

Spain's Sierra de Guara - Land of the Lammergeier

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 18 May 2009



Egyptian Vulture



Griffon Vultures



Saxifraga-pirineica



Subalpine Warbler

Report and images by Byron Palacios



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Day 1

Monday 11th May

London - Zaragoza

The group arrived at Zaragoza airport in the early evening and full of enthusiasm to start the tour. After meeting up at the airport, we got on our van and then made our way northeast and up into the Sierra de Guara Mountains. The scenery became increasingly impressive (despite patches of rain) and we managed to enjoy the beautiful landscapes and villages and also a few birds such as Hoopoe, Crested Larks, Magpie, White Storks and Cattle Egrets.

We finally arrived at the lovely and medieval village of Alquezar, to our superb and very comfortable hotel located in the heart of Alquezar. We had enough time to settle in and enjoy some nibbles and drinks before enjoying a delicious first dinner together.

Day 2

Tuesday 12th May

Alquezar and surroundings

Some of us managed to take an early look around the Alquezar before a relaxing breakfast. It was a sunny beautiful morning in the village, and amongst the small streets, and ancient architecture we were introduced to a range of common local birds including Nightingale, Black Redstart, European and Alpine Swifts, Blackcap, Griffon Vultures, Lesser Kestrel, Egyptian Vulture, and Red-billed Chough, amongst others.

After this in-town birding, we drove the short distance up to Ermita de San Gregorio located right above the Alquezar, an ideal place for Dartford Warbler (we found one plus a very young chick perched on a bare bush), as well as Woodchat Shrike, Serin, Raven, a female Black-eared Wheatear and Tawny Pipit both perched in the distance rocks, more Griffon Vultures and Red-billed Choughs.

We continued further up the road in order to get to the top of the hill and drove through the village of San Pelegrin and then to Balsas de Basacol. This recreational area offers great views of the valley and of Alquezar itself, and it was an ideal landscape to enjoy while having a relaxing and delicious local picnic. The area was fantastic for plants and flowers, including various species of orchids of the *Ophrys* genera, such as Bee and Fly. A beautiful Pyrenean Saxifrage was discovered spread on the rock walls by fellow group members and made our day in terms of flowers. As the afternoon turned hot and dry (34°C) we decided to drive back to our hotel in order to have a break before dinner time at Casa Gervasio Restaurant.

Day 3

Wednesday 13th May

Morrano & Santa Cilia

Today, the morning looked slightly windy and grey as we headed north towards Santa Cilia. After a quick 'fresh-bread stop' in Adahuesca, we continued driving past beautiful fields carpeted with corn poppies and bluebells. Two perched Bee-eaters made us stop by an old rock bridge, not far from the village of Morrano. The gully was full of birds such as European Oriole, Hoopoe, Corn Bunting, Wood Lark, Serin, Nightingale, Melodious Warbler, Common Buzzard, Bee-eater and an elusive Wryneck. Squill, Henbane and Bearberry were some of the plants recorded during the morning. The first Griffon Vultures started their usual activity, soaring the skies, and Sand and House Martins were seen on the journey.

Once in Santa Cilia, we had stunning views of Stonechat and Corn Buntings in the scope. Many Griffon Vultures soared by the bird observatory, and our first Lammergeier was clearly spotted amongst a group of them nearby.

We kept driving further up towards the base of the gorge where we found a nice place to set up our picnic lunch. A beautiful Lammergeier flew right above our heads giving us spectacular views! After lunch, we walked down the track looking for some wildlife but rain spoiled our plans. We decided that it was coffee time and we ended up in one of the nice cafe-bars of Bierge. We decided to do some birding from the van while driving towards Alquezar. Back in the hotel, we had a break before a great local supper and restful night!

Day 4

Thursday 14th May

Lecina

Heavy rain was predicted for today, but it was certainly a wrong forecast given by the local weather channel as we had a very pleasant and even warm and sunny day instead! We headed north quite early towards Arcusa. Our first stop was made at El Palomar bridge, where hundreds of Pyrenean Saxifraga (*Saxifraga longifolia*) were spotted. The site produced many other interesting plants and birds such as Linnet, Serin and superb views of Subalpine Warbler.

