

Spain's Cantabrian Mountains - Realm of the Bear

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 30 May 2007



El Llamardal



Saliencia Valle



Orchid at el Llamardal

Report compiled by Andy Smith and images by Adela Hepworth



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour leaders: Andy Smith
 Adela Hepworth
 Gloria (local guide)

Tour participants Robert Page
 Jenny Page
 Sylvia Vickers
 Jennifer Gegg
 Mike Booth
 Viv Booth
 Chris Stratford
 Pam Stratford
 Peter Spillet

Day 1

Wednesday 23rd May

London to Pola de Somiedo

Cool, overcast and misty with persistent drizzle and light rain.

We arrived at Asturias airport in the late afternoon, collected our vehicles and then made our way south and up into the Cantabrian Mountains. The scenery became increasingly impressive as we progressed and a brief stop produced our first views of Griffon Vultures and Crag Martins. We finally arrived at our comfortable hotel in Pola in the heart of the Somiedo National Park in good time to settle in before enjoying a delicious first dinner together.

Day 2

Thursday 24th May

Pola de Somiedo, El Llamardal and Brana Mumian

Sunny and warm with scattered cloud and a brief heavy late-afternoon thunderstorm.

An early morning stroll from the hotel produced a roadside Red Squirrel and introduced us to a range of common local birds including Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Black Redstart and Serin. After breakfast we drove the short distance up to El Llamardal and then spent the bulk of the day walking to Brana Mumian and back. The walk took us first through mixed woodland and then out onto high meadows with patches of scrub and the picturesque seasonal grazing settlement of El Mumian itself. The scenery was superb and the flowers spectacular. Chamois posed on the crags, Iberian Rock and Viviparous Lizards scuttled over the boulders and butterflies such as Moroccan Orange Tip, Green Hairstreak and Piedmont Ringlets flew over the grassland. Bird highlights included great views of Red-backed Shrike, Water Pipit, Bonelli's Warbler, Rock Bunting and a Short-toed Eagle that passed close overhead and then hovered in classic style over a nearby hilltop.

Day 3

Friday 25th May

Pola de Somiedo, the Saliencia Valley and the "Three lakes"

Sunny and mild with scattered cloud in the morning. Cool and increasingly overcast in the afternoon with heavy rain from late afternoon onwards.

A scenic drive up the Saliencia valley peppered with stops for views, flowers, Red Deer and a confiding Red Fox was followed by a walk up and over the high tops to the picturesque "Three Lakes". The advancing rain caught us out on the way back but the setting was lovely and the flora continuously impressive. Birds included parachuting Water Pipits, singing Black Redstarts, wonderfully aerobatic Alpine Choughs, a lone Black Kite and lots of Dunnocks.

Day 4

Saturday 26th May

Pola de Somiedo, Castro, Puerto de Somiedo, the Sil Valley and Vilablenco

Cool, overcast and misty with persistent drizzle in the morning. Sunny with scattered cloud and a fresh breeze in the afternoon

In the morning we walked from Pola to Castro and back again through some fine woodland with dramatic views down to the river far below. Visible birds were few on account of the inclement weather but we heard lots of Bonelli's Warblers, Iberian Chiffchaffs and Firecrests singing from deep within the dense vegetation. Flowers of course were as good as ever and included a lovely White Helleborine in full bloom.

After lunch back at the hotel most of us opted for an afternoon's exploratory drive up and out of Somiedo to see if we could escape the weather. This proved to be a good move, for once we cleared Puerto de Somiedo at the top of the high ridge to the south we dropped down into fine sunshine. As we travelled down the Sil Valley the mountains fell back, the landscape opened out and the birds changed accordingly. Soon we were watching White Storks, Whinchats, Northern Wheatears, Spotless Starlings and Corn Buntings, all of which appeared to be absent from the high valleys of Somiedo. At one point we stopped to scan the surrounding slopes and were rewarded by good views of two Short-toed Eagles, a pair of Montagu's Harriers and a surprise Black Vulture that appeared above the nearby ridge with a small group of Griffons – not bad!

Day 5

Sunday 27th May

Pola de Somiedo and Vilafafila

Sunny with scattered cloud and a cool fresh northwesterly wind. Rain in the evening in the mountains

Poor weather in the mountains encouraged us south again and we made the long drive to Vilafafila on the Zamoran Plain. In almost complete contrast to Somiedo we found ourselves in a treeless world of wide-open arable fields, steppe grassland and windswept lagoons dotted with quiet little villages and the quaint dovecotes that are a particular feature of the area. With this change of landscape and habitat came a corresponding change of birds and in an exhilarating day we saw a huge range of species.

