

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 - 31 October 2010



2010 Naturetrek Group watching Vultures



Cranes at Gallocanta



Immature Lammergeier



Manuel feeding Griffon Vultures

Report and photos compiled by John Willsher



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Summary: A very successful two centre trip, combining a visit to Alquezar in the Sierra de Guara, Aragon Spain, to find Wallcreeper: with a stay at Laguna Gallocanta south of Zaragoza, to watch the southward migration of Cranes. With good weather four Wallcreepers were seen and at Sta Cilia very close views of approximately 200 feeding Griffon Vultures was superb. Additional species included Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Red Kite, Peregrine, Red-billed Chough and Alpine Accentor.

At Gallocanta thousands of Cranes leaving the laguna during a brilliantly colourful sunrise provided atmospheric sights and sounds. Later the sight of thousands of feeding Cranes against a backdrop of superb autumn scenery was unforgettable. A good variety of other species included two Great Bustards, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Iberian Grey Shrike and large flocks of larks, finches and Tree Sparrows. The area was very good for birds of prey with more Griffon Vultures, many Harriers, and Merlin.

Day 1

Monday 25th October

Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived on time at Zaragoza after an early evening flight from Stansted and were soon on our way northwards towards Huesca. Roads were very quiet and we made good time arriving at Alquezar just after midnight. After meeting our host Gervasio, we were soon in our rooms.

Day 2

Tuesday 26th October

Alquezar

Meeting at first light on a cold morning we walked through the town to the promenade overlooking the Vero gorge. Black Redstarts on the house roofs were our first birds, followed by a Blue Rock Thrush. A group of Rock Sparrows were spotted, a pair of Red-billed Choughs was on top of the cliff, overhead Ravens called and the first of many Red Kites of the day glided over. In the gorge Crag Martins were seen briefly and in the bushes below the promenade several Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps were feeding. We searched extensively for our star bird on the cliff walls but it was going to make us wait. So it was back to our hotel for a delicious breakfast.

Breakfast finished, we made a small detour to Adahuesca for picnic supplies, then we headed towards Colungo for an excursion following the Vero northwards. First stop was the Vero Bridge, with the riverside poplars a brilliant autumn yellow. Blackcaps were feeding in the bushes and a Great spotted Woodpecker was seen. In the sky up to 30 Griffon Vultures were gaining height in the thermals. Moving on towards Colungo a flock of Serins were in roadside trees and a Buzzard on a pole admired. Next stop was at Puente las Gargantas a bridge high above a gorge mostly comprised of conglomerate type material. We searched the holes and crevices but no success, only a Jay in the woodland above. Robins and Chiffchaffs called from the roadside bushes, which included a Strawberry tree with red fruits.

After a few more kilometres we reached Mirador del Vero, a good viewpoint overlooking a part of the Vero Gorge with many Griffon Vulture ledges. It was not occupied at this season of course but a few birds were gliding in and around the gorge along with some Crag Martins. Then in the roof of one of the several small caves on the opposite cliff wall we spotted our first Wallcreeper. It seemed to be resting and we watched it for a considerable time. We became alarmed at one point when a superb Peregrine Falcon, calling and patrolling the cliff, flew very close to it, but all was well. Northwards the high Pyrenees had a dusting of snow and just down the road at a convenient picnic table we enjoyed our lunch in the autumn sunshine.

After watching a Hummingbird Hawkmoth we retraced our tracks towards Colungo first walking through pinewoods to have a look the cave paintings of Tozal dera Mallata. A Ring Ouzel, Goldcrest and Crested Tits was seen and several Blue-winged Grasshoppers. Many small groups of migrant Chaffinches passed over heading south. Once in back in Alquezar some of us walked down into the gorge below the town and were very lucky to see 3 separate Wallcreepers on the way along the gorge and back up to the town. A Dipper flew downstream and a party of Long-tailed Tits were noisily looking for a roosting place as the light faded. We convened later in the bar for a drink rather pleased that all of us had seen one Wallcreeper and a few of us four! We then walked the short distance to the Restaurant Gervasio for a typical delicious wholesome meal.

