

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 7 March 2008



Cranes in flight



The high Pyrenees



Alquezar



Alpine Accentor

Report compiled by John & Jenny Willsher
Photos by John Willsher



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Participants:	Sara Gomm Russell Gomm Meirion Jones John Barnes Mick Michell Albert Percival Hazel Percival Graeme Walshe John Wilson Barbara Wilson Ann Dennis John Millet Theresa Millet

Summary

A very successful two centre trip, combining a visit to Alquezar in the Sierra de Guara, Aragon, to find Wallcreeper: with a stay at Laguna Gallocanta south of Zaragoza, to watch the northward migration of Cranes.

This was the second of two trips to the area and again Wallcreepers were a great success with sightings on 2 days, with 3 individuals seen on the second day. Additional species included White Storks, up to 6 Lammergeier, 8 Egyptian Vultures, Golden Eagle, Red and Black Kite, Peregrine, Red-billed Chough and Alpine Accentor; most seen on several occasions.

At Gallocanta, Crane migration was impressive with approximately 10,000 leaving the lagoon on the day we watched. Other target species seen were 3 Great Bustards, Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Great-spotted Cuckoo, Calandra and Lesser Short-toed larks. Up to 10 Dupont's Larks were heard singing at a site near Gallocanta. Marsh and Hen Harriers were common and a northward migration of Black Kites observed.

Day 1

Saturday 1st March

Stansted – Zaragoza - Gallocanta

We arrived on time at Zaragoza after a late afternoon flight from Stansted, meeting John Willsher who had just dispatched the first group back to Stansted. We were soon on our way, negotiating our way out of Zaragoza, with its massive road and building developments, onto the road south to Gallocanta where we were met at our hotel by Anna our hostess. After finding our rooms we assembled in time for a late dinner.

Day 2

Sunday 2nd March

Gallocanta

After breakfast at 7.30 we set off stopping at Gallocanta to pickup our guide Javier. We had a quick look at the lake from the viewpoint at the edge of the village but it was covered in early morning mist. Cranes could be heard but not many were visible. We then headed to the north western end of the lake at the chapel of El Buen Acuerdo where we left the vehicles and walked a circular walk through arable fields towards the lake edge. Quite often the Cranes fly across these fields in the early morning to find feeding places but today the fog was keeping them down. It however gradually cleared and we could see several thousand Cranes spread out across the lake.

The fields around contained many singing Skylarks and there were hunting Hen Harriers and Kestrel. Around the old stone walls and buildings were Tree Sparrows, Rock Sparrows and Little Owls. We returned towards Gallocanta but on reaching the outskirts we stopped and piled out of the vans to watch a superb flypast as hundreds of Cranes flew over our heads northwards. Returning to the viewpoint at Gallocanta from where the whole lake could be seen, we were then able to watch an amazing exodus, as an estimated 10,000 birds left the lake in many groups, circling above us to gain height to cross the Puerto de Santed to the north.

After our fill of Cranes and a coffee stop at Albergue Allocant we followed the lake southeast, Griffon Vultures were overhead and an estimated 100 Black Kites were seen soaring in the distance. We headed down a track towards the lake observing 2 distant Black-bellied Sandgrouse and several Calandra Larks. Eating our picnic lunch near the lake there was a viewing tower from which we observed a Boar trotting through the mud at the lake edge.

Later we visited the interpretation centre for the Laguna, an excellent educational facility promoting the conservation value of Gallocanta as a staging post for the Cranes and the importance of the area for a wide range of species. We continued around the laguna through Bello and along the southwest edge back towards Gallocanta, on the way meeting some Swedish Crane enthusiasts who were tracking several radio tagged birds north. More Hen Harriers were seen and near the end of our day 3 Great Bustards flew purposefully past us heading north.

Day 3

Monday 3rd March

Gallocanta- Belchite

To get our best chance for Dupont's lark we left the hotel at 6.40am, a dark and frosty start travelling to a local site where the species is resident. We arrived just as it began to get light and immediately heard at least 6 birds singing all around us. We spent the next hour or so listening, cruising in the vehicles and walking, trying to pinpoint the birds; some were quite close to us. However all appeared to be singing from the ground and none were visible, perhaps the freezing conditions was limiting their movements as it was ours! After 3 Hoopoes flew past we headed back to our hotel for breakfast and a warm up.

We later left for Daroca stopping just outside Gallocanta to watch a Great-spotted Cuckoo in an Almond tree close to the road braving the cold wind. We made a quick stop for supplies before heading N to Carinena then E to Belchite and Codo.

Arriving at a viewpoint overlooking the Spanish Ornithological Society's El Planeron reserve we braved the fierce cold wind to admire the view across this large open steppe area towards the colourful eroded escarpments in the distance. We looked for larks but the wind was too strong. Heading back towards Belchite we followed a track into the main reserve leading to a small dammed wet area that had some shelter where we had lunch. There was a Chiffchaff or two and many flocks of Linnet were coming to drink at the water's edge, and a hunting Marsh Harrier was seen. Further into the reserve we had a brief view of 8 Pin-tailed Sandgrouse disappearing over the horizon and after a short walk in an area with interesting Gypsum mounds but few birds, in the strong wind, we return.

