

# Wallcreepers and Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 - 31 October 2010

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Cranes at dawn Gallocanta



Griffon Vultures



Immature Lammergeier



Gallocanta

Report compiled by Rob Murray



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## Day 1

Monday 25th October

Weather: mild and calm giving a smooth flight

The evening flight from Stansted touched down early at Zaragoza enabling us to be on our way south without delay and to arrive at our hotel in Berrueco at midnight.

## Day 2

Tuesday 26th October

Weather: Cold, frosty and clear with a cool wind. Sunny and warmer pm

It was not until we awoke at dawn that we could gasp at the beauty of the view across Gallocanta Lake, appreciated from our beds and even from the bath! It was inspiring. Javier, our local expert, joined us for a tour around the lake. We stopped at various observation towers which gave us superb views across the fields, lake shore and salt flats. We stood enthralled by the sight of three Golden Eagles commanding superiority of the airspace as they circled above us. It wasn't until two crows mounted a challenge to their dominance, that we fully appreciated the enormity of the eagles. The crows appeared as insignificant irritants needing to be swatted away like flies. Other raptors hunted over the flat expanse of this huge lake. Marsh and Hen Harriers, Sparrowhawk and Kestrel, Griffon Vultures and Kites, all exploited their appropriate niches in the ecology of this fascinating lake.

In the late afternoon we scrambled up a footpath to a defensive site above the village of Berrueco. It afforded us splendid views of the entire lake and its enclosing hilly boundaries. Flocks of cranes poured over the hillsides to waft gracefully down to the shimmering, deep -blue water fringed by a glistening white carpet of salt crystals. For some of the cranes this was a final descent to their wintering grounds. For others, Gallocanta is merely a staging post before moving further south.

## Day 3

Wednesday 27th October

Weather: Temperature -6.5 °C at dawn, frosty, very clear and still. !9°C and sunny pm

Rising very early enabled us to be beside the lake before dawn to witness what must be amongst the most spectacular of birding experiences in the world. Orion and his faithful dog were hunting across the western sky and glaring down at those having the temerity to be up at this hour. We shuffled into position in front of a crumbling wall, eyes spellbound as Venus rose above the hill and the first red rays of the rising sun clipped the stark silhouette of the hill opposite.

The cranes became restless and their grunts and wails pervaded the still, freezing air. Thousands rose as one, departing from the shelter of the night time roost to seek nourishment in the distant fields. Wave after wave of flocks streamed past; the red, dawn glow giving a Turneresque canvas to the black swirling shapes. Some cranes had drawn their legs up tightly to their undercarriage, concealing them from view and presenting a most comical outline.

Arriving back at the hotel for breakfast, we noticed that the temperature was a welcome +3°C here. It climbed steadily throughout the day to peak at 19°C. Our next quest really was for the holy grail of birding. A patch of Paramo vegetation has attracted a small, pioneering colony of Dupont's Larks. We patiently searched the aromatic scrub for a glimpse of this, the most elusive of European birds. We failed!

Whilst driving along the farm tracks around the lake, we discovered a round pool festooned with weeds and teeming with life. Common Darter dragonflies were egg-laying in tandem. The male grasps the female behind her head and forces her down to the weedy jungle to dip her abdomen into the limpid waters, to release her eggs. This jungle also conceals mighty predators. We watched in fascination as pairs of eyes popped up like periscopes to track the movements of the dragonflies. Suddenly a corpulent Marsh Frog would hurl itself clear of the water and ambush the hapless, unsuspecting dragonflies. Frogs' jaws snapped at their agile, aerial prey. We were reluctant to leave this enthralling drama.

Later in the afternoon we visited the old, walled city of Daroca. The narrow, medieval streets with arches and overhangs were of great interest. Our keenest photographer was bemused by the difference in appearance of streets as depicted in photographs in the tourist brochures as to when seen for real. It was a challenge to emulate these professionals.

## Day 4

Thursday 28th October

Weather: Warm sunshine. No wind. 21°C. Beautiful!

We interrupted our long drive from Gallocanta to Alquezar with stops at El Planeron and Sarinena Lake. The roadside viewing gallery at the World Heritage site of El Planeron affords a panoramic view of this precious habitat. Those who had been there remarked that it could be a Moroccan landscape with eroded, distant hills and desert-like scrub. A fox trotted along a track way as we scanned for glimpses of the characteristic birds. Finding a feather from a Sandgrouse was the closest we came to success, but no one minded as it was such a splendid place to be. We drove on over the River Ebro and through the wide vistas of the area known as Los Monegros. There were many birds of prey here.

There is a visitors' centre at Sarinena where toilets were as welcoming a sight as the picnic tables beckoning us for a late lunch. Our guide, Ramiro escorted us to the far flung corners of the lake where we encountered superb birds such as Penduline and Bearded Tits, Southern Grey Shrike, Little Egret and Water Rails and some challenging driving! I may have the knowledge to distinguish between difficult, incredibly similar species of birds, but I definitely lack the ability to select the correct gears, in the right sequence, at the right time, when there are 6 plus reverse to choose from! It was generally felt that although I had played well in the first half, a substitution was due. I handed the captain's armband to Kate who drove as smoothly as whipped cream for the rest of the trip!

