Spain's Sierra de Guara - Land of the Lammergeier

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 13 May 2013









The village of Nocito & Tozal de Guara (2,077m)

Spectacled Warbler

Report and images by Byron Palacios



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Day 1 Monday 6th May

London - Zaragoza

We left Stansted airport and arrived at Zaragoza airport in the early evening in order to start the tour. We sorted out our vehicle very quickly and made our way northeast and up into La Hoya de Huesca (Alto Aragon), the main gateway of the Sierra de Guara Mountains. The scenery became increasingly impressive across the mountains, before we arrived at the lovely and medieval Alquezar. We checked in at our very comfortable hotel located in the heart of the village and we walked down the narrow streets towards Casa Gervasio in order to enjoy a delicious first dinner together.

Day 2 Tuesday 7th May

Alquézar - Pico de Quizáns

Weather: Sunny & dry with some clouds; quite windy

It was a great morning in Alquezar, the sun was dazzling and we had a restful night, followed by a relaxed and enjoyable breakfast. Then, we walked amongst the small streets and ancient architecture until we arrived at an impressive 'backdrop' of the village, a landscape full of crags and rocky cliffs; here, the range of local birds including Black Redstart, European and Alpine Swift, Griffon Vultures, Red-billed Chough, Rock Dove, and Crag Martin were seen! We walked around the impressive building of La Collegiata alongside the limestone cliffs and ridged rocky hills in the background. The River Vero basin was pristine as we gazed down at the "meseta" down in the lowlands, Bajo Aragon, the southern basin of the River Ebro and the region of Los Monegros. We listened to the noisy Nightingale and spotted flying Red-billed Choughs, and admired the beautiful eye-level flying of Griffon Vultures using the nearby thermals; and they were not the only birds taking advantage of the thermals, two Lammergeiers (Bearded Vultures) were spotted soaring beautifully just above the village in the mid distance.

After this, we took a little break and then we drove up out of the village, just a short distance up to the Pico de Quizáns, located right above Alquézar. We found a nice place to set out our lunch while watching more Griffon Vultures and Red-billed Choughs, and a very nice Egyptian Vulture. We also had great views of Cirl Bunting, Western Orphean Warbler, Red Kite and Woodchat Shrike. After lunch, we set off to walk one of the hill tracks into the lower portion of the Pico de Quizáns, finding a nice view point which overlooks the two main gorges of Alquézar where plenty of Griffon Vultures and a pair of Egyptian Vulture were, all nesting across the huge rocky wall full of crags.

We enjoyed watching them coming up and down and drifting through those impossible rocky gaps, fascinating creatures and great flyers! We were expecting to see Lammergeiers from here but we lucked out in the end in despite waiting for some time for them to turn up...

We walked back to our vehicle and drove down to Alquézar making a photo stop before we got to the village centre where we enjoyed a nice drink overlooking the church and the River Vero valley, while helping out Laura with some questionnaires as part of her master's degree! As the afternoon turned in to early evening, with a very pleasant temperature, we decided to walk back to our hotel in order to have a break before dinner time at Casa Gervasio Restaurant.

Day 3

Wednesday 8th May

Santa Cilia de Ponzano – River Alcanadre (walk along the vineyards area)

Weather: Sunny & cloudy with some dark clouds. Windy at times

We had another lovely morning in Alquézar surrounded by the sound of Nightingales calling from the various bushes around the village, and vultures constantly cruising the sky. After another delicious breakfast, we got ready to set off towards the village of Santa Cilia de Ponzano, a little village located right in the heart of Guara, truly the land of vultures, where 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 Lammergeiers. Manu brought with him a good 200 pounds of meat, sheep legs and a few goose eggs, all collected very early in the morning from local farms, keen to help with the cause of boosting the population of vultures in the area. We drove to the car park and walked up the hill towards the feeding point where a dozens of Vultures, the majority Griffons, covered the sky and some of them were patiently waiting perched on the rocks nearby.

