

# The Spanish Pyrenees

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 25 May 2008

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Riquelme



Griffon Vulture



Bee Orchid



Black Woodpecker

Report and photos compiled by Gerald Broddelez



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## Day 1

Sunday 18th May

Berdun

Weather: overcast and rainy

Our Ryanair to Zaragoza flight departed London on time, arriving in Spain in the late evening. From the airport we picked up our hired minibuses and continued on to Berdun, arriving shortly after midnight. Berdun is a spectacular old hilltop village. It sits amid the floodplains of the Aragon and Veral rivers, surrounded by the mountains and foothills of the Spanish Pyrenees.

## Day 2

Monday 19th May

Berdun

Weather details: overcast, fresh

Today we explored the bird and plant-rich areas right on our doorstep. The morning was spent walking down to and near the Veral River. We walked slowly down along the road looking at flying Griffon Vultures, Black and Red Kites and perched Serins. There was plenty to hear as well, including Nightingales, Melodious Warblers and Sardinian Warblers.

Once at the river we had a good time botanically and we managed to add many new plants to the list. Best of all were *Helianthemum appeninum*, *H. nummularium*, *H. nummularium* ssp. *pyrenaicum* and *Ononis fruticosa*. Several Bee-eaters and Golden Oriole flying overhead kept the birders alert. A male Cirl Bunting was singing and showed itself briefly.

We started the afternoon with a walk along the Aragon River, stopping en route to watch a Woodchat Shrike and singing Corn Bunting. During our walk we found good birds. Overhead we had a great time identifying both light and dark phase Booted Eagle, a single Short-toed Eagle and a male Marsh Harrier. At the same time, the bushes and scrub were alive with singing Nightingales, Cetti's Warbler, Melodious Warbler and Blackcap, and a Woodlark was flushed from its nest. By now it was a bit warmer, so the first butterflies put in an appearance and we had great views of Mazarine Blue and Grizzled Skippers, which were sunning themselves.

Penduline Tits were heard calling and we found their nest, but the birds refused to show themselves, probably due to the cold northerly wind. We watched the nest for a while with the scope and were amazed how delicate it was, swinging in the wind. A Spotted Flycatcher nearby was a good find.

We then drove to the other side of the river and quickly found a good selection of orchids with a large specimen of *Orchis purpurea* the highlight, but we also added *Orchis militaris*, *Ophrys sphegodes* and *Cephalanthera longifolia* to the morning's tally. Other plants included *Aphyllanthes monspeliensis*, *Dipcadi serotonin* and *Muscari comosum*.

The best bird of the day was a rare Lammergeier that flew low over the ridge, giving fantastic views to all – we saw it dropping a bone! Despite it being a cool and overcast day we did quite well seeing a wide selection of birds and plants including a few rare ones.

#### Highlights of the day

Birds: Griffon Vulture, Lammergeier, Booted Eagle, Red Kite, Nightingale, Common Wheatear, Bee-eater, Golden Oriole, Cirl Bunting

Invertebrates: Mazarine Blue, Grizzled Skipper

Plants: *Cephalanthera longifolia*, *Plantanthera bifolia* and *chlorantha*, *Orchis militaris*, *Ophrys scolopax*

## Day 3

## Tuesday 20th May

### Berdun

Weather details: sunny and cool/warm

Today we explored the hills and limestone outcrops to the south of Berdun. At our first stop, Embalse de la Pena, we enjoyed good views of Bee-eaters and Rock Sparrows on the wires and a pair of Great Reed Warbler singing from the reed beds. We heard several calling Turtle Doves and Golden Orioles but, despite trying hard, only had fleeting glimpses. Plants seen included *Isopyrum thalictroides*, *Linum narbonense* and *Convolvulus cantabrica*.

We then moved on to visit the spectacular red rock pinnacles at Riglos, stopping en route for a photo stop, where we saw also our first Sardinian Warbler.

At Riglos we took our picnic lunch watched by Griffon Vultures, Red-billed Chough, Sardinian and Subalpine Warbler, a nice male Blue Rock Thrush and several butterflies, including the Scarce Swallowtail and Western Dappled White. All the time we were being watched by some brave mountain climbers above us. As we left we found a perched Peregrine Falcon and viewed it through our scopes.