Day 3

Wednesday 27th October

Alquezar

After an 8am breakfast and quick picnic supplies stop in Adahuesca, we were heading west towards Santa Cilia. Here we met our guides Laura Henderson an English speaker and Manuel Aguilera Sanz of the Asociación Amigos del Vulture Fund a dedicated raptor conservationist who has been operating a vulture feeding station at Sta Cilia for 30 years. Laura showed us the Natural Park of Guara Interpretation Centre - a very well designed facility with excellent photographic displays and information about the park which is the second largest national park in Spain.

We then followed them in their vehicle up above the village, walking the last few hundred yards towards the feeding area. We sat down at the edge of a bare rocky area in warm sunshine and long distant views - ideal Vulture flying weather. Manuel then distributed a wheelbarrow load of butcher's waste that he had collected. Before he even started distributing it Griffon Vultures were landing all around him, so accustomed are they to this operation. We had brilliant close views of roughly 200 vultures scrambling with each other trying to get to the food and watched in amazement as these large birds, only a few metres from us, devoured the scraps.

Once the bones were cleaned of any traces of meat, and things quietened down, we withdrew to 100m or so distant. Two Lammergeiers were soon flying overhead, an adult plus an immature. The immature although wary landed a couple of times on the feeding slope giving us a lasting impression of its large size. At one point we watched as it swallowed a large bone. Having our fill of vultures we set off downhill to our minibus returning to the village. We entered an old converted church and experienced an excellent diorama presentation, with very realistic life size models, about the role of vultures in the park. We went part way back up the hill to have our picnic in superb weather with up to 3 Lammergeiers still active around the feeding site and a pair of Golden Eagles displaying above our heads.

Returning towards Alquezar we stopped and walked to a viewpoint overlooking Sierra de Morrano. It was now warm and several butterflies were on the wing and flying around the cliffs were many Crag Martins. Back in Alquezar we set off to walk the Vero Gorge again, this time in the opposite direction down the steps first. Unfortunately Wallcreepers eluded us but we did all get a view of an Alpine Accentor on the cliff. On the way back up, Grey and White Wagtails were seen busy feeding on the waste water lagoon below the town. As the light faded there were more Red-billed Choughs entering their roosting holes and several Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps were in the bushes around the citadel area.

Day 4

Thursday 28th October

Alquezar-Gallocanta

Promptly on our way by 9am, we headed first towards Huesca then south through large areas of arable farmland to the Sierra de Tramaced a fascinating eroded escarpment. Our first stop was a canyon near Piraces, at the top were Thekla Lark, numerous Corn Bunting and Rock Sparrow. In the gorge below were Blue Rock Thrush, several Black Redstarts and a Merlin. Along an irrigation canal were large numbers of House Sparrows, 3 Grey Herons and stopping alongside some recently cut rice fields 2 Lapwings, White Wagtails and several Water Pipits were actively feeding in the wet muddy stubble. We saw also a small flock of Cattle Egrets and a fleeting glimpse of a Dartford Warbler as it dived into cover. In the surrounding irrigated lucerne fields many Common Buzzards perched on the irrigators.

At Laguna de Sarinena we ate our picnic in warm sunshine. In the bushes around us were Serins, Chiffchaffs, Blackcap and Goldfinches. On and around the lake were many Teal, Mallard and Shoveler plus a few gulls including one Little Gull. At the edges of the extensive reedbeds were several Grey Herons and a Marsh Harrier was watched hunting over them.

