Spain's Sierra de Guara - Land of the Lammergeier

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 14 May 2019



Pyrenean Saxifrage

Enjoying the vultures closely!



Black Wheatear



Western Orphean Warbler

Report and images by Byron Palacios



Naturetrek Wolf's Lane Chawton
T: +44 (0)1962 733051
E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

Alton

Hampshire GU34 3HJ F: +44 (0)1962 736426

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Byron Palacios (leader) with four Naturetrek clients

Day 1 Tuesday 7th May

London Stansted – Zaragoza - Alquézar

Our fellow travellers arrived at Zaragoza airport in the late afternoon in order to start the tour. We then loaded the minibus and set off, heading north-east and up into La Hoya de Huesca (Alto Aragon), main gate of the Sierra de Guara Mountains. The scenery became increasingly impressive across the mountains, but most impressive was the arrival at the lovely and medieval village of Alquezar. We checked in at our superb and very comfortable hotel located in the heart of the village and then walked down the narrow streets towards Casa Gervasio, in order to enjoy a delicious first dinner together.

Day 2

Wednesday 8th May

Alquézar – Bierge – Ponzano – Rodellar

It was a great morning in Alquezar, although the weather was slightly unsettled, with some grey clouds bringing some early drops of water. After a relaxed and delicious breakfast, we walked amongst the small streets and ancient architecture till we arrived at the impressive 'backstage' of the village, a jaw-dropping landscape full of big crags and rocky cliffs; here, the range of local birds including Serin, Black Redstart, Common and Alpine Swift, Griffon Vultures, Red-billed Chough, Rock Dove, Crag Martin and Blue Rock Thrush. The rain persisted for quite a bit, so we changed our plans and drove off along the river Alcanadre valley, not far from the village of Bierge. Here, a nearby track parallel to the river produced very interesting birds such as Melodious Warbler, Firecrest, Griffon Vulture, Booted Eagle, a group of eight Honey Buzzards, and a Bonelli's Eagle which was an unexpected surprise! We then continued driving along the road reaching the village of Ponzano where we had lunch, enjoying great views of Corn Bunting, Woodchat Shrike, Cirl Bunting and Spotted Flycatcher afterwards.

The afternoon weather settled a little bit so we drove back towards Alquézar, making a diversion towards the area of Rodellar where we had great views of the Black Gorge, one of the most impressive canyon of the Sierra de Guara. We had lovely views of European Bee-eaters, Subalpine Warbler and great views of Western Orphean Warbler. Lower down the track and after a short drive, we found ourselves above a rocky wall where lots of Griffon Vultures were sat, giving us a fantastic spectacle. Dark skies came along threaten with heavy rain in the late afternoon, so we started drifting down the track, heading back to our hotel in order to have a break before checklist and a delicious dinner.

Day 3 Thursday 9th May

Colungo - Las Gargantas - Lecina

We had a lovely sunny morning today in Alquézar surrounded by the heavy noise of Nightingales calling from the various bushes around the village, and vultures constantly cruising the sky. After another delicious breakfast, we soon got ready to set off, driving up out of Alquezar and heading north of the Sierra, right through the village of Colungo, 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, offers a unique view of the river Vero and is a great spot to find some interesting species. We walked to the top of the bridge to admire the landscape set along this beautiful riparian area where we found Melodious Warbler, Stonechat, loud Cetti's Warbler, and a Woodchat Shrike hunting nearby. We took a walk around the bridge and the river, spotting a gorgeous Red Kite perched quietly on a snag, giving us close views of this lovely raptor, while noisy Nightingale were, as usual, calling from every corner of the area and we managed to find one right in the open of which we had great scope views. A Golden Oriole was calling in the distance, but we could not find any closer to where we were. After this very productive first stop, we continued our drive making the usual 'bread stop' which quickly produced Black and Red Kites, Griffon Vultures, Corn Bunting, and a lovely male Black Redstart.

