sightings and then Peter explaining the plans for the following day.

Day 3

Monday 7th August

Santurtzi Ferry Terminal, Santona Marsh, Hermida Gorge, Brez and Espinama.

A fine and dry day with light high cloud. The 1pm temperature was 30 deg C.

The ferry docked at Santurtzi Ferry Terminal near Bilbao at 7am 'ships time', which was 8am local time. In the Terminal building we met the last three members of our group and had a short wait till the Europcar representative arrived and we collected our hire vehicles. By 9am we were on the road heading for Santona Marsh.

We drove straight to the public hide and started birding. Unfortunately the tide was well out so most of the birds were distant but sightings included Great Cormorant, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Cattle Egret, a single Greylag Goose, Ringed Plover and Common Sandpiper. It was also good to see Curlew and Whimbrel together for comparison purposes.

After an hour in the hide we set off for the Parque Nacional de Picos de Europa. With a stop to buy makings for our picnic we drove into the Park through the beautiful Hermida Gorge and stopped at the viewpoint near the chapel Santa Maria at Lebena for lunch.

The picnic was a distraction as we watched the sky and saw Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed Eagle, Common Buzzard, Peregrine Falcon Black Kite and Raven. Birds around the car park included Serin, Cirl Bunting, Red-backed Shrike and Jay.

The verges around the parking area were alive with butterflies and when it was too much to look up, viewing down revealed over a dozen species of butterflies including Swallowtail; Scarce Swallowtail; Cleopatra, High Brown, Glanville, Spotted, Provencal and False Heath Fritillaries; and Long-tailed, Common, Spanish Chalkhill and Lang's Short-tailed Blues.

After a picnic lunch we continued on towards Espinama, making a stop at Brez with a short walk around the village overlooking pastures. Here we heard Great Spotted Woodpecker and had good views of Chough.

We arrived at Hostal Nevandi early evening and had the chance to settle in before our evening meal at 8pm followed by the log call.

Day 4

Tuesday 8th August

Fuente De

During the early morning there was a cold, swirling mist on the high ground but by late morning it had cleared and the afternoon was sunny and clear. The temperature at 5.30pm was 22 deg C.

At 9am we drove the three kilometres or so to the car park at the end of the road where we found the Cable Car station to take us up to the high plateau of Fuente De at 1926 metres. Waiting in the queue we had excellent views of Nuthatch and it wasn't long before it was our turn and we were whisked the kilometre to the top and the observation area. Unfortunately there was a swirling mist and it was chilly but we walked out along the trail towards an area where Wallcreeper have bred previously.

We all found suitable rocks to sit upon opposite the nest site and scanned and waited. Thankfully the mist cleared and it became warm in the sun. After a while Eunice picked up the tell-tale red and grey colours and soon the whole group was ecstatic watching a Wallcreeper from a distance of about 25 yards as it searched for food on the rocks and at one point stopped to preen on the rock-face. It was worth the effort of carrying our picnic up the mountain and it was eaten with relish. At one point we were distracted by an Alpine Accentor, and as we finished Alpine Choughs came close to for our leftovers.

We made a slow return to the Cable Car seeing Snowfinch, Black Redstart, Northern Wheatear, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and Water Pipit. Also near the Cable Car station we were treated to excellent close views of more Alpine Accentors and Snowfinch. It had taken so long to get back with all the good views that we had to change our plans and decided to spend another hour on the tops enjoying more good views. During that time we added Hobby and Honey Buzzard to our list.

It was another queue to descend in the Cable Car and by 6pm we were back at our hotel where, at 8pm we enjoyed another typical Spanish meal followed by the log call.

Day 5

Wednesday 9th August

Drive from Espinama to Zamora via Puerto de San Glorio, Riano and Villafafila

Fine, sunny and clear. It got hotter the nearer we got to Zamora and at 7pm the temperature was 30 deg C.

After breakfast we loaded the vehicles and at 9am said 'goodbye' to Santi at Hostal Nevandi and headed off towards the Plains, first stopping at Potes for fuel, and food for lunch.