We continued driving until our next stop along the road, where we found a good patch of *Valeriana pirineica*. Also, an elusive Orphean Warbler was seen too. The next stop was made at the transitional area, where conifer and beech woods were dominant. Here, we had more superb views of the local Subalpine Warbler, Crested Tit, Spotted Flycatcher, Winchat, and Song Thrush, amongst others. Important and beautiful flowers such as Narrow-leaved Helleborine, Lesser Butterfly Orchid, Lady Orchid, *Cephalantrum longifolia*, *Thalactrum tuberosa*, Buttercup (*Ranunculus* sp.) and many more were found.

We had our picnic lunch at Barcabo where we had magnificent views of Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, while a single Roe Deer was seen afterwards down the road near the van. We ended up in the afternoon exploring around Lecina and Betorz. We drove back to Alquezar in the late afternoon to relax, enjoy some drinks and supper, and even to celebrate one of our group members' birthday!

Day 5

Friday 15th May

Alquezar – Las Almunias de Rodellar

Another sunny beautiful and relaxing morning as we started our final walk around the village before breakfast. We left Alquezar heading for our next three nights based at Las Almunias de Rodellar. As we drove along the narrow country roads, an unexpected Red-backed Shrike made us stop (we had excellent views of this nice species), plus Crested Lark, Stonechat and more Con Buntings.

Our next stop was made at 1,000 metres above sea level, right on the transitional area of San Saturnino. The dominant pine woods offered spectacular views of Crested Tit, Firecrest, Orphean Warbler and Woodlark, all seen through our scope. Some interesting plants such as Sword-leaved Helleborine, Lady's Orchid, Bilberry and others were found. We found a great spot overlooking the snowcapped Pyrenees and the Guara Canyons. Once finished, we carried on with our driving to our hotel in Las Almunias de Rodellar. The small and locally-owned B&B provided us comfortable accommodation and delicious local food! From here, we had great views of Lammergeier, Red Kite and Short-toed Eagle while having a mid-afternoon drink. We also scoped a pair of rare Bonelli's Eagles and a hovering Short-toed Eagle on a short walk to the nearby village, a very exciting way indeed to finish the day!

Day 6

Saturday 16th May

Santa Cillia Vulture Station and F.A.B. Visitors Centre

After an early pre-breakfast walk on the trails around the village, we drove up out of Las Almunias towards Santa Cilia again. The main reason to go back to this area for the second time was to witness a very unusual and unique experience. We were offered the chance to feed vultures accompanying local vulture expert and Fondo Amigos del Buitre's co-founder Manu Aguilar. His vast and unparalleled knowledge of these birds has made him a very well respected naturalist and pioneer (together with late colleague David Garcia) on the ethology and ecology of vultures, especially on Lammergeiers. Manu brought with him more than 200 pounds of meat from local farms. We drove to the car park and walked up the hill towards the feeding point. Manu's helper, Nicole, also brought a few ostrich eggs, an Egyptian Vulture's favourite food (they break the eggs using a small rock held with their beaks and hammering till eggs split apart!). Over 250 Griffon Vultures landed on the carcasses straight away, while six Egyptian and a few Bearded Vultures soared above them waiting for their turn. An Egyptian Vulture was very keen on the big eggs but he was not confident enough to show us his peculiar way of breaking them. Lammergeiers landed later on in order to take the bones and drop them from the sky making smaller pieces of them so they can swallow the bones more easily. After this spectacular wildlife show, we walked down to the visitors centre and finally we were invited to the FAB's interpretation centre in order to see the fantastic results of their hard work through years of effort and also to see videos and a slide show of their amazing collection.

We had our picnic lunch at the mirador which overlooks the vulture's feeding station trying to see if some of the species were around. But there were not just vultures around but also a solitary fox and two young Chamois were nearby the natural rock platform. A true bonus for the mammal list of the day! Hoary Pepper Cress and *Dipcadi serotinus* were a few of the large number of plants recorded throughout the day. As soon as the afternoon's temperature increased, we decided to go for a drink in one of the villages nearby and head back to our hotel for a well deserved rest and fantastic supper. What a day we had!