We then entered the deep gorges and bendy roads from where we spotted the very precious plants of Pyrenean Saxifrage (Saxifraga longifolia) which were quite numerous this year, all laid out by this lovely old bridge overlooking the impressive canyons, surrounded by a large number of Common Swifts, Crag Martins, Alpine Swifts, Barn Swallows, House Martins and Red-rumped Swallows, all very active in the sky! We made another stop at the highest part of the road where lovely a 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 Common Swifts. We were sat here relaxed and admiring the beautiful scenery when two pairs of Egyptian Vultures flew nearby and eye-level to us. And as this wasn't enough, a large vulture overflew our heads very suddenly, it was a gorgeous Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier) drifting in the large canyon to give us amazing views! From this very exciting point, we could see the ancient village of Lecina, and as lunch time was hitting - we were certainly running out of the calories obtain from our very substantial breakfast! - we drove to this ancient village in order to eat our picnic lunch.

The weather looked a bit more promising after lunch, so we decided to take a walk on the track which leads to the village of Betorz, following a Common Cuckoo which was constantly calling around us, lots of Western Bonelli's Warblers, European Bee-eaters, Eurasian Hoopoe and Subalpine Warbler, amongst others. By the end of the afternoon, we drove back to Alquezar, getting there in time for a good break before a delicious dinner.

Day 4 Friday 10th May

Santa Cilia de Ponzzano - Bierge

Another beautiful morning in Alquezar, so it was ideal to celebrate it with another delicious breakfast. Afterwards, we set off towards the village of Santa Cilia de Ponzano, a little village located right in the heart of Sierra de Guara, truly 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 Aguilera. 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 a good 200lbs of meat, sheep legs and a few goose eggs, all collected very early in the morning from those local farms keen to help with the cause of aiding the large population of vultures on the area. We drove to the car park and walked up the hill towards the feeding point where a cloud of dozens of Vultures, mainly Griffons, covered the sky, with some of them patiently waiting perched on the rocks nearby.

© Naturetrek Peter Dunn

Once we were in the right spot, Manu directed us where we needed to be. Nearly 200 Griffon Vultures landed on the carcasses straight away, while a pair of Egyptian Vultures soared above them waiting for their turn as they landed in search of the goose eggs Manu has brought to them. Some Red and Black Kites were also around, waiting the opportunity to grab some bits too; 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 land on the site taking the eggs straight away from the Griffon Vultures; it was then when two Lammergeiers flew over our heads, checking out how were things going with the feast and waiting their moment to pick their bit. We moved a bit backwards to allow them to come closer or even to land confidently, but they did not trust us that much yet. Hence, we moved out from the site and checked them out from the other side of the gulley with much success as they landed to take some bones. They take them somewhere else to be smashed against the ground, making smaller pieces of them so they can swallow the bones more easily. One of them flew beautifully above us, very close, showing off his so-handsome-looking plumage, perhaps too handsome to be classified as a vulture!

After enjoying the show delivered by these lovely birds, we returned to the village in order to visit the Museum Casa del Buitre (Vultures House) in order to enjoy the beautiful display, put together to demonstrate the life cycle and ecology of the area. After this, we thanked Manu very much for his help and moved to the village's mirador in order to have our picnic lunch. Whilst we ate, we kept an eye on the mountain clearing where Manu laid the carcass, finding more Lammergeiers landing in this area, fabulous!

After this little break, we started our drive back to Alquézar, making a stop in the village of Bierge where we had a nice coffee break, followed by a few birding stops which produced interesting birds such as Rock Sparrows, Subalpine Warbler, Serin, and lots of lovely European Bee-eater. We then kept going towards Alquezar where we took a break in our hotel, followed by some drinks and nibbles, checklist and another delicious local supper at Casa Gervasio's Restaurant.

