# Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain – PRIVATE TOUR

Naturetrek Tour Report

27 February - 4 March 2012



Report team: Barry Oxley, Alan Parfitt, Lyn Ebbs and John Willsher

Photos courtesy of Lyn Ebbs, Richard Ebbs, Beryl Hulbert, Pat Moore, Geoff Oddy, Barry Oxley, Dave Saunders and John Willsher



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#### Introduction

This visit to Spain was the inaugural RSPB/NATURETREK holiday undertaken by members of the Aylesbury, Oxford and Reading RSPB groups. These holidays are formulated by Naturetrek and are designed to give a unique experience to those participating and a financial benefit to the RSPB and RSPB members.

# **Summary**

Our two hotels were strategically chosen to allow us to take full advantage of viewing the cranes, vultures, wallcreepers and other regional bird specialities. The comfortable Hotel Mirabel situated in the medieval town of Alquézar was well positioned for viewing Wallcreepers in the Rio Vero Gorge, and exploring the vast Sierra del Guara N.P. The contrasting Hotel Secaiza at Gallocanta, near the village of Berrueco was also ideally placed to watch the northward migration of cranes. Here we were well looked after by Anna and Mata and by Gonzo their dog.

Apart from one shower and some light rain on our last day the weather was good, with cold mornings and evenings but fine sunny days particularly at Gallocanta. We had two sightings of Wallcreeper and mind blowing views of about 250 Griffon Vultures at the feeding station. A Black Vulture was a bonus here and together with Egyptian Vulture and four Lammergeiers we clocked all the regular breeding vultures of Europe.

The crane migration lived up to expectation with good numbers arriving in the evenings to roost on the lagoon and others leaving early in the mornings to feed in the surrounding fields before taking off for the perilous journey over the Pyrenees to Northern Europe. These shy and wary birds were seen in small family groups and the sound of them calling overhead became a distinctive feature of the holiday.

We learnt that crane numbers were increasing, a testimony to Javier and his team and an army of co-operating conservationists in Europe which together with Manuel's team bodes well for our larger avian friends. It was particularly enlightening for our RSPB group to see nature conservation in action through the eyes of these dedicated Spanish teams.

A pre-dawn hunt west of Gallocanta for Dupont's Lark produced about seven singing birds, it was surreal listening to their calls as it got light but despite much searching we were unable to spot even one lurking in the low scrub, despite the song seemingly being close by. They are described as "elusive" and lived up to their reputation, and so we were consoled with John's comment that he had sightings only once out of eight or so visits.

## Day 1

# **Monday 27th February**

## Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquézar



Our minibus was prompt and deposited most of us at Stansted where we met Geoff and were soon on our way by Ryanair over the Pyrenees to Zaragoza. John was waiting for us at arrivals and after collecting our Mercedes minibus we headed north. The Spanish countryside seemed as dry as in the UK and we found later that, similar to back home, they had only 25% of the normal winter rainfall. However, we amused ourselves spotting Cattle Egrets, Spotless Starlings and a lone Hoopoe as we sped along the motorway towards Huesca, enjoying the light traffic and pothole-free roads. White Storks were feeding in the fields and Red Kites and Common Buzzards were following farm tractors, shades of back home in Oxfordshire.



We stopped at the Embalse de Sotonera for a break, with water levels lower than ever seen before by John. Huge numbers of Common Cranes were arriving to roost on the far side of the reservoir, resting up for their onward journey; their evocative calls were to accompany us throughout the trip. Because of the low water levels it was difficult to see the other waterfowl which were some distance from us; however, the cranes were our focus here.



After passing Huesca we began our winding journey uphill, gaining an elevation of 1000 metres or so before arriving at the historic and charming town of

Alquézar. Here we gratefully made for our rooms to clean up ready for dinner at the hotels nearby restaurant, Casa Gervasio. Here we had a typical Spanish meal of various courses accompanied by some splendid wine and assorted liqueurs.

# Day 2

## **Tuesday 28th February**

#### Alquézar









Some of us met outside the hotel for a pre-breakfast walk. We were rewarded by views of a number of Blackcaps and Song Thrushes which were clearly in spring mode. We then walked through the cobbled streets down to the impressive gorge viewpoint. Here a Red-billed Chough was calling from high up on the Colegiata Tower. We scoured the gorge walls and cave roofs for our target bird while watching Crag Martins swoop by and hearing Black Redstart, Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Sparrow give voice. After much patient searching we were rewarded when Pat's eagle eye spotted a stunning, albeit rather distant, Wallcreeper searching the cracks and crannies for spiders and insects.

After a filling breakfast we were off into the hills stopping at Adahuesca for supplies. We followed the Vero River for a while, stopping at the ancient Gargantus Bridge, watching birds drinking before moving on to appropriate viewpoints, finding a Dipper and a confiding Firecrest.