Around the lagoons we found Garganey, Kentish Plover, Black, Whiskered and Gull-billed Terns, Avocet, Black-winged Stilt and Spanish Yellow Wagtails. On the grasslands were Crested, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipits and Corn Buntings and at the deserted settlement of Oteros we found a Hoopoe and both Rock and Tree Sparrows. Raptors were outstanding and included Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Red and Black Kites, Montagu's and Marsh Harriers and over a hundred delightful Lesser Kestrels. Added to all this we saw 25 huge and impressive Great Bustards, a speciality of the area, and surprises in the form of a Short-eared Owl and three Great-Spotted Cuckoos. All in all a great day!

Day 6

Monday 28th May

Pola de Somiedo, Valle de Lago and Perlunes

Cold, windy and wet in the morning (with snow on the tops!); sunny with scattered cloud and rather warmer in the afternoon

During a cold morning's walk in the beautiful Valle de Lago we found a lovely stand of Burnt-tip Orchids and enjoyed good views of two Roe Deer, a pair of Stonechats feeding young, a couple of singing Garden Warblers, several Rock Buntings and a quartet of Red-billed Choughs swooping playfully around a rock face. In the afternoon we drove up the nerve-wrackingly narrow and precipitous lane to the high hamlet of Perlunes, took a short walk there and then explored our way back down again. Along the way we saw Griffon Vultures, Ravens and a Short-toed Eagle whilst one sharp-eyed member of the party glimpsed a Wild Boar.

Day 7

Tuesday 29th May

Pola de Somiedo, Peral viewpoint, Proaza, Puerto de San Lorenzo and Villamor

Sunny with scattered cloud, mild and breezy

In the early morning we went up to the high viewpoint above the dramatically positioned village of Perlunes in the hope of seeing a bear. Sadly our luck was out but an hour or so up here did give us some good views of Red and Roe Deer grazing on the meadows below. After breakfast some of the group went back to the upper Valle de Lago whilst others went across the mountains to the town of Proaza to a visit Brown Bear rehabilitation centre. At the Puerto San Lorenzo on the way back we admired the panoramic views and found a pair of Woodlarks, and at the remote hamlet of Villamor we enjoyed a short walk through some fantastic flower meadows.

Day 8

Wednesday 30th May

Pola de Somiedo to London

Drizzle at first then sunny with scattered cloud. Warm and breezy

After a leisurely breakfast we left Pola and made our way back down towards the coast. We stopped en-route for a riverside picnic lunch complete with Bee Orchids and Sand Martins and made it to the airport in good time. Everything went smoothly and we arrived back in the UK safely and on time a few hours later.

Systematic lists

Birds

| Common name | Scientific name | May 2007 | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|----|----|----|-------|----|----|----|
| | | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
| Great Crested Grebe | <i>Podiceps cristatus</i> | | | | | 2 | | | |
| Little Egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> | | | | | 1 | | | |
| Cattle Egret | <i>Bubulcus ibis</i> | | | | | 4 | | | |
| Grey Heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | | |
| White Stork | <i>Ciconia ciconia</i> | | | | 10 | 50 | | | |
| Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | | | 5 | | 25 | | 25 | |
| Gadwall | <i>Anas strepera</i> | | | | | 4 | | | |
| Shoveler | <i>Anas clypeata</i> | | | | | 5 | | | |
| Garganey | <i>Anas querquedula</i> | | | | | 2 | | | |
| Pochard | <i>Aythya ferina</i> | | | | | 5 | | | |
| Black Vulture | <i>Aegypius monachus</i> | | | | 1 | | | | |
| Griffon Vulture | <i>Gyps fulvus</i> | 3 | 10 | 10 | 5 | 5 | 15 | 12 | 2 |
| Egyptian Vulture | <i>Neophron percnopterus</i> | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 2 | 1 | | |
| Short-toed Eagle | <i>Circaetus gallicus</i> | | 1 | | 3 | 3 | 5 | | |
| Booted Eagle | <i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i> | | | | | 2 | | | |
| Red Kite | <i>Milvus milvus</i> | | | | | 5 | | | |
| Black Kite | <i>Milvus migrans</i> | | | 1 | 3 | 40 | | | |
| Eurasian Marsh Harrier | <i>Circus aeruginosus</i> | | | | | 3 | | | |
| Montagu's Harrier | <i>Circus pygargus</i> | | | | 2 | 12 | | | |
| Common Buzzard | <i>Buteo buteo</i> | 2 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 10 | 6 | 8 | 3 |
| Sparrowhawk | <i>Accipiter nisus</i> | | 1 | | | | 1 | | |
| Common Kestrel | <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | | 1 | 2 | | 1 | 1 | | |
| Lesser Kestrel | <i>Falco naumanni</i> | | | | | 100 | | | |
| Hobby | <i>Falco subbuteo</i> | | | | 1 | 1 | | | |
| Peregrine Falcon | <i>Falco peregrinus</i> | | 1 | | | | | | |
| Red-legged Partridge | <i>Alectoris rufa</i> | | 2 | | | | | | |
| Common Quail | <i>Coturnix coturnix</i> | | | | | 1h | | | |
| Coot | <i>Fulica atra</i> | | | | | 20 | | | |
| Great Bustard | <i>Otis tarda</i> | | | | | 25 | | | |
| Black-winged Stilt | <i>Himantopus himantopus</i> | | | | | 50 | | | |
| Avocet | <i>Avosetta recurvirostra</i> | | | | | 25 | | | |
| Lapwing | <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | | | | | 25 | | | |
| Little Ringed Plover | <i>Charadrius dubius</i> | | | | | 2 | | | |
| Kentish Plover | <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i> | | | | | 1 | | | |
| Common Sandpiper | <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> | | | | | 1 | | | |
| Redshank | <i>Tringa totanus</i> | | | | | 2 | | | |
| Dunlin | <i>Calidris alpina</i> | | | | | 30 | | | |
| Sanderling | <i>Calidris alba</i> | | | | | 3 | | | |
| Black-headed Gull | <i>Larus ridibundus</i> | | | | | 4 | | | |
| Yellow-legged Herring Gull | <i>Larus cachinnans</i> | 50 | | | | 50 | | | |
| Lesser Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus fuscus</i> | | | | | 3 | | | |
| Gull-billed Tern | <i>Sterna nilotica</i> | | | | | 30 | | | |
| Black Tern | <i>Chlidonias niger</i> | | | | | 10 | | | |
| Whiskered Tern | <i>Chlidonias hybridus</i> | | | | | 1 | | | |
| Feral Pigeon | <i>Columba livia</i> | | | | | 100's | | | |
| Wood Pigeon | <i>Columba palumbus</i> | 5 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 2 |