Continuing our journey south through Los Monegros the extensive arable farmland areas yielded more Marsh Harriers, a Hen Harrier, and Red Kites. Crossing the Ebro River we travelled west towards Zaragoza then southwest to Quinto and on towards the steppe lands of Belchite and the reserve of El Planeron. It was warm with no wind which was ideal for viewing this unique landscape. We drove into and around the reserve; birds of interest were many Skylarks, some Crested Larks and small flocks of Lesser Short-toed Larks. Viewing from the vehicle and on foot, we strained for a glimpse of that elusive Dupont's Lark, for which the reserve is so important. We tried, but sadly not today. Pressing on past the war memorial ruins of Belchite, and the vineyards of Carinena, we arrived at our hotel at Berruico in good time to see and hear roosting Cranes coming in to the lake for the night. Later we enjoyed a delicious meal.

Day 5

Friday 29th October

Gallocanta

We started early, picking up our guide Javier at Gallocanta, so we would get into position looking from the NW side of the laguna near the Los Ojos observation point at first light. We were in position overlooking the water just as the sky was getting light over the hills to the east. We could just see and definitely hear several thousand Cranes calling. As it got lighter we could see ranks of them spread along the lake in the shallow water just offshore. After some minutes groups started taking off and many of them flew either side of us bugling loudly as they flew away from the lake to their feeding areas. The silhouette of large groups against the stunningly colourful sunrise and distant hills was just amazing. As the light increased several Marsh and Hen Harriers came from their roost in the reeds spreading out in various directions along the lake edge and across the farmland. A large group of Corn Buntings flew over. Amongst the Cranes in the water was a single Flamingo and a Fox was watched as it investigated along the edge of the mud. After an hour or so most Crane activity reduced to a trickle and we had finished trying to identify the large numbers of ducks and several small distant waders so it was back to Hotel Secaiza for a welcome breakfast.

Later at the southeast end of the lake there were more Cranes feeding in the fields and watching from the tower hide of Canizar, several more Harriers were spotted. Driving the narrow tracks through the arable fields we searched for signs of Black-bellied Sandgrouse eventually having a very unsatisfactory view of four flying away over the horizon. Backtracking and continued searching produced a further six birds on the ground and more flying. Nearer the lake, feeding in some weedy patches of standing sunflowers were large numbers of Goldfinches with many Tree Sparrows.

Past Bello we again took to the tracks to explore the southwest side of the lake first stopping at a convenient new picnic area for lunch. Lunch done we set off again but soon stopped when two Great Bustards were seen across the fields. We watched for many minutes as these stately birds slowly ambled further away from us. As we drove large numbers of Skylarks and Calandra Larks were flushed from the newly cultivated fields and Little Owl was very obliging, sitting on the wall of a derelict farm building.

At the tower hide of Le Reguera overlooking the northeast end of the lake we had good views of large numbers of ducks, 3 Little Egrets and some distant waders including Little Stints, Dunlin and a Sanderling. There were more Harriers near the reed bed roosting area including four splendid adult male Hen Harriers. Continuing our way back several large flocks of Tree Sparrows were busily taking cover in the trackside bushes. Once in Gallocanta we had a welcome visit for refreshments in Albergue Allucant where we learnt that the previous day's official Crane count was 12,800!! Later, back at our hotel, some of us climbed up to El Castellar above Berrueco and enjoyed the panoramic view across the lake.

Day 6

Saturday 30th October

Gallocanta

Many of us wanted to repeat yesterday's early morning spectacular of the Cranes leaving the lake, so another early start saw us in position overlooking the north end of the lake as it was getting light.

There was more wind than yesterday and more people watching, this being a holiday weekend, many Crane enthusiasts were assembled. We were not disappointed as thousands of birds left their roosting area in the shallow water to go to feeding areas in the surrounding farmland. Many Harriers again were seen leaving their roost site in the reeds and a distant Roe Deer was watched. Heading back for breakfast we stopped for a large flock of finches which were all Chaffinches. The weedy arable stubbles around the lake clearly support large numbers of larks and finches at this time.

After breakfast, back at Gallocanta, a visit to the new interpretation centre produced our first Iberian Grey Shrike in front and on the mud Grey Plovers and Curlews. Travelling south on tracks near the lake shore we searched again for the Sandgrouse but we had to be content with Merlin, Sparrowhawk and more varied finch flocks. Lunchtime was spent at the Ermita at the lake's north end which had a covered picnic area giving some shelter from the now quite strong wind.