Once we were in the right spot, Manu directed us where we needed to wait...nearly two-hundred Griffon Vultures landed on the carcasses straight away, while a pair of Egyptian Vultures soared above them waiting for their turn to land and go in search of the goose eggs Manu had brought them. Some Red and Black Kites were also around waiting the opportunity to grab some bits too but they didn't really have any chance with all those Griffons around, but a few pairs of Northern Ravens managed to sneak through. An Egyptian Vulture managed to break an egg using a stone as a tool but the cheeky Griffon Vultures snatched the egg from him as soon as he broke it! Then two Lammergeiers flew over our heads, checking out how were things going with the feast and waiting their moment; so we moved a bit backwards to allow them to come closer but they didn't not trust us yet so we moved even further and checked them out as they landed to take some bones and take them somewhere else to be smashed against the ground so they could swallow them more easily. One of them flew beautifully above us, very close, a handsome looking bird.

After enjoying the spectacle, we thanked Manu very much. Lunch time was upon us so we set our picnic lunch in the middle of a heavy blowing wind, but we managed to enjoy our lunch until a bit of rain hit the area so we packed up all our belongings and drove to the nearest pub to enjoy a nice drink while the rain was on.

After this little break, we started our drive back to Alquézar, making a few birding stops on the way along the river Alcandre basin where we found a few interesting birds such as Golden Oriole, Subalpine Warbler, Serin, and the lovely European Bee-eater. We arrived back at Alquezar where we took a break in our hotel, followed by some drinks and nibbles, checklist and enjoyed supper at Casa Gervasio's Restaurant.

Day 4 Thursday 9th May

Colungo (La Albarda-Campanachal bridge) – Lecina

Weather: Overcast with sunny spells and a few showers.

After breakfast, we drove out of Alquezar heading north of the Sierra, to the ancient village of Lecina. Our first stop was made at the fascinating Moorish bridge located on the River Vero and known as La Albarda or Campanachal Bridge. This lovely bridge built between XI and XII Centuries and offers a unique view of the river and is a great spot to find some interesting species. We walked to the top of the bridge to admire the landscape and found Melodious Warbler, Whinchat, Cetti's Warbler, and a very busy Short-toed Treecreeper. We took a walk around the bridge and the river, spotting a gorgeous Booted Eagle perched quietly on a snag, giving us close views of this lovely raptor! The very elusive Nightingale was, as usual, calling from every corner of the area and we managed to find one right in the open, from which we had great scope views. A Golden Oriole was calling from the distance but we could not find any closer to where we were. After this productive first stop, we continued our drive making the usual 'bread stop' which produced Black and Red Kites, Griffon Vultures, Corn Bunting, and a lovely male Black Redstart.

We then entered the bendy roads and deep gorges from where we spotted the very precious Pyrenean Saxifrage (Saxifraga longifolia) which was not that numerous this year, perhaps due to the very long winter experienced in the area. We made another stop at the highest part of the road where Shot-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit and Firecrest were beautifully seen. Then we stopped at the gorge or 'barranco' Mirador del Rio Vero, an impressive gorge perfect for nesting Griffon Vultures, Crag and House Martins, Alpine and European Swifts. We could see the ancient village of Lecina from the mirador, and as lunch time was upon us, we drove to this ancient village in order to eat our picnic lunch, but a massive dark cloud put at risk our plans, so we ate our delicious local improvised lunch under a beautiful shelter and amongst nesting Barn Swallows in one of the ancient houses of the village!

Weather looked a bit promising after lunch, so we decided to take a walk on the track which leads to the village of Betorz, following a Eurasian Cuckoo flying around us and calling like mad. Then rain came on and we started walking back towards our vehicle, but we managed to find a Nightingale calling from the top of the tree, and even better, a lovely male Cirl Bunting right above him too! We drove back to Alquézar and to our hotel to rest before our fantastic supper.

Day 5 Friday 10th May

Alquezar – Monte Aragón Castle – Nocito

Weather: Nice & sunny. A chilly wind

It was another sunny beautiful and relaxing morning as some of us took a final walk around the village before breakfast. We left Alquezar heading for our next three nights based at Nocito. As we drove along the narrow country roads along the Somontano, we made our typical quick bread stop at Barbastro and drove around forty minutes to get to Monte Aragón Castle. This building lies on a plateau which is lined up with Los Monegros region to the south and Los Mallos or Riglos to the north. The surroundings of the castle have formations of rose puddingstone, highly vulnerable to erosion which has created sugar loaf forms. We stopped at the base of the narrow road which leads to the castle in order to take some photos and also to look for some wildlife, and we found lots! A good variety of butterflies and important bird species, and all the three species of Wheatears distributed in Spain; we found two Black Wheatears first, followed by a pair of Northern Wheatears and then two Black-eared Wheatears just at the base of the castle. We also found Thekla and Crested Larks, Corn Bunting, Black Kite, Griffon Vulture and fantastic views of Spectacled Warbler.