From Potes we drove further through the Parque and stopped at Puerto de San Glorio, a viewpoint at the top of a pass. Here we had more good views of Griffon Vulture and Short-toed Eagle, and added Booted Eagle to the list which showed very well.

We now headed south-west and were slightly thwarted when our lunch-stop lay-by next to the river near Riano had been blocked off. We found another lay-by close-by and as we got out from the vehicles were treated to views of Short-toed Treecreeper that showed well. Also Great Banded Grayling butterflies were close by.

After lunch we continued to Villafila. Although most of the wet areas had dried up we had good views of Great Bustard; Montague's, Hen and Marsh Harriers; Common and Lesser Kestrels; Green Woodpecker and Rock Sparrows. Kevin also found a Pied Flycatcher which showed well.

It was nearing 7pm when we reached our hotel, Hosteria de Zamora, located near the river. The temperature was still 30 deg C. The evening meal was at 9pm so after the log call most of the group retired to bed, ready for an early start the next day.

Day 6

Thursday 10th August

Duero Gorge Area (Fariza, Miranda do Douro, Embalse de Almendra)

Fine, sunny and clear with a light breeze. The temperature at 6am was 14 deg C. and at 7pm 32 deg C.

The group departed at 6am for the drive to Fariza and a drinking pool near the village of Fornillos. We arrived as dawn was breaking to be greeted by a flock of 100+ European Bee-eaters overhead. As we ate our breakfast birds came to the pool to drink and we had good views of Ortolan, Corn and Rock Buntings; Woodlark; Redstart; and Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrikes.

Next we did a circular walk about a mile long. Additions to our list included Thekla Lark, Bonelli's Warbler, Dartford Warbler, Subalpine Warbler, Common Whitethroat and Lesser Whitethroat.

We got back to the vehicles about 11am and drove the short distance into Portugal to Miranda do Douro where there was an opportunity for coffee whilst lunch provisions were purchased. From Miranda we drove a little way north to the picnic area at Aldeia Nova, which overlooked the Gorge. More Griffon Vultures patrolled the gorge close by as we ate our lunch.

In Miranda we had met two Portuguese birders who recommended a different route back into Spain where we might see birds that would have been new for the trip. We took the new route via Barrocal do Douro to the Rio Tormes Gorge where we had excellent views of Bonelli's Eagle.

Our last stop of the day was at the enormous Embalse de Almendra reservoir. Two new sightings were of Jackdaws and Great Crested Grebes.

It was 7pm when we arrived back at our hotel. Dinner was again at 9pm followed by the log call.

Day 7

Friday 11th August

Castronuno Area (am Plains, pm River Duero)

Fine, sunny, clear and still. The temperature at 6am was 15 deg C. and at 6pm 33 deg C.

Again the group was mobile by 6am heading to the plains near Castronuno. Enroute a Nightjar flew up from the road but it was too dark to tell if it was European or Red-necked. We ate breakfast at the vehicles as dawn broke and scanning around revealed four grounded Griffon Vultures and a distant Great Bustard.

After eating we walked along a farm lane and as the view opened out we had scope views of Little Bustard and flight views of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and Calandra Lark. After some time we went back to the vehicles and drove around the farm tracks in search of more birds. Three Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were seen to land in a ploughed area and eventually one was found. Everyone enjoyed scope views before we approached nearer in the vehicles and managed to get excellent views from about 40 yards distance.

Enroute Castronuno a stop to check a wooded area revealed a large flock of Azure-winged Magpies. Next stop for the group was the café in Castronuno whilst Peter and Alan went for provisions. Then to the River Duero for a picnic passing lots of Bee-eaters on the laneside wires.

After lunch one vehicle was pre-positioned before the group went for a walk with Alan. Peter moved his vehicle to the end then walked back to the group. Two juvenile Black-crowned Night Herons were seen before the group reached the open river. Scanning the reeds on the opposite side revealed Water Rail and Little Bittern. A Purple Heron also flew over.