Day 5

Saturday 11th May

Monte Aragón Castle – Belsué – Nocito

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 drove around 40 minutes till we got to Monte Aragón Castle. This interesting building lies on the 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 showed formations of rose puddingstone, highly vulnerable to erosion which has here created sugar-loaf forms. We stopped at the base of the narrow road which leads to the castle in order to take some photos of the highly contrasting landscape, and also to look for some wildlife, and we found lots! A good variety of butterflies and important bird species, being the best place to find 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 had fantastic views of Sardinian Warbler.

After visiting the top of the hill where the castle itself lies, we continued our driving towards the northern slope of Sierra de Guara, making a coffee break in the village of Arguis, before continuing to drive to the top of the

brand-new motorway pass, where we enjoyed our lunch in a nice breeze and sunshine with wonderful views of the Pyrenees. Back on track and passing the junction that took us back into the Sierra de Guara Natural Park, we drove down the narrow mountain tracks, already getting terrific views of the Belsué valley. We had a good stroll around followed, by a short drive to one of the highest points of the road (nearly 1,500 metres) where we took a short walk on one of the ancient trails of the area. A few interesting things were found here, such as European Pied Flycatcher, Stonechat, Common Kestrel and Woodchat Shrike, amongst others.

Our next and final stop was made at 920 metres, above the village of Nocito, where we took a nice stroll which produced lovely wildflowers and butterflies. We then drove down to Nocito itself, where we checked into our lodge in order to take a break. Some of us took a short stroll around the village before we gathered together at the local bar for a nice drink where we did our checklist, followed by a nice mountain-style supper! After dinner, we went for a night walk and managed to see a lovely Eurasian Scops Owl.

Day 6

Sunday 12th May

Nocito - Used - Bara

Today, we had a nice walk around the village of Nocito, enjoying the views and the chilly start of the sunny morning in the mountains. After a delicious and relaxed breakfast, we drove a short distance, leaving our vehicle not far from Nocito and we walked along the road towards the village of Used. We saw fantastic birds along this pleasant walk, such as Short-toed Eagle, Serin, Cirl Bunting, heard a noisy Wryneck, had great views of Rock Buntings, Western Orphean Warbler, Western Bonelli's Warbler and Stonechat, amongst others. We arrived at Used where we enjoyed looking this small hamlet. We then took another short ride to the end of the track, where the hamlet of Bara is located. We set out our lunch and had a bit of a break overlooking the lovely landscape, a very pleasant time indeed, enjoying the gorgeous sunshine and the many Nightingales, Garden Warblers and Black Redstarts calling around us!

After lunch, we took a trek following the northern bank of the river Alcanadre where we saw more interesting wildlife despite the sunshine which was hitting hard by the time. We then drove back to Nocito in order to have a break in the late afternoon, followed by a delicious local-style dinner.

Day 7

Monday 13th May

Nocito - Ibirque

We woke up to 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 slope of Guara, going through high passes which already have the contrast of the supreme Pyrenees in the background, fully snow-covered, which we enjoyed alot! We made a stop at the Ibirque pass which overlooks the whole northern valley of Sobrarbe and the village of Lasaosa, from where we saw Common Rock Thrush, Common Cuckoo, Northern Wheatear, Griffon Vulture and Tree Pipit. After enjoying a nice walk around this very interesting area, we carried on drifting down the valley, 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 of which produced gorgeous views of Crested Tit, Tawny Pipit and Rock Bunting, amongst others. As the sun was strong, we

© Naturetrek Peter Dunn

returned to the Ibirque pass where we enjoyed our picnic lunch while getting lots of lovely butterflies in view and a full view of the mighty Pyrenees!

After this nice visit, we returned to Nocito in order to take a break, followed by a nice walk along one of the village tracks where we found very interesting orchids, butterflies and other wildlife. After this, we gathered together to complete our checklist of the day, followed by a delicious local supper.