After lunch we drove south and visited the 11th century Castillo de Loarre, set in a beautiful hillside with superb views south over the plains. We explored the area and woodlands around the Castle and found such delights as singing Bonelli's Warbler, Crested Tits, a male Rock Thrush and several male Stonechat.

The plant list also got a boost as we saw *Saponaria ocymoides* and *Lonicera pyrenaica*, among many others. A last stop was made at some meadows near Puerta de la Reina where we found a few Orchids, including *Ophrys apifera* and *Ophrys insectifer* as well as several butterflies, including Speckled Wood, Wall Brown, Glanville Fritillary and several Common Blues.

## Highlights of the day

Birds: Egyptian Vulture, Peregrine Falcon, Crested Tit, Bonelli's Warbler, Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting

Invertebrates: Glanville Fritillary, Wall Brown

Plants: *Saxifraga longifolia*, *Linum viscosum*, *Lonicera pyrenaica*

## Day 4

Wednesday 21st May

## Berdun

Weather details: sunny and warm

After breakfast we drove to the Aisa Valley, stopping en route for a Red Fox. We made several more stops en route adding Lady and Naked Men Orchid, Wood White and many Red Kites. Once at Aisa we walked among the streamside meadows of this remote Pyrenean valley. The botanists had a great time identifying the superb flora, which included several *Orchis purpurea*, *Dactylorhiza sambucina*, *Primula farinosa*, *Caltha palustris*, *Gentiana acaulis* and *G. verna*. On the butterfly front Piedmont Ringlet, Berger's Clouded Yellows and Little Blue were seen well.

During lunch a Lammergeier flew high overhead and many IZARD (Pyrenean cousin of the Chamois) were found lying in the snow. Birds were keeping a low profile but we had good views of a male and a young Rock Thrush, later followed by several Red-backed Shrikes which we viewed through scopes as well as many Wheatears and Linnets.

After lunch we walked towards the end of the valley in search of good birds or plants. The botanists did well as they found the endemic Lesser Daffodil (*Narcissus minor*) and a host of other goodies, such as *Bartsia alpina*, *Pedicularis pyrenaica*, *Pinguicula vulgaris* and *Ajuga pyramidalis*. At a rocky outcrop we found a Red Fox being mobbed by several Choughs and our first Alpine Marmots! A short stop en route back to Jaca added a nice male Spanish Festoon, a South White Admiral and Duke of Burgundy Butterfly to the list.

## Highlights of the day

Birds: Chough, Lammergeier, Red-backed Shrike, Rock thrush

Invertebrates: Spanish Festoon, South White Admiral, Duke of Burgundy

Plants: *Gentiana acaulis*, *G. verna*, *Pinguicula vulgaris*

## Day 5

Thursday 22nd May

## Berdun

Weather: overcast, sunny and a few drops of rain

This morning we drove up the Hecho Valley. Surrounded by stunning scenery, we were soon on our way through the forest. Here we heard a Black Woodpecker that showed briefly in flight and several Short-toed Treecreeper and Goldcrest.

A walk through the woodland produced some good plants as well, including *Hepatica nobilis* and *Primula elatior*. It was already mid-morning when we reached our target spot – a large rock-face, home to a pair of Wallcreepers. We waited for about 45 minutes until Betty spotted a single bird foraging in a crag between the two main rocks.

For the next five minutes we were able to observe the bird through the scopes and see it flashing its red wingspots from time to time. Unfortunately, it then disappeared behind the rock not to be seen again. Several choughs kept us entertained while we waited for the bird to reappear. We also had great sightings of Griffon Vultures and found a group of IZARD, plus *Linaria alpina* and *Gentiana occidentalis* among the plants. On our return to the car park we found a tree full of Citril Finches.

During the afternoon we visited the monasteries of San Juan de la Peña. On our way up we looked at roadside plants such as *Tulipa australis*, *Satureja montana*, *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* and breeding Griffon Vultures. Back at the car park, a nesting Black Woodpecker kept us entertained for the next half hour as both the male and female came in to feed the hungry young. It was a spectacular sight and one of the highlights of the holiday for many. After a coffee and ice cream we walked to another viewpoint, admiring the vultures flying below us. We made a detour on our way back to base, due to a very pretty Roller sitting on the wires and several Black and Red Kites – a fantastic end to a beautiful day.