The group reached the vehicles by 4pm then had the hour-long drive back to the hotel. Dinner was again at 9pm.

Day 8

Saturday 12th August

Travel from Zamora to Bilbao via Villafafila

The morning was fine, clear, dry and sunny but colder (11 deg C. at 7.30am) till the sun rose. At Bilbao there was heavy cloud and at 5pm the temperature was 22 deg C.

Today the group had a slightly later start, leaving just after 6.30am, to be at Villafafila for first daylight. As dawn was breaking we passed a Little Owl on a roadside building and another on a barn at the edge of Villafafila.

Breakfast was eaten at the vehicles then the group went up to the roof of the observation building to scan around. In one 360-degree sweep 52 Great Bustards were counted. An unexpected treat was a Gull-billed Tern that spent several minutes over the small pool in front of our position before flying off.

Back in the vehicles checking the tracks we added Short-toed Lark and Tawny Pipit to the list. Montague's Harriers were in abundance including one of the rare localised melanistic form. To finish our visit to the Plains we were treated to close perched and flight views of a juvenile Goshawk and a Short-toed Eagle.

We left the Plains at 11am for the drive back to Bilbao. We stopped at Villalon de Campos for coffee and shopping then continued on our journey. Lunch was at a motorway picnic area and we arrived at Hotel Nervion in the centre of Bilbao at 4.30pm.

Once rooms had been organised everyone had a free evening to explore and most went to see the Guggenheim Museum, which was only 400 yards from the hotel.

Day 9

Sunday 13th August

Bilbao, Santurtzi Ferry Terminal and on-board the 'Pride of Bilbao' into the Bay of Biscay

Cloudy, still and dry in Bilbao. As the ferry left port there was a squall then fine for the rest of the day with a calm sea but strong NNW wind

After breakfast the vehicles were packed and the group left for Santurtzi Ferry Terminal, arriving by 10am. Farewells were said to Philippe and Susan who collected their car and were driving back to France. Booking-in, security and boarding was a little less chaotic than at Portsmouth and by sailing time at 1.15pm local time (12.15pm ship's time) most of the group were settled back on the Observation Deck. We left port with high expectations but the birds were not numerous and the best sightings were of three Sooty and two Manx Shearwaters and a flock of 150 Sanderling.

After an hour we came to the deeper waters and through the rest of the afternoon had good views of Fin Whales, Pilot Whales and a single Cuvier's Beaked Whale.

At 9pm the group met in the Green Room for the final log call and discussions on the trip. There was general agreement that one of the best locations had been the drinking pool near Fariza on the Plains; the best bird was the Wallcreeper; and for Catherine the best cetacean was the Fin Whales.

Day 10

Monday 14th August

On-board the 'Pride of Bilbao' into the English Channel and Portsmouth Ferry Terminal

Clear but overcast with a fresh NW wind. The sea was calm.

Members of the group were coming and going from 7am on the Observation Deck but unfortunately the variety of birds and cetaceans were 'thin on the ground'. Gannets were numerous and during the morning two Manx Shearwaters and a Great Skua were seen. Mid-afternoon a Willow Warbler was found moving around the Observation Deck, which attracted an audience. At one point it landed on a rail a few feet in front of the group.

During the late afternoon most interest was watching the English coastline and spotting familiar places from a different viewpoint at sea. The 'Pride of Bilbao' berthed at 5pm to mark the end of another Naturetrek adventure.