Day 8

Tuesday 14th May

Nocito - Belchite - Zaragoza

After our last delicious breakfast in the village of Nocito, we said goodbyes to our hosts Bertrand and Marie and thanked them for their kind and brilliant hospitality. Wer drove up out of the area in order to head south-west, right to the area of Belchite, more precisely, to the reserve of El Planeron. The dramatic dry and red land habitat was the appropriate place to see many species of larks such as Crested, Calandra, Greater and Lesser Short-toed Larks, Skylark, and Thekla Larks, which we got to see well. We also had great views of Northern Wheatear, Marsh Harrier, Black Kites, Iberian Grey Shrike, and Red Kite. As the temperature rose higher towards lunchtime, we enjoyed our picnic lunch in the old and bombed village of Belchite, taking a close view of the devastation caused to this particular village during the days of the Spanish Civil War.

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

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.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays

www.twitter.com/naturetrektours

www.instagram.com/naturetrek wildlife holidays

Species Lists

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

			May								
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
1	Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix		h							
2	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos								✓	
3	European Nightjar	Caprimulgus europaeus							✓		
4	Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
5	Common Swift	Apus apus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus		h	h	h	h	✓	✓	h	
7	Rock Dove	Columba livia		✓	✓	✓				✓	
8	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur								h	
10	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
11	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis					✓			✓	
12	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	✓				✓				
13	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	✓								
14	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	✓								
15	Bearded Vulture	Gypaetus barbatus			✓	✓					
16	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus		✓	✓	✓	✓				
17	European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus		✓							
18	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus	✓	√	✓	✓	✓		√		
19	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus				✓	✓	√			
20	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus		√							
21	Bonelli's Eagle	Aquila fasciata		✓							
22	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus								✓	
23	Red Kite	Milvus milvus	✓	√	✓	✓			√	✓	
24	Black Kite	Milvus migrans	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
 25	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		√	✓	✓	✓	√	√	✓	
26	Eurasian Scops Owl	Otus scops					/	h	√		
<u>-</u>	Tawny Owl	Strix aluco							h		
28	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops		h	✓	✓	h	√	h		
29 29	European Bee-Eater	Merops apiaster		···	√	✓	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·				
30	Eurasian Wryneck	Jynx torquilla		·	h	h	h	h	h		
31	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		,		- ''	- ''	···	- II		
32	Iberian Green Woodpecker	Picus sharpei						✓	✓		
33	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus					✓	•	•		
34	Iberian Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis					ļ •			✓	
35	Woodchat Shrike	Lanius mendionalis Lanius senator		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		Ť	
36	Eurasian Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus		h	h			h	✓	h	
30 37		Garrulus glandarius			—————————————————————————————————————				· /	- ''	
38	Eurasian Jay Eurasian Magpie			✓	V	✓	V	•	, ,	✓	
	<u> </u>	Pica pica		∨	V	✓	✓			_	
39	Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax		V	V	,	V			✓	
40	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula						./	✓	✓	
41	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone			/	/	/	√	V	_	
42	Northern Raven	Corvus corax		√	✓	✓	✓	✓		-	
43	Coal Tit	Periparus ater	-	h					✓	-	
44	European Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus			√			√		-	
45	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		√	V	V		√	√	_	
46	Great Tit	Parus major		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

