

The Spanish Pyrenees

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 May - 1 June 2008



Lady's Slipper Orchid



Griffon Vultures



Berdun



Bee Orchid

Report and photos compiled by Gerald Broddez



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: Gerald Broddelez
Richard Turnell

Participants: Frank Comstock
Jenny Comstock
Heather Scott
Jenny Hartshorne
Karen Patchett
Susan Clarke
Guy Meredith
Serena Meredith
Jonina Gudmundsdottir
Holmgeir Bjornsson

Day 1

Sunday 25th May

Berdun

Weather details: overcast and rainy

Our flight with Ryanair to Zaragoza departed London on time, arriving in Spain in the late evening. From the airport we picked up our minibuses and continued on to Berdun. We arrived after midnight and were greeted by rain! Berdun is a spectacular old hilltop village, sitting amidst the flood-plains of the Aragon and Veral rivers, yet surrounded by the mountains and foothills of the Spanish Pyrenees. In Berdun we were staying in a comfortable and characterful house and our hostess, Melanie, quickly allocated us rooms.

Day 2

Monday 26th May

Berdun

Weather details: rain and cool

Today we explored the bird and plant-rich areas right on our doorstep. Because it was raining heavily we decided to change our plans slightly and have a look around the village first. After getting the keys we all went into the church and were surprised how big and well maintained it all was despite being built in the 11th century. We then had a quick look at the bakery where we could see one of the old wood ovens still being used.

After lunch we drove down to the Aragon River stopping en route for a Woodchat Shrike and our first Crested Larks and Corn Buntings. During our walk we found good birds – several singing Nightingales, Cetti's Warbler, Garden Warbler, Woodlarks, Cirl Bunting and Golden Orioles. But it was the Penduline Tits that stole the show. We watched a new nest being built by a male for a while with the scope, while the old nest had been taken over by a pair of Blue Tits. Just fantastic!

On the plant front we did very well, and we saw a whole series of orchids – Bee, Woodcock, Lesser Spider, Greater and Lesser Butterfly and Robust Marsh.

We then drove to the other side of the river and quickly found another good selection of orchids with Military and Dark-red Helleborine Slender Broomrape being among the highlights. On the butterfly front we also did quite well during the afternoon seeing Baton and Provençal Chalkhill Blue, Large Wall Brown, Pearly Heath, Queen-of-Spain Fritillary and Red-underwing Skipper. The whole time we were being watched by a procession of birds of prey which included Griffon Vultures, Black and Red Kites, and a white-phase Booted Eagle.

Despite a rainy start to the day we did quite well, seeing a wide selection of birds and plants including a few rare ones.

Highlights of the day

Birds: Booted Eagle, Red Kite, Nightingale, Penduline Tit, Woodchat Shrike

Invertebrates: Provençal Chalkhill Blue, Baton Blue, Pearly Heath, Large Wall Brown

Plants: *Cephalanthera rubra*, *Plantanthera bifolia*, *P.chlorantha*, *Orchis militaris*, *Ophrys scolopax* and *Orobranche gracilis*

Day 3

Tuesday 27th May

Berdun

Weather details: cloudy, overcast and rainy

Today we explored the hills and limestone outcrops to the south of Berdun. We stopped en route to Riglos along the road to look at some *Gladiolus* (*G. illyricus*) and Fragrant Orchid.

We then stopped at Embalse de la Peña and enjoyed good telescope views of a pair of Great Reed Warbler. We heard several calling Cetti's Warblers and Golden Orioles but only had fleeting glimpses.

We then moved on to visit the spectacular red rock pinnacles at Riglos, stopping en route to look at a small colony of Crag Martins. At Riglos we had our picnic lunch watched by Griffon Vultures, Red-billed Chough, Sardinian and Subalpine Warbler, loud calling Peregrines, several Egyptian Vultures, Rock Sparrows and several brave mountain climbers. We also added a new butterfly to our list – Western Dappled White.