Day 4

Tuesday 4th March

Gallocanta - Alquezar

Rather than setting off N immediately on leaving our hotel this morning, we had one last look along the lake. Driving southeast towards Tornos and back around the perimeter of the lake towards Gallocanta through fields, we hoped to get a better view of the local Black-bellied Sandgrouse flock. They do not oblige but a male and female Merlin were seen and many Calandra Larks. Numbers of Cranes were much reduced with only 50 on the lake, maybe they had all flown N or the strong N wind was holding up new arrivals.

After using the facilities at Alquezar and saying goodbye to Javier we headed north for Zaragoza and on towards Sarinena where we had hoped to eat our picnic whilst looking over the lake but the weather was against us. Finding a relatively sheltered wooded area we stopped to eat but soon after watching another group of Black Kites trying to head north, the strong cold wind sent us on our way again.

After Sarinena we followed the Canal del Flumen past the Embalse de Marcen which yielded a variety of wildfowl, on through Marcen, and Tramaced with their nesting White Storks to Piraces, following the base of the spectacular eroded escarpment. A Black Wheatear was briefly seen but could not be re-located. At Piraces we stopped at a viewpoint overlooking the impressive eroded valley but the wind was still very strong so we were soon on our way again north to the N240 and onto Alquezar arriving at our hotel with snow falling. Jose Antonio our host soon had us settled into our very new luxurious accommodation. We assembled in the bar at 7.30 with a complementary glass of excellent white wine from the local Somontano region, meeting Nuria who was to be our local guide for the next few days. An excellent dinner was then provided at the hotel's restaurant Casa Gervasio a short walk along one of the town's narrow streets.

Day 5

Wednesday 5th March

Alquezar – Bierge - Santa Cilia

The day started early with a pre-breakfast walk around the town to search for the Wallcreeper that Nuria regularly sees from her house, feeding on the walls of buildings. We started at the promenade overlooking the gorge with the castle high above us. Small pink cushions on the gorge wall were a plant endemic to the Sierra de Guara, *Petrocoptis guarensis*. The weather was very cold with snow showers but there were many Griffon Vultures, Ravens, Red Kites and Red-billed Choughs utilising the strong winds and updraughts. There were Blackcaps in the Ivy below the cliffs and in the flowering almond trees. Several Rock Sparrows were active on the cliffs and castle walls and a Grey Wagtail was seen. The setting of the town even on a dull snowy morning was spectacular.

After getting good views of 4 very obliging Alpine Accentors near the castle we walked back and down past one of the old town's water sources, Fuente de Monchiriguel, to another viewpoint and waited. On queue the Wallcreeper appeared at 8.35 on its favourite house but it didn't stay long so we followed it as it visited the walls of a number of houses before disappearing over to another street. So a very satisfied group of birdwatchers returned to the hotel for breakfast.

We headed out of the town just after 10 stopping in Adahuesca for picnic provisions, buying cheeses from the village cheese factory, and then travelled on towards Bierge stopping for the first of several Lammergeiers sightings of the day and finding a Firecrest in the roadside trees. In Bierge Nuria suggested we look at the town feeding station, which was not baited at the moment but still might tempt the Lammergeier we had just seen to have a look. This proved to be the case; a very good stop with the Lammergeier drifting past at eye level and overhead 2 Egyptian Vultures and a Golden Eagle.

Driving on and up through Santa Cilia we met Paco who organises a feeding station and counts the local vultures. The hills around were covered in snow and it was a bleak and freezing place to be standing around, some choosing to stay in the relative warmth of the vehicles. A volunteer was sought to help distribute the meat on a rock slab on the opposite hillside and the rest of us waited. The only birds around were Meadow Pipits perhaps from the uplands of Britain, so they probably felt at home in the conditions. A Golden Eagle flew over but the vultures were slow to respond in the windy conditions.

It was picnic time for the group but where? Paco came to the rescue, suggesting we could use the village community room. We retired to the village and had our picnic in a large warm room with bar and sink, tables and benches – what a luxury. From the windows we could see many Griffon Vultures now coming down to feed on the meat. Two Lammergeiers flew past, an adult and an immature making an interesting comparison.

After lunch we visited a small museum and exhibition in the village, the result of a special EU and local organisations joint project to help promote and hence protect the wildlife of the Sierra de Guara.

Returning to Alquezar we had time for a late afternoon walk to the gorge watching Red-billed Choughs coming to roost, more Griffons, Alpine Accentors, Black Redstarts, Ravens, Red Kites and numerous Crag Martins warming themselves on the gorge wall in a burst of late afternoon sunshine.