#### Highlights of the day

Birds: Lammergeier, Black Woodpecker, Roller, Wallcreeper

Plants: *Tulpa sylvestris*, *Orchis chamagneuxi*, *Hepatica nobilis*

## Day 6

Friday 23rd May

### Berdun

Weather details: rainy and overcast with dry spells during the afternoon

After breakfast we were on our way to the Spanish-French border where we were going to spend the rest of the day. We stopped first near Formigal. Here we checked the wooded slopes in vain for Lady's Slipper Orchid (*Cypripedium calceolus*). The roadside meadows were full of orchids. It continued to rain as we made our way to the French border, so we had a coffee and did some shopping before going for a short walk in the alpine meadows. Fortunately, the heavens closed for a while and we were able to 'botanise' along the way and added a whole new set of plants to our list. Our best finds were *Anemone narcissifolia*, *Corydalis solida*, *Gentiana acaulis*, *Fritillaria pyrenaica* and many others. Birds were keeping a low profile, but we still found several Wheatears and Water Pipits displaying, and our first Alpine Choughs.

We drove back down and stopped for our picnic lunch along a man-made reservoir and were entertained by a Booted Eagle, a pair of Honey Buzzards and a single Egyptian Vulture. Because the conditions were still bad we decided to drive down again to lower ground in search of more clement weather and wildlife. We then walked part of the famous Santiago trail to the village of Arres, seeing *Carduelis mitissimus*, *Melittis melissophyllum* and *Silene nutans* along the way.

After dinner we went for a night session. Unfortunately it started raining as we arrived, so we only heard frogs and toads calling and saw a single Hare.

#### Highlights of the day

Birds: Water Pipit, Alpine Chough, Honey Buzzard, Booted Eagle

Mammals: European Hare

Plants: *Fritillaria pyrenaica*, *Anemone narcissifolia* and *Linaria supina*

## Day 7

Saturday 24th May

### Berdun

Weather details: rainy and overcast

After breakfast we drove to the Foz de Binies where we started our walk through the spectacular gorge. Fortunately it stopped raining, so we had quite a pleasant walk through the gorge. A single Lammergeier and Egyptian Vulture were seen overhead, while the ledges held many Griffon Vultures, allowing us to get great views and take excellent pictures. The usually quiet river that runs through the gorge had changed into a real torrent, but we still managed to see a single Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail and a pair of Dippers. New plants we found included *Petrocoptis pyrenaica*, *Ruscus aculeatus*, *Allium sphaerocephalum* and *A. moly*

After a siesta in the afternoon we explored the edges of the Aragon River again. We had excellent scope views of Woodlark carrying food, and after waiting a bit the calling Penduline Tit showed well to all. It was a great end to our stay.

Highlights of the day.

Birds: Lammergeier, Griffon Vulture, Penduline Tit, Woodlark

Plants: *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, *Ramonda myconi*, *Jasminum fruticans*

## Day 8

Sunday 25th May

### London

Weather details: sunny and warm

This morning the rain and grey skies made us change our plans, so instead of going to Binies we went south and birded in the steppes around the Embalse de Sotonera. We had a good time identifying several new bird and butterfly species for the list. Huge Calandra Larks were displaying and singing all around us with Crested Larks nearby for comparison. A Honey Buzzard flew low overhead and a pair of pretty Black-eared Wheatears posed in the scope.

We made a short stop in a roadside village and admired a White Stork with young on the nest. Continuing to the lakes we decided to move on as it started raining quite heavily. It was a while before we reached Zaragoza. We had our picnic just to the south, where we saw a Black-eared Wheatear. Low flying Griffon Vultures kept us company before driving further south to the steppes near Belchite.

Here we walked along a trail into the arid steppe habitat in search of larks and other species. Many larks were singing and species included Thekla, Greater Short-toed, Crested and the rare Dupont's. Although singing at very close range we just could not get the birds into view.

We then drove to a wetland area, stopping en route for a family of Hoopoe. The wetland held a few Black-winged Stilts but not much else. Since the roads had become very muddy after the heavy rain of the last couple of days we decided to turn around and drive back to Zaragoza.

Here we had our last picnic dinner together before saying our goodbyes...

### Highlights of the day

Birds: Honey Buzzard, Black-eared Wheatear, Black Tern, Marsh Harrier

Invertebrates: Spanish Fritillary, False Ilex Hairstreak, Essex Skipper, Spanish Gatekeeper, Spanish Marbled White

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The Naturetrek Facebook page is now live: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Naturetrek-Wildlife-Holidays/9765181485>. Setting up a personal profile at [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) is quick, free and easy. Do please pay us a visit!