© Naturetrek Peter Dunn

				May								
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14		
47	Woodlark	Lullula arborea			h	✓		h	✓	✓		
48	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis								✓		
49	Thekla Lark	Galerida theklae					✓			✓		
50	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata					✓			✓		
51	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla								✓		
52	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra					✓			✓		
53	Lesser Short-toed Lark	Alaudala rufescens								✓		
54	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
55	Red-rumped Swallow	Cercropis daurica			✓							
56	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
57	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti		h	h	h						
58	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus					✓					
59	Western Bonelli's Warbler	Phylloscopus bonelli			✓	h	h	✓	✓	h		
60	Melodious Warbler	Hippolais polyglotta		✓	✓	✓	✓			h		
61	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla		✓	✓	✓	h	✓	✓			
62	Garden Warbler	Sylvia borin		h				✓	√			
63	Western Orphean Warbler	Sylvia hortensis		✓	h	h	✓	✓				
64	Dartford Warbler	Sylvia undata							✓			
65	Subalpine Warbler	Sylvia cantillans		✓	✓	✓						
66	Sardinian Warbler	Sylvia melanocephala		✓	✓	✓	✓					
67	Common Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla		✓	✓	✓	✓					
68	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		✓	h	h	h	√	√			
69	Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea						h				
70	Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla						✓				
71	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor		✓	✓	✓	√	√	√	✓		
72	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	√	√			
73	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos						√				
74	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus							√			
75	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata		✓				√				
76	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula					h	√	√	√		
77	Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos		✓	h	h	h	✓	✓	h		
78	European Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca					···	✓				
79	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros		✓	/	✓	✓	✓	√	✓		
80	Common Rock Thrush	Monticola saxatilis						_	✓			
81	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius		✓			✓		,			
82	Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra						✓				
83	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola			✓	✓	✓	·	✓	√		
84	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe			ľ	•	✓	•	· /	· ·		
85	Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica					✓		•	_		
86	Black Wheatear	Oenanthe leucura					✓					
			✓	✓	/	✓	✓	✓	✓			
87	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	V	∨	, v	∨	∨	V	V			
88	Rock Sparrow	Petronia petronia		∨	✓	∨ ✓	∨	✓	✓			
89	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba		V	V	V	✓	V	✓			
90	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris		✓	✓	✓	∨	√	∨	✓		
91	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs										
92	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		√	√	√	√	✓	✓	✓		
93	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		√	√	√	√					
94	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
95	European Serin	Serinus serinus	✓	√	√	√	√	✓	√	√		
96	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		

			May							
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
97	Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia						✓	✓	✓
98	Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus		✓				✓	h	

Butterflies

Scarce (Spanish) Swallowtail, Iphiclides podalirius

Large White, Pieris brassicae

Bath White, Pontia daplidae

Mountain Dappled White, Euchloe simplonia

Orange Tip, Anthocharis cardamines

Pale Clouded Yellow, Colias hyale

Cleopatra, Gonepteryx Cleopatra

Green Hairstreak, Callophrys rubi

Baton Blue, Pseudophilotes baton

Common Blue, Polyommatus icarus

Black-eyed Blue, Glaucopsyche melanops

Red Admiral, Vanessa atalanta

Small Tortoiseshell, Aglais urticae

Twin-spot Fritillary, Brenthis hecate

Provencal Fritillary, Melitaea deione

Weaver's Fritillary, Boloria dia

Small Heath, Coenonympha pamphilus

Wall Brown, Lasiommata megera

Grizzled Skipper, Pyrgus malvae

Red-underwing Skipper, Spialia sertorius

Black-veined White, Aporia cratargi

Small White, Pieris rapae

Western Dappled White, Euchloe crameri

Provence Orange Tip, Anthocharis euphenoides

Clouded Yellow, Colias crocea

Brimstone, Gonepteryx rhamni

Wood White, Leptidea sinapis

Silver-studded Blue, Plebejus argus

Adonis Blue, Lysandra bellargus

Escher's Blue, Polyommatus escheri

Large Tortoiseshell, Nymphalis polychloros

Painted Lady, Vanessa cardui

Cardinal, Pandoriana pandora

Glanville Fritillary, Melitaea cinxia

Spanish Fritillary, Euphydryas desfontainii

Spanish Marbled White, Melanargia ines

Speckled Wood, Pararge aegeria

Large Wall Brown, Lasiommata maera

Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper, Pyrgus armoricanus

Other Wildlife

Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*Large Psamodrommus, *Psammodromus algirus*Common Wall Lizard, *Podarcis muralis*Orange Footman Moth, *Eilema sororcula*

Roe Deer, Capreolus capreolus Moorish Gecko, Tarentola mauritanica Viviparous Lizard, Zootoca vivipara Broad-bordered Bee Hawk-moth, Hemaris fuciformis



Violet Limodorum Orchid (Violet bird's-