Species lists

Birds

Common name	August 2006								
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Little Grebe						1			
Great Crested Grebe					8	4			
Fulmar	3								C
Sooty Shearwater								3	
Manx Shearwater	2							2	2
Gannet	C							1	C
Cormorant		3				10			
Little Egret		6							
Grey Heron		15		1	2	6			
Purple Heron						2			
Cattle Egret		6							
Black crowned Night heron						2			
Little Bittern						3			
White Stork		1		150	C	C	C		
Greylag Goose		1							
Mallard		C		C	30	C			
Honey Buzzard			1						
Red Kite				1	2	1	2		
Black Kite		4		2	10	6	18		
Egyptian Vulture		4	1		8		1		
Griffon Vulture		20	50	C	50	6	6		
Short toed Eagle		3		3	1		1		
Marsh Harrier				1		1	1		
Hen Harrier				1					
Montagu's Harrier				8	2	3	10		
Sparrowhawk				2					
Goshawk							1		
Common Buzzard		C	1	6	6	4	C		
Bonelli's Eagle					2				
Booted Eagle				2	1	4			
Lesser Kestrel				7			5		
Kestrel			3	6	2	1	12		
Hobby			1						
Peregrine Falcon		1			1		1		
Red legged Partridge				1	8		9		
Water Rail						1			
Moorhen						3			
Coot		3		1		2			

Common name	August 2006								
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Little Bustard						3			
Great Bustard				14		1	55		
Ringed Plover		10				3			
Whimbrel	1	C							
Curlew		C							
Green Sandpiper				1	1		1		
Common Sandpiper		2		1	1		1		
Sanderling								150	
Great Skua	2								1
Great Black backed Gull									3
Herring Gull									1
Atlantic Yellow legged Gull		C						C	
Lesser Black backed Gull	C	2						6	1
Black headed Gull		10						1	
Mediterranean Gull		1							
Kittiwake	4								
Gull billed Tern							1		
Guillemot									1
Pin tailed Sandgrouse						8			
Black bellied Sandgrouse						2			
Rock Dove					3				
Feral Pigeon		C	1	C	C	C	C	C	3
Wood Pigeon		2		3	4	6	6	1	
Turtle Dove					2	1	1		
Collared Dove		4		2	C	4	6	2	
Little Owl							2		
European Nightjar						1			
Common Swift		C		C	C	C	C		
Bee eater				10	100	100	6		
Hoopoe					3	2			
Wryneck						1			
Great Spotted Woodpecker		1	1	1					
Green Woodpecker				1					
Calandra Lark						7			
Short toed Lark							1		
Crested Lark				C	C	6	20		
Thekla Lark					1				
Wood Lark					10				
Sand Martin				12		6			
Eurasian Crag martin		C	C	C	C				

Common name	August 2006								
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Swallow		C	C	C	C	C	C		
Red rumped Swallow					5				
House Martin		C	C	C	C	C	C		
Tawny Pipit				1			2		
Tree Pipit					1				
Meadow Pipit		1							
Water Pipit			3						
White Wagtail		C	10	6	1	5	1		
Spanish Yellow wagtail						3	5		
Grey Wagtail		1	2	3					
Dipper		1							
Alpine Accentor			8						
Robin			1	1					
Nightingale		1				1			
Black Redstart			50	3	1	2	1		
Redstart		1			1				
Stonechat		1			5				
Northern Wheatear			3	8	2	1	20		
Rufous tailed Rock thrush			1						
Blue Rock thrush			1						
Blackbird		1	1	1	2	1			
Fan tailed Warbler		1		2			1		
Sedge Warbler						1			
Reed warbler				1		2			
Melodious Warbler					2				
Blackcap		1	1	1					
Whitethroat					1				
Lesser Whitethroat					2				
Subalpine Warbler					4				
Dartford Warbler					2				
Willow Warbler		1			1	3	1		1
Western Bonelli's Warbler					1				
Spotted Flycatcher		1				1			
Pied Flycatcher				1		1	1		
Long tailed Tit		1							
Marsh Tit			1						
Coal Tit			1						
Great Tit		4	6		1	1	1		
Blue Tit		1	3		2	1			
Nuthatch			2						