After visiting the top of the hill where the castle lies, we continued our drive towards the northern slope of Sierra de Guara passing the junction in the outskirts of Huesca, heading north and following the narrow roads in to the park, where we found a nice spot to set up our picnic lunch at Cuello de la Manzanera (Manzanera's Neck), just above the village and the dam of Arguis. We enjoyed our lunch and the location offered terrific views of the Belsué Valley. We had a good stroll around followed by a short drive to one of the highest points (nearly 1,500 metres) where we took a walk on one of the ancient trails of the area. A few interesting things were found here, such as Spotted Flycatcher, Stonechat, and European Robin.

Our next and final stop was made at 920 metres in the village of Nocito where we checked in to our hostel in order to take a break and some of us a walk around the village before we gathered together at Casa Villacampa restaurant where we did our checklist, followed by supper.

Day 6

Saturday 11th May

Nocito - Used

Today, was a glorious sunny morning! After breakfast, we drove a short distance, leaving our vehicle not far from Nocito and walked along the road towards the village of Used. We saw fantastic birds along this pleasant walk, such as Golden Oriole, Booted Eagle, Red-backed Shrike, Serin, Cirl and Rock Buntings, Western Orphean Warbler, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Woodlark, Nightingale, Stonechat, amongst others. We arrived at Used where we enjoyed our lunch and had a bit of a break overlooking the lovely landscape which was very pleasant. After lunch, we took another walk down the road getting lovely views of two Hobbies, a Booted Eagle; Griffon Vultures were soaring around and Stonechats and Orphean Warblers were flitting amongst the hedges. It was time to drive back to Nocito in order to have a break in the late afternoon, followed by a delicious dinner and our nocturnal expedition was rewarded woth great views of the very elusive Eurasian Scops Owl.

Day 7

Sunday 12th May

Sobrarbe Valley – Puerto del Serrablo – Mesón de Fuebla

Weather: Nice and sunny!

Another gorgeous day in Nocito facing the impressive Tozal de Guara Mountain which silently guards the main Guara valleys! After breakfast, we drove up north in order to explore more of the northern slopes of Guara, going through high passes which already have the contrast of the supreme Pyrenees in the background, fully covered in snow which looked very impressive! We made a stop in the first pass which overlooks the whole northern valley of Sobrarbe and the village of Lasaosa, from where we saw Rufous-tailed Thrush, Western Orphean Warbler, Red Kite, Griffon Vulture and Tree Pipit.

Continuing with our drive, we managed to see a nice Short-toed Snake-Eagle perched in one of the pylons but she was too fast for us as she took off when we tried to set the scope on her. Anyway, we carried on drifting down the valley and crossing the River Gállego onto the loop road which connects the Sierra de Guara and the Alto Gállego Valley; we made two stops en route, one produced a gorgeous Golden Eagle soaring in the blue sky. The second stop was made uphill where we took a short walk amongst the pine woods and found some Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagle, Coal Tit and a few Firecrest. We continued our drive searching for a good spot to set up our picnic lunch, going higher through the Puerto del Serrablo Pass (1,295 metres) where we stopped for landscape photos, and stopped at our picnic site Mesón de Fuebla where we enjoyed our meal and view of the mighty Pyrenees! After this, we took a walk along the old dirt track which surrounds a portion of the pine woodland with dry dirt banks where we saw nice butterflies and a wonderful Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier) drifting straight towards us and soaring right over our heads...just wonderful!

After the walk, it was time to head back to Nocito making a few stops on the way; back at the River Gállego bridge where several Griffon Vultures and a Booted Eagle were seen, followed by a stop just above Nocito's Valley where we had wonderful views of Short-toed Snake-Eagle which we missed earlier on in the morning this time we saw her really close hovering and hunting...what a day for raptors! Other birds such as Western Bonelli's Warbler, Mistle Thrush, Common Buzzard and Western Orphean Warbler were also seen here.