After lunch we drove south and visited the 11th century Castillo de Loarre, set beautifully into the hillside with superb views south over the plains. We explored the area and woodlands around the Castle and found such goodies as singing Bonelli's Warbler, Crested Tits and a family of Stonechats. The plant list also got a boost as we saw *Antirrhinum majus*, *Lonicera pyrenaica* and *Saponaria ocymoides*.

Highlights of the day

Birds: Peregrine, Great Reed Warbler, Stonechat, Sardinian Warbler, Subalpine Warbler, Bonelli's Warbler

Invertebrates: Western Dappled White

Plants: *Gladiolus illyricus*, *Orchis ustulata*, *Gymnadenia conopsea*

Day 4

Wednesday 28th May

Berdun

Weather details: overcast with occasional rain, especially during late afternoon

This morning we drove up the Hecho Valley. A Roe Deer crossed the road in front of us, soon followed by another. Surrounded by stunning scenery and freshly fallen snow, we were soon on our way to the cliffs above the forests. We saw a lot of birds as we walked through the woodland and also at a stop we made in a large clearing – several Short-toed Treecreepers, Crested tits and Goldcrest were all seen well at eyelevel. We saw some interesting plants as well, including *Hepatica nobilis* and *Moneses uniflora*.

It was already late morning when we reached our target spot – a large rock-face, home to a pair of Wallcreepers. We waited for about an hour for the birds to appear. While waiting, we had great sightings of a pair of perched Lammergeier, busy breaking bones. We also saw many Griffon Vultures and choughs, several IZARD (Chamois) on the opposite slopes, plus *Vitaliana primuliflora* and *Gentiana occidentalis* among the plants. Suddenly, a Wallcreeper was spotted but unfortunately flew away along the cliffs not to be found again.

On our way down we stopped to look at a small group of Citril Finch through our telescopes before having lunch back at the car park. On the way down we stopped at a small meadow and found Burnt tip Orchids.

After this we drove south and during the afternoon we visited the monasteries of San Juan de la Peña. We stopped halfway up to look at some roadside plants such as Wild Tulip (*Tulipa australis*) and *Brimeura amethystinus*. After a coffee at the new Monasteria we walked to the viewpoint, stopping to look at Green Winged Orchid (*Orchis morio ssp. champagneuxii*) and to admire the snow-covered mountain range in the distance.

Back at the car park we had good views of Nuthatch and Firecrest, and also brief looks at a flyby Black Woodpecker.

Highlights of the day

Birds: Lammergeier, Firecrest, Crested Tit, Citril Finch, Short-toed Treecreeper

Mammals: Roe Deer, IZARD

Plants: *Hepatica nobilis*, *Moneses uniflora*, *Tulipa australis*

Day 5

Thursday 29th May

Berdun

Weather details: overcast, sunny and warm

After breakfast we were on our way to the Spanish-French border where we spent the rest of the day. We stopped first near Formigal. Here, a local ranger took us up the wooded slopes to look at the Lady's Slipper Orchids *Cypripedium calceolus*, one of which was just getting in flower, and then to a roadside meadow full of orchids with *Orchis purpurea*, *Dactylorhiza majalis* and *Menyanthes trifoliata*.

We then drove up to the Spanish-French border. From the parking lot we walked up towards our picnic spot, botanising along the way and adding a whole new set of plants to the list. Best of all were *Anemone narcissifolia*, *Corydalis solida*, *Gentiana acaulis*, *Soldanella alpina*, *Fritillaria pyrenaica* and many others.

Because of the sunny weather and the clear skies we had fantastic views of the mountains around us. Water Pipits and Wheatears were displaying, and several Alpine Chough plus a fantastic Lammergeier flew low overhead giving outstanding views.

After our 'picnic lunch with a view', during which we were entertained by a couple of Alpine Marmots, we walked up into the meadows in search of the specialities of the area. We found many more Wheatears, as well as Water Pipits and a nice group of Izard high on a ridge. Best of all, we found a young Golden Eagle being mobbed by a Kestrel! We also found a good selection of plants, including *Daphne mezereum* and *Rhododendron ferrugineum*. After a coffee we drove down back to Jaca and Puente de la Reina, stopping at various roadside meadows.