| Common name | Scientific name | May 2007 | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|----------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
| Cuckoo | <i>Cuculus canorus</i> | 1h | 2h | | 1h | 1h | 1h | | |
| Great Spotted Cuckoo | <i>Clamator glandarius</i> | | | | | 3 | | | |
| Tawny Owl | <i>Strix aluco</i> | | | | 1 | | | | |
| Short-eared Owl | <i>Asio flammeus</i> | | | | | 1 | | | |
| European Swift | <i>Apus apus</i> | 25 | 25 | 20 | 15 | 50 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Hoopoe | <i>Upupa epops</i> | | | | | 1 | | | |
| Black Woodpecker | <i>Dryocopus martius</i> | | 1h | | | | | | |
| Green Woodpecker | <i>Picus viridis</i> | | | 1h | | | 1h | | |
| Great Spotted Woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos major</i> | | 1 | | | | | 1 | |
| Middle S. Woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos medius</i> | | 1h | | 1h | | | 1h | |
| Skylark | <i>Alauda arvensis</i> | | 1h | | | 1 | | | |
| Crested Lark | <i>Galerida cristata</i> | | | | | 15 | | | |
| Woodlark | <i>Lullula arborea</i> | | | | | | | 2 | |
| Short-toed Lark | <i>Calandrella brachytactyla</i> | | | | | 5 | | | |
| Calandra Lark | <i>Melanocorypha calandra</i> | | | | | 5 | | | |
| Sand Martin | <i>Riparia riparia</i> | | | | | | | | 50 |
| Crag Martin | <i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i> | 10 | 2 | 10 | 5 | 12 | 5 | 10 | |
| Barn Swallow | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> | 25 | 5 | | 20 | 25 | 2 | 15 | 5 |
| House Martin | <i>Delichon urbica</i> | 10 | | 10 | 10 | 1 | | 10 | |
| Tawny Pipit | <i>Anthus campestris</i> | | | | | 2 | | | |
| Water Pipit | <i>Anthus spinoletta</i> | | 2 | 3 | 5 | | 3 | | |
| Meadow Pipit | <i>Anthus pratensis</i> | | | | 1h | | | | |
| Tree Pipit | <i>Anthus trivialis</i> | | 3 | 3 | 1 | | 3 | 2 | |
| White Wagtail | <i>Motacilla alba</i> | 1 | 4 | 5 | 8 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| Spanish (Yellow) Wagtail | <i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i> | | | | | 8 | | | |
| Grey Wagtail | <i>Motacilla cinerea</i> | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 | | 3 | 2 | 2 |
| Wren | <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i> | 2 | 8 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 3 |
| Dipper | <i>Cinclus cinclus</i> | | 1 | 1 | 3 | | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Dunnock | <i>Prunella modularis</i> | | 3 | 25 | 5 | | 2 | 4 | |
| Robin | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 | | 10 | 8 | 4 |
| Nightingale | <i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i> | | | | 1h | | | | |
| Black Redstart | <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i> | 1 | 3 | 5 | 8 | 15 | 6 | 5 | 1 |
| Common Wheatear | <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i> | | | | 7 | 15 | | | |
| Whinchat | <i>Saxicola rubetra</i> | | | | 1 | | | | |
| Stonechat | <i>Saxicola torquata</i> | | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 2 | | |
| Song Thrush | <i>Turdus philomelos</i> | | 3 | 1h | 2h | 1 | 2 | | |
| Blackbird | <i>Turdus merula</i> | 6 | 10 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 1 |
| Garden Warbler | <i>Sylvia borin</i> | | 2 | 4 | 3 | | 6 | | 1 |
| Blackcap | <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i> | 2 | 15 | 15 | 10 | | 10 | 10 | 3 |
| Common Whitethroat | <i>Sylvia communis</i> | | 5 | | 1 | | 1 | 1 | |
| Zitting Cisticola | <i>Cisticola juncidis</i> | | | | | 2 | | | |
| Cetti's Warbler | <i>Cettia cetti</i> | | | | | 1h | | | |
| Bonelli's Warbler | <i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i> | | 3 | | 4 | | 1 | | |
| Chiffchaff | <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> | 1 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Firecrest | <i>Regulus ignicapillus</i> | 1 | 3 | 1 | 4 | | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Great Tit | <i>Parus major</i> | 2 | 2 | 4 | 3 | | 5 | 5 | |
| Coal Tit | <i>Parus ater</i> | | 2 | 2 | 2 | | 1 | 2 | |
| Blue Tit | <i>Parus caeruleus</i> | | 2 | 4 | 2 | | 2 | 3 | 1 |
| Crested Tit | <i>Parus cristatus</i> | | | | | | h | | |
| Marsh Tit | <i>Parus palustris</i> | | | | 2 | | | | |