The activity became very slow as the afternoon was warmer than the previous day, so we drove back to our lodge in Nocito taking the usual pre-supper break. We gathered together to complete our checklist of the day, followed by supper and off to bed.

Day 8 Monday 13th May

Nocito - Belchite - Zaragoza

Weather: Nice and sunny

After our last breakfast we drove to the village of Bara. We had a nice walk from the top of the hill down to the village, enjoying the beautiful morning and the landscape we were sadly soon about to leave. As soon as we started our walk we enjoyed lovely views of a pair of Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes, Tawny Pipit, Woodlark, Western Orphean Warbler, Nightingale, Booted Eagle, amongst others. We walked to the River Alcanadre bridge to admire the mountains and the surrounding landscape; then we drove back to Nocito to collect our belongings and to finally leave the area heading down to the lowlands. Once in the area we made a stop in the village of Fuendetodos, very well known as Goya's land, as the artist was born here.

We enjoyed our last picnic lunch and then we went to the area of Belchite, precisely to the reserve of El Planeron. The dramatic dry and red earth habitat was the appropriate place to see many species of larks such as Crested, Calandra, Great and Lesser Short-toed Larks, Skylark, and even a poor view of the rare and elusive Dupont's Lark which unfortunately flew away when we tried to get good views of it. Other birds seen were Black-eared Wheatear, Marsh Harrier, Woodchat Shrike, Black Kite, and a small group of Lesser Kestrels.

The time passed by, so we started to make our way to Zaragoza airport in order to catch our flight back to the UK. It was a very nice holiday indeed in this fantastic part of north-eastern Spain, where we had unforgettable wildlife experiences along with good food, lovely wine and great company...

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

		May									
	Common name	Scientific name	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
1	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia								✓	
2	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos								✓	
3	Black Kite	Milvus migrans			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
4	Red Kite	Milvus milvus		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
5	Short-toed Eagle	Circaetus gallicus							✓		
6	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus		✓	✓						
7	Lammergeier	Gypaetus barbatus		✓	✓				✓		
8	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus								✓	
10	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo			✓				✓	✓	
11	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus				✓		✓	✓	✓	
12	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos							✓		
13	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus		✓	✓					✓	
14	Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni								✓	
15	Hobby	Falco subbuteo						✓			
16	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa			✓					✓	
17	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos				✓					
18	Rock Dove	Columba livia		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
19	Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
20	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto			√		✓		✓	✓	
21	Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur				h				h	
22	Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus				···	h	✓	h	<u> </u>	
23	Tawny Owl	Strix aluco		h		h	- ''	h	h		
24	Scops Owl	Otus scops		-''			h	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·	h		
25	Alpine Swift	Apus melba		√	✓	✓	- ''		-''		
26	European Swift	Apus apus		✓ ·	✓ ·	✓ ·	✓	✓	✓	✓	
27	Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis		•	•	✓	,	•	,	Ť	
28	Hoopoe	Upupa epops			✓	h		h	h	h	
29	European Bee-eater	Merops apiaster			✓	- 11		- ''	- ''	- 11	
30	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major			-	✓					
31	Wryneck	Jynx torquilla				✓		h	✓	✓	
				h	h			h ✓	,	✓	
32	Woodlark	Lullula arborea Alauda arvensis		h	h			V		∨	
33	Skylark						✓			∨	
34	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata								_	
35	Thekla Lark	Galerida Theklae					✓				
36	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla								✓	
37	Lesser Short-toed Lark	Calandrella rufescens								✓	
38	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra								✓	
39	Dupont's Lark	Chersophilus duponti								?	
40	Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris		√	√	√	√		√	✓	
41	House Martin	Delichon urbica		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	√	
42	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Tree Pipit	Anthus trivialis							✓		
44	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris								✓	
45	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
46	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea		✓					✓		