After dinner we went for a night session. After waiting a while we spotted a Nightjar flying by at close range, but an Eagle Owl refused to show itself. Several Midwife Toads could be heard calling, and after searching a bit we found the animal hiding under a patch of grass.

Highlights of the day

Birds: Lammergeier, Water Pipit, Alpine Chough

Mammals: Alpine Marmot, Izard, Brown Hare

Invertebrates: Dingy Skipper, Pyrenean Brook Newt, Pyrenean Frog, Midwife Toad

Plants: *Fritillaria pyrenaica*, *Soldanella alpina*, *Scilla lilio-hyacinthus*

Day 6

Friday 30th May

Berdun

Weather details: rain, overcast and sunny spells during the afternoon

After breakfast we drove to the Aisa Valley, stopping en route for a photo stop and found Red-backed Shrike, Yellowhammer and Dingy Skipper. Once at Aisa we walked among the streamside meadows of this remote Pyrenean valley. Despite the cold conditions the botanists had a great time identifying the superb flora, which included several *Orchis purpurea*, *Dactylorhiza sambucina*, *Primula farinosa*, *Pedicularis sylvatica*, *P. pyrenaica* and *Rhamnus alpina ssp alpina*. Birds were keeping a low profile, but we did see Black redstart, Red-backed Shrike and Linnets.

We stopped for our picnic lunch and were closely watched by a group of Izards on the snowy slopes and loads of Alpine Choughs overhead. We then walked towards the end of the valley, adding a variety of plants to the list before walking back to car park. We then drove down into the mixed pine/deciduous forests, looking at Lady and Naked Men Orchids.

Driving further down towards Puente de la Reina we stopped at some meadows close to the Aragon River and had a good time 'botanising' and 'butterflying'.

Highlights of the day

Birds: Red-backed Shrike

Mammals: Izard (Chamois)

Plants: *Orchis purpurea*, *Aceras anthropophorum* and *Primula farinos*

Day 7

Saturday 31st May

Berdun

Weather details: rainy and overcast

The morning was spent walking down to the Veral River. As the water levels were very high we could not walk along the river path, so continued along the main road.

After a short rest we spent the rest of the afternoon walking through the spectacular gorge. We walked along the main road and explored the river banks in the gorge. The birders found a Grey Wagtail in the stream as well as Spotted Flycatchers, Black Redstart and Bonelli's Warblers in the woodlands. In the gorge we found several Griffon Vultures on the ledges and a single Egyptian Vulture. But it was the Short-toed Eagles that stole the show. We saw no less than three of them close overhead!

Plants were well represented, too, and included several good ones, for example Ramonda in flower and Yellow garlic. Tree species included *Phyllyrea angustifolia* and *Sorbus latifolia*.

Highlights of the day

Birds: Lammergeier, Griffon Vulture

Invertebrates: Small Skipper, Chequered Blue, Scarce Swallowtail, Spanish Festoon, Chestnut Heath

Plants: *Ramonda myconi*, *Jasminum fruticans*, *Allium moly*, *Onosma tucerosperma*

Day 8

Sunday 1st June

London

Weather details: sunny and warm

After breakfast we drove to Puente de la Reina and walked along part of the Santiago trail to Ares and back.

The weather was reasonable and the sun broke through a couple of times, bringing out some butterflies, including Spanish Swallowtail, Black-veined White, many Wall Browns and several Blues. Birds seen included several singing Cirl Buntings, Subalpine Warbler, a family of Stonechat, Corn Buntings, Red-backed Shrike and a low-flying Honey-Buzzard. Several orchids were seen, including Fragrant, Early Purple, Bee and Tassel Hyacinth.

After lunch, it was sadly time to say goodbye to our hosts and drive back to Zaragoza airport to check in for our flight back to London. We had some time before the flight so we drove to Lake Sotonera where we spent some time checking out the steppe areas and lake edges. An Osprey along the Aragon River was a nice surprise.

We made a stop in a small village to look at a White Stork nest with young, and then stopped in an agricultural area where we found our quest – Calandra Lark – quite easily. We stopped at the lake and made a short walk to the lake edge. Yellow-legged Gulls were abundant there, and we also saw several Great Crested Grebes and Mallards swimming along the lake edge. A flyby Purple Heron was another bonus. Our final stop was at the lake's dam where we took a walk in the sun, adding a small flock of flyby Cattle Egrets, several smart Bee-eaters and a few butterflies to our lists.