## Day 5

Friday 29th October

Weather: High cloud. Sunny later on. 16°C

An intrepid group of scramblers descended to the floor of the gorge at Alquezar and took up the challenge of the precipitous, metal, promenade walkway hanging over the River Vero to take them to the foot of the gigantic rock walls beneath the Colegiata. The ascent back to the village was steep, but all made it safely. No Wallcreepers were seen despite the intensity of the search. Later we visited the Mirador del Vero and enjoyed seeing Griffon Vultures in the gorge loafing around waiting for thermals to develop. A Stone Martin revealed itself briefly. I glimpsed a Wallcreeper, but it was too slick to be appreciated by the rest of the group. Following the track from the car park brought us to the caves where Bronze Age artists had decorated the cave walls. Some of the designs were exquisite, whereas others would require the intervention of mind-bending substances if much of significance was to be deciphered. Time spent in the evening at the promenade of Alquezar was rewarding. Crag Martins, Choughs, Black Redstarts and Blue Rock Thrushes kept us entertained. Still no Wallcreepers!

## Day 6

Saturday 30th October

Weather: warm and sunny with excellent visibility. Short spell of drizzle pm

The roads to Santa Cilia are curvaceous and meander through picturesque villages. The views are spectacular. We arrived on time to meet Manuel, our Vulture expert. He took us up the mountainside along dirt tracks littered with unstable rocks. Anticipation was rife. We all knew we were about to witness another sensational show. Manuel hauled his wheel barrow of butchers' waste out onto a clear area of rock. Already menacing shapes were assembling on the skyline like raiding parties of Indians circling the supply wagon. What ensued was an assault on our senses. All were engaged in the spectacle of a vulture feeding frenzy. The swishing sound of air resisting the flaps of gigantic wings as the birds descended was a signal to the ears to be alert. Our noses soon picked up the musty scent of decay. You could savour the taste of the feast that awaited the vultures. More and more vultures leapt into the fray. Clambering over each other; dancing upon a rival's head; tugging at entrails to dispossess a rival of its prize. All of this action was witnessed at a distance of a few metres but in fact they appeared to be unconcerned by our proximity. We watched them disperse into thermals to search for the next meal. It was then that two Lammergeiers appeared and circled above us. A well constructed diorama and an interesting film were shown to us in the vulture museum after this natural spectacle had concluded.

We had enjoyed a week of excellent weather with no rain, but this afternoon brought some showers and drizzle. This was to be our last chance to find Wallcreepers. The steepest cliff walls on the eastern side of the Colegiata just had to be the place to make a final search. It proved to be an excellent choice as we found two of these enigmatic jewels of the mountains fluttering up the cliffs like butterflies. One came extremely close to us, much to everyone's delight (and considerable relief to the leader!)

## Day 7

Sunday 31st October

Weather: It was pouring with rain, but cleared up later

The heavy rain thwarted those of us who wanted to take advantage of the extra hour of light following the changing of the clocks. A final birding session just wasn't possible. We had a leisurely breakfast and set off for the airport.

We had experienced the bird-life and culture of two very different areas of Spain in glorious weather. Taking in historical sites and gazing at village life as well as the wild life gave us an overall appreciation of the human and natural ecology of this fascinating area.

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## Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	October				
			26	27	28	29	30
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			2		
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			7		
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			7		
4	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			1		
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			9		
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	2				
7	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	27				
8	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>					
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	153	50	20		
10	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	40		5		
11	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	41		40		
12	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	2		3		
13	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	4		5	8	5
14	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>					2
15	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	3	13	10	90	300
16	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	9				
17	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	6	12	3		
18	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2				
19	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	3		10		3
20	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	4	1			
21	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	5	4		1
22	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			12		
23	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>			2H		
24	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			3		
25	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			3		
26	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	1000s	1000s	47		
27	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	1				
28	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	2				
29	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	15		8		
30	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>			1		
31	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>	7				
32	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	7				6
33	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	51	50	50	15	8
34	Collard Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	42	50			
35	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1			
36	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1		
37	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				1	
38	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>		50			
39	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>					3
40	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	17	45	70		
41	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	100	12	60		1
42	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	50	10	60		
43	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			35		25
44	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	2	10			
45	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	6	8	12		10
46	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			3		
47	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				4	1

	Common name	Scientific name	October				
			26	27	28	29	30
48	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>					1
49	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1	3	6	12
50	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>					
51	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	1				
52	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				5	2
53	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			1	12	1
54	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				12	2
55	Cettis Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			H		
56	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				20	3
57	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>			1	2	H
58	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			1	1	
59	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			3	15	1
60	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>					
61	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				H	
62	Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>				H	
63	Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>			1	2	3
64	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				2	1
65	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>				1	2
66	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>					
67	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>					2
68	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	2		2		
69	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	30	25	100s	20	25
70	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				H	
71	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>			6		
72	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				4	2
73	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1			6	4
74	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	13	10	6		
75	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	4	30			
76	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	8	20	35	6	10
77	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	3				
78	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		6	47	10	15
79	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1	2	7	H
80	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				8	
81	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	23	15	6	8	
82	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				H	
83	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	63	35	50		
84	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	150+	100+	20		
85	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	3	1	2		

## Insects

Clouded Yellow *Colias croceus*

Peacock *Inachis io*

Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae*

Praying Mantis *Mantis religiosa*

Migrant Hawker *Aeshna mixta*

Large White *Pieris brassicae*

Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta*

Wall Butterfly *Lasiommata megera*

Hummingbird Hawk-moth *Macroglossum stellatarum*

Darter sp. *Sympetrum striolatum*

## Mammals

Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

Stone Martin *Martes foina*