Day 6

Thursday 6th March

Alquezar - Colungo - Barranco las Gargantas - Mirador del Rio Vera - Tozal dera Mallata

A pre-breakfast walk again produced a Wallcreeper, first seen on the gorge wall and then flying across to the houses.

Breakfast done we headed east to Colungo then north, stopping on Puente las Gargantas where we quickly disembarked to watch a Short-toed Eagle fly over. The bridge overlooked a deep V shaped gorge cut through the conglomerate rocks with walls containing numerous ledges and holes. Soon a Wallcreeper was spotted and we watched it hunting along rock face for many minutes. Carrying on we reached a viewpoint overlooking the Vera gorge. To the north was spectacular panoramic view of the high Pyrenees, brilliant white with fresh snow. Along the gorge walls we could see some nesting Griffon Vultures and a Peregrine was flying below us.

Amongst the scrubby bushes were small clumps of delightful Rush-leaved Jonquils (*Narcissus assoanus*) and a few *Crocus nevadensis marcetii*. Backtracking a mile or so and we walked through pinewoods towards the edge of the gorge where walkways had been constructed allowing us to safely climb down to a ledge outside an open but grilled cave entrance permitting us to view the many thousands of years old paintings on the cave roof. On a sunny slope out of the wind we ate our picnic.

We returned to Alquezar first visiting a feeding station above the town with many Raven's and Red Kites. Back in Alquezar some of us spent some more time around the town and others led by Nuria, walked down through old olive groves to the bottom of the Vero gorge, upstream along walkways hanging from the walls and finally a climb back up to Alquezar. More clumps of *Petrocoptis guarensis* were found, plus *Sarcocapnos ennaphylla*, a plant endemic to the Eastern Pyrenees and mountains of northern Spain. In the sand along the river edge were large clumps of Olive-leaved Willow with its delicate catkins. And many ferns in the shady gullies including *Polypodium cambricum*, Maidenhair Fern (*Adiantum capillus-veneris*) and Rusty-backed Fern (*Ceterach officinarum*)

Day 7

Friday 7th March

Alquezar-Zaragoza-Stansted

Leaving after breakfast we travelled directly via Huesca to the airport at Zaragoza to catch our early afternoon flight back to Stansted and home.....

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	March						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			2				
2	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1				
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			1				
4	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			15				
5	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	10						
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	+		150				
7	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	12		30				
8	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	+						
9	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			5				
10	Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	100+	+	50+	+	+		
11	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	3	1	4	+	+		
12	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>				4-6	1		
13	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>				8	3		
14	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	40	15	+	100+	200		
15	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	2	1				
16	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	10		3		1		
17	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>					1		
18	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				1			
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	3	1	1	1	1		
20	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				2			
21	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	7	+	+	3	+		
22	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					1		
23	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			2				
24	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	1						
25	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	10k	1k+	50				
26	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	3						
27	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	15		34				
28	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			3				
29	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	+		+				
30	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>	2						
31	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>		8					
32	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	+	+	+	+	+		
33	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	+	+	RD	+	+		
34	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	+	+	+	+	+		
35	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	5						
36	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	2	3					
37	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	2	1					
38	Greater-spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>		1					
39	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	H	1	H	+	+		
40	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	+	+	+				
41	Lesser short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>		5					
42	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	+	+	+	+	+		
43	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	3	+	+				
44	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>		H10					
45	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		4	+	1			
46	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		1		50	+		
47	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		2		3			

	Common name	Scientific name	March						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	
48	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	+	+	+	+	+		
49	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				2	1		
50	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				H	H		
51	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>				4+	3		
52	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1	1	4	+		
53	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	3	1	4	+		
54	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	6	10	4				
55	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>			1				
56	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>					1		
57	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	+	+	2	+	+		
58	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>				5			
59	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			1	1	+		
60	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2	1			+		
61	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cettia</i>		H					
62	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	H						
63	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				10	+		
64	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>					1		
65	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			H				
66	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1		+	1	3		
67	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>				2			
68	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			1	+	+		
69	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			1	+	+		
70	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>				1	3		
71	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	
72	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			1				
73	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		+	+	1			
74	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	3	5	6	40	60		
75	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>			2				
76	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	3		2	10	30		
77	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	
78	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	+	2	10+				
79	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	+	+	+	+	+		
80	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	+	+	+	+	+		
81	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>				1			
82	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	+	+	+	+	+		
83	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	+	2	+	+	+		
84	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	+	+	+	+			
85	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	+	+	+	+	+		
86	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	+	+	+				
87	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	+	+	+				
88	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	1		1				
89	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	+						

Mammals

	Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		2				
	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	1					
	Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		8				
	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		1				

	Common name	Scientific name	March						
			2	3	4	5	6	7	

Others

Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>		+					
Lizard	<i>Adromos sp</i>	+						
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>		+					
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>							
Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>							