It was then back to Zaragoza airport, where we all said goodbye.....

Highlights of the day

Birds: Honey Buzzard, Osprey, White Stork, Calandra Lark, Purple Heron, Cattle Egret

Invertebrates: Essex Skipper, Black-eyed Blue, Dappled White

Plants: *Gymnadenia conopsea*, *Orchis mascula*, *Muscari comosum*

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.

Naturetrek Facebook

Many participants of Naturetrek tours like to remain in touch after the holiday, to share photos, comments and future travel plans. Until now we've provided no suitable platform for post-tour networking. Now, though, we're delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page.

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 is quick, free and easy. Do please pay us a visit!

Species List

Birds

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*
 Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*
 Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*
 Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
 Red Kite *Milvus milvus*
 Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*
 Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*
 Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*
 Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*
 Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
 Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinnans*
 Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*
 Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*
 Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*
 Hoopoe *Upupa epops*
 Black Woodpecker *Picus Martius*
 Woodlark *Lullula arborea*
 Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra*
 House Martin *Delichon urbica*
 Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta*
 Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*
 Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*
 Robin *Erithacus rubecula*
 Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*
 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*
 Firecrest *Regulus ignicapillus*
 Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*
 Crested Tit *Parus cristatus*
 Great Tit *Parus major*
 Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*
 Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*
 Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*
 Jay *Garrulus glandarius*
 Alpine Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus*
 Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*
 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*
 Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*
 Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*
 White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*
 Black Kite *Milvus migrans*
 Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus*
 Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*
 Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*
 Booted Eagle *Hieraetus pennatus*
 Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*
 Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*
 Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*
 Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*
 Nightjar *Caprimulgus caprimulgus*
 European Swift *Apus apus*
 Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*
 Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*
 Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*
 Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*
 Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
 White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*
 Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*
 Dunnock *Prumella modularis*
 Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*
 Common Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*
 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*
 Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*
 Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*
 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*
 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*

Butterflies

Scarce (Spanish) Swallowtail *Iphiclides podalirius*
 Large White *Pieris brassicae*
 Western Dappled White *Euchloe crameri*
 Clouded Yellow *Colias crocea*
 Brimstone *Gonepteryx rhamni*
 Green Hairstreak *Callophrys rubi*
 Green-underside Blue *Glaucopsyche alexis*
 Amanda Blue *Polyommatus amandus*
 Common Blue *Polyommatus icarus*
 South White Admiral *Limentitis reducta*
 Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae*
 Knapweed Fritillary *Melitaea phoebe*
 Speckled Wood *Pararge aegeria*
 Large Wall Brown *Lasiommata maera*
 Red-underwing Skipper *Spialia sertorius*
 Dingy Skipper *Erynnis tages*

Black-veined White *Aporia crataegi*
 Small White *Artogeia rapae*
 Orange Tip *Anthocharis cardamines*
 Pale Clouded Yellow *Colias hyale*
 Wood White *Leptidea sinapis*
 Holly Blue *Celastrina argiolus*
 Provencal Chalkhill Blue *Polyommatus albicans*
 Adonis Blue *Lysandra bellargus*
 Duke of Burgundy *Hamearis lucina*
 Painted Lady *Vanessa cardui*
 Glanville Fritillary *Melitaea cinxia*
 Pearly Heath *Coenonympha arcania*
 Wall Brown *Lasiommata megera*
 Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus malvae*
 Essex Skipper *Thymelicus lineola*

Moths

Cream-spot Tiger
 Mother Shipton
 Latticed Heath
 Pine Processionary moth
 Bee Hawkmoth

Burnet Companion
 Hummingbird Hawk-moth
 Silver-Y
 Burnet sp.

Mammals

Alpine Marmot
 Red Squirrel
 Red Fox

Izard (Chamois)
 Roe Deer

Reptiles & amphibians

Common Wall Lizard
 Pyrenean Brook Newt

Pyrenean Frog
 Midwife Toad

Other Insects

Carpenter Bee