## Species Lists

### Birds

- Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*  
 Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*  
 Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*  
 Red Kite *Milvus milvus*  
 Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*  
 Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*  
 Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*  
 Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus*  
 Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*  
 Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*  
 Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans*  
 Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*  
 Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*  
 Alpine Swift *Apus melba*  
 Hoopoe *Upupa epops*  
 Black Woodpecker *Picus martius*  
 Great-spotted Woodpecker *Picus picus*  
 Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*  
 Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*  
 Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*  
 Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*  
 White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*  
 Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*  
 Dunnock *Prunella modularis*  
 Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*  
 Common Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*  
 Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*  
 Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*  
 Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*  
 Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*  
 Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*  
 Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans*  
 Bonelli's Warbler *Phylloscopus bonelli*  
 Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*  
 Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*  
 Marsh Tit *Parus palustris*  
 Great Tit *Parus major*  
 Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*  
 Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*  
 Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*  
 Jay *Garrulus glandarius*  
 Alpine Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus*  
 Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*  
 Raven *Corvus corax*  
 Spotless Starling *Sturnus unicolor*  
 House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*  
 Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*  
 Serin *Serinus serinus*  
 Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*  
 Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*  
 Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus*  
 Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*  
 White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*  
 Black Kite *Milvus migrans*  
 Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*  
 Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*  
 Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*  
 Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*  
 Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*  
 Hobby *Falco subbuteo*  
 Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*  
 Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*  
 Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*  
 Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*  
 European Swift *Apus apus*  
 Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*  
 Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*  
 Woodlark *Lullula arborea*  
 Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*  
 Dupont's Lark *Chersophilus duponti*  
 House Martin *Delichon urbica*  
 Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*  
 Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*  
 Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*  
 Robin *Erithacus rubecula*  
 Black Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*  
 Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis*  
 Blackbird *Turdus merula*  
 Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*  
 Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta*  
 Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis*  
 Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*  
 Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*  
 Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*  
 Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caedatus*  
 Crested Tit *Parus cristatus*  
 Coal Tit *Parus ater*  
 Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus*  
 Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*  
 Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*  
 Magpie *Pica pica*  
 Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*  
 Carrion Crow *Corvus corone cornix*  
 Roller *Coracias garrulus*  
 Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*  
 Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*  
 Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*  
 Citril Finch *Serinus citrinella*  
 Linnet *Acanthis cannabina*  
 Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*  
 Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*  
 Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia*

## Butterflies

Scarce (Spanish) Swallowtail *Iphiclides podalirius*  
 Black-veined White *Aporia crataegi*  
 Small White *Artogeia rapae*  
 Orange Tip *Anthocharis cardamines*  
 Brimstone *Gonepteryx rhamni*  
 Little Blue *Cupido minimus*  
 South Brown Argus *Aricia cramera*  
 Adonis Blue *Lysandra bellargus*  
 Duke of Burgundy *Hamearis lucina*  
 Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae*  
 De Prunners Ringlet *Erebia meolans*  
 Wall Brown *Lasiommata megera*  
 Red-underwing Skipper *Spialia sertorius*

Spanish Festoon *Zerynthia rumina*  
 Large White *Pieris brassicae*  
 Western Dappled White *Euchloe crameri*  
 Clouded Yellow *Colias crocea*  
 Wood White *Leptidea sinapis*  
 Green-underside Blue *Glaucopsyche alexis*  
 Amanda Blue *Polymmatius amandus*  
 Common Blue *Polymmatius icarus*  
 South White Admiral *Limentitis reducta*  
 Glanville Fritillary *Melitaea cinxia*  
 Speckled Wood *Pararge aegeria*  
 Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus malvae*  
 Dingy Skipper *Erynnis tages*

## Moths

Burnet Companion  
 Hummingbird Hawk-moth  
 Latticed Heath  
 Pine Processionary Moth

Mother Shipton  
 Broad-bordered Bee Hawk-moth  
 Silver-Y

## Mammals

Alpine Marmot  
 Red Squirrel  
 Red Fox

Izard (Chamois)  
 Roe Deer  
 European Hare

## Reptiles & amphibians

Common Wall Lizard  
 Ocellated Lizard  
 Edible Frog

Iberian Wall Lizard  
 Common Frog

## Other insects

Carpenter Bee