Day 7

Sunday 17th May

Bara

After a very early breakfast, we drove up out of Las Almunias de Rodellar and went to the remote village of Bara on a new road through Huesca. Good views of Bonelli's Warbler, a gorgeous Spider Orchid and even some Wildcat fresh tracks were found during our first stop made at the Embalse de Santa Maria de Belsue. Continuing our drive through the highest point of the road (1,275 m) and down towards Bara, many birds such as Stonechat, Red-backed Shrike, a female Rock Thrush, Subalpine Warbler, Short-toed Eagle, Tawny Pipit and more were seen. A lush bushy terrain produced lovely orchids such as Early Purple, Fly and Burnt Tip, also some Dipcadi or Brown Bluebell, *Ramonda myconi*, and many more! We enjoyed our picnic lunch in the gorgeous and remote village of Bara, overlooking the impressive Gorgas Negras Canyon. Two of our adventurous – and very fit – fellow travellers decided to walk back to Rodellar trekking the trail which goes across Gorgas Negras. Myself and the rest of the group went to Nocito in order to enjoy a cool and refreshing drink as the early afternoon temperature had turned into a really hot day. We started our drive back to Las Almunias de Rodellar, arriving there in the late afternoon, enough time to wash, grab a beer and enjoy a delicious local supper served in the early evening.

Day 8

Monday 18th May

Belchite

After a leisurely breakfast we left Las Almunias de Rodellar and made our way back down towards the Zaragoza area. A diversion made not far from the town took us to the upper River Ebro basin which offers a vast land of impressive plains mixed among fields, meadows and farming areas. Our first stop was just before Belchite, where Skylark and Crested Larks were seen at first. In spite of the very hot temperature and bright sun, we managed to see others larks such as Calandra, Tekla, Short-toed and Lesser Short-toed Larks, and had great views of Montague's Harrier, an adult and juvenile flying together. We also saw Black Kite, White Stork, Short-toed Eagle, Bee-eater, Woodchat Shrike, the very noisy Great Reed Warbler (heard only), and many more. We had our last picnic lunch of the holiday in the heart of El Planeron, enjoying the lovely views of this beautiful area. As the time passed by, we started to make our way heading Zaragoza airport in order to catch our flight back to the UK. It was a very nice holiday indeed around this fantastic part of northeastern Spain, where we all had unforgettable wildlife experiences and also the pleasure of having shared it with a great group of keen nature lovers!

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	June							
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>							✓	
2	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓						✓	✓
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>								✓
4	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>			✓		✓	✓		
5	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>					✓			
9	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>			✓	✓			✓	✓
11	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
12	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓					✓	✓
13	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumannii</i>		✓						
14	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>						✓		
15	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓					
16	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓			✓	✓	✓
17	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>			H					
18	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓		✓				
19	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
20	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>				✓			✓	
21	European Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
23	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>							✓H	
24	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>								✓
25	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓						✓	✓
26	Tekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>					H			✓
27	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			✓		✓		✓	
28	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachytactyla</i>								✓
29	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella</i>								✓
30	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>								✓
31	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓					
32	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>		✓	✓				✓	
36	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H		H		H	H	
38	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		H		H				
39	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>					H	H		
40	Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	H	H	✓	✓	H	H	H	H
41	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
42	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>							✓	
43	Common Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>							✓	
44	Black-eared Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>		✓						
45	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			✓					
46	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	June							
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
47	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				✓				
48	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>						✓	H	
50	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓		H	✓			
51	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		✓		H				
52	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		✓ H						
53	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	
54	Orphean Warbler	<i>Sylvia hortensis</i>			H	✓	✓	✓	H	H
55	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		H	✓			H		
56	Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>							✓	
57	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		H		✓	✓	H		
58	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>				✓	✓			
59	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			✓	✓			✓	
60	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	H	✓	✓	
61	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>							✓	
62	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
63	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>				✓	✓			
64	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			✓					
65	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>						✓	✓	
66	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>					✓			
69	Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax Pyrrhocorax</i>		✓					✓	
70	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>							✓	✓
71	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
72	Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>		H	✓			H	✓	
73	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
76	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
77	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓		✓			
78	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		✓ H	H			H		
79	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Mammals

Red Fox, Roe Deer and Chamois.

Reptiles

Viviparous Lizard, Iberian Rock Lizard, Green Lizard, San Lizard.

Butterflies

Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail, Large White, Small White, Green-veined White, Orange Tip, Moroccan Orange Tip, Clouded Yellow, Brimstone, Cleopatra, Wood White, Green Hairstreak, Idas Blue, Holly Blue, Short-tailed Blue, Little Blue, Black-eyed Blue, Turquoise Blue, Adonis Blue, Common Blue, White Admiral, Small Tortoiseshell, Peacock Butterfly, Painted Lady, Speckle Wood, Large Wall Brown, Marble White and Privet Hawkmoth.