Following lunch we explored an area several kilometres west where several Dupont's Larks are known to breed but today it was only a Skylark that showed itself. Back to Gallocanta for coffee and then a return to the tower hide for a last look at the numerous ducks, harriers, waders including more Sanderling and Ruff, a Peregrine Falcon and 2 Great White Egrets. We returned to our hotel for another superb meal to finish off the day.

Day 7

Sunday 31st October

Gallocanta – Zaragoza - London

On our way north we made a couple of stops adding a singing Cetti's Warbler to our list. Traffic was light and we made good time to Zaragoza for our lunchtime flight home...

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	October						
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				2			
2	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				3			
3	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				11	3		
4	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>						2	
5	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>						2	
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				10	1		
7	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>					1	1	
8	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					200	✓	
9	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>						2	
10	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		4		✓	✓	✓	
11	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>					6	✓	
12	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					5	✓	
13	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				✓	✓	✓	
14	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓	✓	✓	
15	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		30+	6	✓		1	
16	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>			3				
17	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		100+	200+	✓	10	9	
18	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				✓	10	10	
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				2	15	20	
20	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		2	1	1	1	1	
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1		✓	2	1	
22	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			2				
23	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1	1	3	3	5	
24	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1				1	
25	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1	1	2	
26	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			H	H	8		
27	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				4			
28	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>				1000s	10,000	✓	✓
29	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>				2			
30	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						5	
31	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				50+	20	20	
32	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				1	4		
33	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				7	✓		
34	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>				21	✓		
35	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>				7	✓		
36	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					5		
37	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>					✓		
38	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>				2	4	✓	
39	Little Gull	<i>Larus minutus</i>				1			
40	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>				1			
41	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>					15		
42	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓		✓		1	
43	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
45	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>					1	1	
46	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1					
47	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		1				H	1

	Common name	Scientific name	October						
			25	26	27	28	29	30	31
48	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				✓	✓	✓	
49	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		1	H	✓	✓	✓	
50	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				✓			
51	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>				✓			
52	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				✓	✓	✓	
53	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogene rupestris</i>		5	100+				
54	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>				6			
55	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				✓	✓	✓	
56	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1	50	✓	10	✓	
57	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			3	1			
58	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		1					
59	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	1				
60	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>			1				
61	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓			H
62	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>				✓			3
64	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		3		3			
65	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
66	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
67	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				6			
68	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cettia</i>							1
69	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓			
70	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		✓	✓	✓			
71	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>				1			
72	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓			
73	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		3					
74	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓				
75	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		3+					
76	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓				4 ✓
77	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		2	✓				
78	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		4					
79	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>							1
80	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		2					
81	Spotless Starling	<i>Sumus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1					
83	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>				✓			✓
84	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		6	2				
85	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		6	4	3			
86	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>				4	20	✓	✓
87	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					300	✓	
88	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓		✓	✓	2	
89	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		8		✓	1		
90	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		30		✓			
92	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>							1
93	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		20	✓	✓	✓	✓	
94	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>			2	✓	✓	✓	
95	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>				✓	30	✓	✓
96	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			1	H	1	H	

Mammals

26 27 28 29 30 31 1

1	Common Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>					1		
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>						1	

Butterflies

26 27 28 29 30 31 1

1	Clouded Yellow		2	6	✓				
2	Wall			1					
3	Speckled Wood			1					
4	Small Tortoiseshell			1					
5	Red Admiral			1					
6	Large White			1					
7	Small Blue			1					
8	Blue sp.			1					

Others

26 27 28 29 30 31 1

1	Hummingbird Hawkmoth				1				
2	European Green Lizard	<i>Lacerta viridis</i>			1				
3	Carpenter Bee sp	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>			1				
4	Dragonfly sp.				1				
5	Trout sp		1						