	Common name		May									
		Scientific name	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13		
47	Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos		h	h	✓	h	✓	h	✓		
48	Robin	Erithacus rubecula					✓					
49	Stonechat	Saxicola torquata					✓	✓	✓	✓		
50	Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra				✓						
51	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
52	Common Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe					✓	✓				
53	Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica					✓			✓		
54	Black Wheatear	Oenanthe leucura					✓					
55	Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush	Monticola saxatilis							✓	✓		
56	Blackbird	Turdus merula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
57	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos			h	h	h	h	h	h		
58	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus							✓			
59	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti				✓						
60	Melodious Warbler	Hippolais polyglotta		h		✓				✓		
61	Garden warbler	Sylvia borin			h							
62	Orphean Warbler	Sylvia hortensis		✓				✓	✓	√		
63	Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla							h	h		
64	Subalpine Warbler	Sylvia cantillans			✓	h						
65	Spectacle Warbler	Sylvia conspicillata					✓					
66	Bonelli's Warbler	Phylloscopus bonelli				✓		✓	✓	✓		
67	Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita						h				
68	Firecrest	Regulus ignicapillus			✓	/			✓			
69	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata			,		✓		,			
70	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus					<u> </u>	✓				
71	Crested Tit	Parus cristatus				✓		✓	h	✓		
72	Coal Tit	Parus ater				, ·		h		h		
73	Great Tit	Parus major		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			
74	Blue Tit	Parus caeruleus		✓	· ·	✓	✓	· ·	· ·	· ·		
				V		✓	V	▼	V	_ _		
75	Nuthatch	Sitta europaea				✓		V	L			
76	Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla		L	L			L	h			
77	Wren	Troglodytes trolodytes		h	h	h		h	h	h		
78	Red-backed Shrike	Lanius collurio		✓				√	✓			
79	Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator		V	✓	✓		✓		√		
80	Magpie	Pica pica	✓				✓			✓		
81	Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius						h	✓			
82	Chough	Pyrrhocorax Pyrrhocorax		✓	✓					h		
83	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
84	Jackdaw	Corvus monedula										
85	Raven	Corvus corax		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
86	Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus			✓	h		✓				
87	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
88	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
89	Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
90	Serin	Serinus serinus			✓	✓	✓			✓		
91	Linnet	Acanthis cannabina							h	✓		
92	Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
93	Greenfinch	Carduelis chloris				✓	h			✓		
94	Corn Bunting	Miliaria calandra			✓	✓	✓			✓		
95	Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus		✓		✓		✓				

			May 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13							
Common name	Scientific name	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	

Mammals

1	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes		✓			
2	European Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus		✓			
3	European Hare	Lepus europaeus			✓		
4	Iberian Hare	Lepus granatensis	✓				
5	Stone Marten	Martes foina	✓				

Butterflies & Moths

1	Swallowtail	Papilio machaon						✓	
2	Scarce (Spanish) Swallowtail	Iphiclides podalirius	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
3	Large White	Pieris brassicae	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Small White	Artogeia rapae	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Green-veined White	Artogeia napi		✓					✓
6	Bath White	Pontia daplidae					✓		✓
7	Western Dappled White	Euchloe crameri					✓	✓	
8	Orange Tip	Anthocharis cardamines	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
9	Clouded Yellow	Colias crocea		✓					
10	Pale Clouded Yellow	Colias hyale							✓
11	Berger's Clouded Yellow	Colias australis				✓	✓		
12	Mountain Clouded Yellow	Colias phicomone	✓						
13	Brimstone	Gonepteryx rhamni	✓				✓	✓	
14	Wood White	Leptidea sinapis			✓	✓			
15	Green Hairstreak	Callophrys rubi					✓	✓	
16	Little Blue	Cupido minimus	✓		✓				
17	Common Blue	Polyommatus icarus	✓	✓					
18	Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui						✓	
19	Marbled White	Melanargia galathea				✓			✓
20	Great Banded Grayling	Brintesia circe						✓	
21	Meadow Brown	Maniola jurtina	✓						✓
22	Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria	✓			✓		✓	
23	Wall Brown	Lasiommata megera	✓						
24	Grizzled Skipper	Pyrgus malvae						✓	✓
25	Long-tailed Blue	Lampides boeticus			✓				
26	Jersey Tiger Moth	Euplagia quadripunctaria			✓				