Common name	August 2006								
	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Wallcreeper			2						
Short toed Treecreeper				1	1				
Golden Oriole					3	2			
Red backed Shrike		5		6			1		
Southern Grey Shrike				1	3				
Woodchat Shrike				3	8	C	C		
Jay		1	2	2	2	1			
Azure winged Magpie						15			
Magpie				3	1	4	3	1	
Red billed Chough		50	6						
Alpine Chough			40						
Jackdaw					10				
Rook				2					
Carrion Crow		4	2	C		12	C		
Raven		4	2						
Spotless Starling		20		30	20	100	40		
House Sparrow		C	C	C	C	C	C	C	
Tree Sparrow				6		12	4		
Rock Sparrow				12	40		1		
Snowfinch			6						
Chaffinch		1	2		4	1	1		
Serin		4	2	1	10				
Greenfinch		1			20	3			
Siskin					1				
Goldfinch		10				2			
Linnet			10		20	6			
Cirl Bunting		3							
Rock Bunting					2				
Ortolan Bunting					2				
Corn Bunting					10				

Mammals

Western European Hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*)

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European Hare (*[capensis] europaeus lepus*)

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Fin Whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*)

06/08/2006 Portsmouth to Bilbao ferry 5

13/08/2006 Bilbao to Portsmouth 11

Cuvier's Beaked Whale (*Ziphius cavirostris*)

13/08/2006 Bilbao to Portsmouth 1

Long-finned Pilot Whale (*Globicephala melaena*)

06/08/2006 Portsmouth to Bilbao ferry 10

13/08/2006 Bilbao to Portsmouth 7

Atlantic White-sided Dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus acutus*)

06/08/2006 Portsmouth to Bilbao ferry 6

Bottle-nosed Dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*)

06/08/2006 Portsmouth to Bilbao ferry 20

Common Dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*)

06/08/2006 Portsmouth to Bilbao ferry 100

Striped Dolphin (*Stenella caeruleoalba*)

06/08/2006 Portsmouth to Bilbao ferry 70

Harbour Porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*)

06/08/2006 Portsmouth to Bilbao ferry 10

13/08/2006 Bilbao to Portsmouth 3

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

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Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*)

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Chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*)

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Butterfly List

Swallowtail (*Papilio machaon*)
Scarce Swallowtail (*Iphiclides podalirius*)
Apollo (*Parnassius apollo*)
Large White (*Pieris brassicae*)
Small White (*Artogeia rapae*)
Bath White (*Pontia daplidice*)
Clouded Yellow (*Colias crocea*)
Cleopatra (*Gonepteryx cleopatra*)
Small Copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*)
Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*)
Lang's Short-tailed Blue (*Leptotes pirithous*)
Holly Blue (*Celastrina argiolus*)
Brown Argus (*Aricia agestis*)
Chalk-hill Blue (*Lysandra coridon*)
Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*)
Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*)
Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*)
Comma Butterfly (*Polygonia c-album*)
High Brown Fritillary (*Argynnis adippe*)
Glanville Fritillary (*Melitaea cinxia*)
Spotted Fritillary (*Melitaea didyma*)
False Heath Fritillary (*Melitaea diamina*)
Provençal Fritillary (*Mellicta deione*)
Marbled White (*Melanargia galathea*)
Rock Grayling (*Hipparchia alcyone*)
Great Banded Grayling (*Kanetisa circe*)
Common Brassy Ringlet (*Erebia cassioides*)
Piedmont Ringlet (*Erebia meolans*)
Meadow Brown (*Maniola jurtina*)
Southern Gatekeeper (*Pyronia cecilia*)
Small Heath (*Coenonympha pamphilus*)
Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*)
Skippers (*Hesperiidae*)
Red Underwing Skipper (*Spialia sertorius*)

Other wildlife

Marsh Frog

Common Frog

Iberian Wall Lizard

Common Wall Lizard

Moorish Geko

Preying Mantis

Violet Carpenter Beetle

many species of crickets & grasshoppers

Emporer Dragonfly

Scarlet Darter

Keeled Skimmer

Moths

Jersey Tiger Moth

Buff Footman

Bee Hawk moth sp.

Pine Processionary Moth nety