| Common name | Scientific name | May 2007 | | | | | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| | | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |
| Long-tailed Tit | <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i> | | | | | | h | 2 | |
| Short-toed Treecreeper | <i>Certhia brachydactyla</i> | | | | 2 | | | 1 | 2 |
| Red-backed Shrike | <i>Lanius collurio</i> | | 3 | | 2 | | 1 | | |
| Woodchat Shrike | <i>Lanius senator</i> | | | | | 1 | | | |
| Magpie | <i>Pica pica</i> | 8 | 6 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 2 |
| Eurasian Jay | <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> | | 2 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 8 | 2 |
| Jackdaw | <i>Corvus monedula</i> | | | | | 30 | | | |
| Chough | <i>Pyrrhonorax Pyrrhonorax</i> | | 2 | 6 | 2 | | 10 | 6 | |
| Alpine Chough | <i>Pyrrhonorax graculus</i> | | | 25 | | | | | |
| Carrion Crow | <i>Corvus corone</i> | 50 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 10 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | 2 | 2 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 5 | |
| Spotless Starling | <i>Sturnus unicolor</i> | | | | 4 | 25 | | | 3 |
| House Sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> | 5 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 30 | 5 | | 3 |
| Tree Sparrow | <i>Passer montanus</i> | | | | | 10 | | | |
| Rock Sparrow | <i>Petronia petronia</i> | | | | | 10 | | | |
| Chaffinch | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i> | | 2 | 3 | 1 | | 2 | 1 | |
| Linnet | <i>Acanthis cannabina</i> | | 3 | 10 | 10 | 12 | 1 | 4 | |
| Goldfinch | <i>Carduelis carduelis</i> | | 1 | | | 1 | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| Greenfinch | <i>Carduelis chloris</i> | | | | | 1 | | | |
| Serin | <i>Serinus serinus</i> | 3 | 3 | 5 | 8 | 2 | 8 | 8 | |
| Bullfinch | <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i> | | | 4 | | 1 | 3 | 3 | |
| Yellowhammer | <i>Emberiza citrinella</i> | | 2 | 5 | 2 | | 4 | | |
| Reed Bunting | <i>Eberiza schoeniclus</i> | | | | | 1 | | | |
| Rock Bunting | <i>Emberiza cia</i> | | 2 | 5 | 7 | | 10 | 3 | |
| Corn Bunting | <i>Miliaria calandra</i> | | | | 1 | 10 | | | |

Mammals

Hedgehog, Pipistrelle, Red Fox, Wild Boar, Red Deer, Roe Deer, Chamois and Red Squirrel.

Reptiles

Viviparous Lizard, Iberian Rock Lizard and Adder.

Butterflies

Large White, Green-veined White, Bath White, Orange Tip, Moroccan Orange Tip, Dappled White sp., Brimstone, Green Hairstreak, Red Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell, Piedmont Ringlet, Wall Brown and Mallow Skipper.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.