After our sumptuous picnic we stopped at the Mirador del Vero, south of Lecina, looking into the gorge for nesting Griffon Vultures and finding a lone Egyptian Vulture, recently returned from Africa hoping to nest in the gorge. A pair of Peregrines were harassing the Rock Doves here and after moving to a new viewpoint we clambered down ladders to view some ancient rock art.

As we were returning to the vehicles we discovered some minute specimens of *Narcissus assoanus* and *Crocus nevadensis*, the first signs of spring at this altitude we thought, although *Viburnum tinus* blooms were about to open in some places and the flowers of the Strawberry Tree *Arbutus unedo* were forming.

Returning to Alquézar, we indulged in a coffee and a short exploration of the town before another splendid meal, a chat, checklist and bed.

Day 3

# Wednesday 29th February





We had to forego our pre-breakfast walk today as we wanted to be away promptly for our "close encounter" with the vultures. We were now becoming familiar with our scrumptious Spanish breakfast and ate well before heading to Adahuesca and the village store for picnic provisions, then making for the village of Santa Cilia. Here we collected our guides, Laura and Manuel of the Asociación Amigos del Vulture Fund who led us to the feeding station situated on a sloping hillside just outside the village. Manuel wore a red coat







which the vultures recognised meant food, and Griffons descended in numbers to consume the gruesome "carrion" presented to them. Constant squabbling ensued, together with various skirmishes to establish the pecking order; this accompanied by Manuel's "vamos" and furious camera whirring noises set the scene for an entertaining 20 minutes or so.

Two Lammergeiers arrived to see what all the fuss was about but decided they were vastly outnumbered and eventually left. Not so a black vulture which knew he was top dog, (well, bird), and landed in the resultant melee for any leftovers. This individual was ringed and identified by Manuel as coming from a local re-introduction scheme. It appeared to be in moult as the feathers were ragged, and was possibly just achieving adulthood. The Eurasian Black Vulture is classed as "vulnerable"; however, Spain's conservation efforts have resulted in an increase in numbers from about 200 pairs in 1970 to in excess of 1,000 pairs today.

Returning to the village, Laura took us to the Natural Park of Guara interpretation centre; here we had a 20-minute presentation about the park, which is the largest protected area in Aragón and a Special Protection Area for birds, particularly the Lammergeier. In the converted bell tower of the church we were shown a diorama using excellent life size models, showing how important vultures are to the life of the park.

After our picnic on the hill overlooking the feeding area we watched more Griffon Vultures soaring before making our way back to Alquézar, stopping now and then for photo opportunities. Upon arriving most then opted for a trek down the Rio Vero Gorge, a demanding but exhilarating descent down numerous steps, wishing the clumps of Ramonda myconi clothing the rock faces were in flower. Butcher's Broom Ruscus aculeatus was observed and upon arriving at the bottom a large colony of Maidenhair Fern Adiantum capillus venerus growing near a huge Fig Tree Ficus carica distracted us for a moment before another Wallcreeper was spotted. We traversed the suspended metal walkway clinging to the gorge walls before arriving at the restored power station and making the gentler walk back up to the town through almond orchards where clumps of Violets Viola suavis were growing under the trees.

# Day 4

# Thursday 1st March

#### Alquézar-Gallocanta

Today we were moving to Gallocanta. Following breakfast, the vans negotiated the narrow streets of Alquézar to the hotel, loaded the vehicles and, after our final goodbyes to Gervasio, we were on our way, stopping near Abiego amongst the vineyards to admire the view and Woodlarks singing.







We arrived at the spectacular scenic sandstone cliffs of Serreta de Tramaced, a fitting spot for spaghetti westerns we thought. A Black Wheatear showed well here. We moved on through some, mostly dry, rice paddies, stopping by the roadside near some bluffs to watch two Golden Eagles displaying and making more Golden Eagles, a rare sight.

We arrived at Laguna de Sariñena where we stopped for lunch. Serins serenaded us from the stone pines as we consumed our now familiar picnic and watched a Marsh Harrier quartering the reed beds. We scanned the lake but the waterfowl were distant due to the low water levels and we did not have time to explore further, having another 120 miles to go.

We pressed on, driving around the outskirts of Zaragoza, via the walled town of Daroca and Gallocanta, arriving at Berrueco at around 5.00pm. We were welcomed by Mata, and then made for our rooms for a tidy up before enjoying a beer and a short walk behind the hotel before dinner.

Day 5 Friday 2nd March

Gallocanta (Written by Alan Parfitt)







Our first full day at Laguna de Gallocanta and an early morning wake-up call to see the cranes. The lake is about 10km long by 2km wide and is a key stop-off spot for Common Cranes on their migration to northern Europe after wintering in southern Spain, principally in Extremadura.

We boarded our people carriers outside our Hotel Secaiza at Berrueco near Gallocanta, in the dark at 6.40am for our drive to a viewing hide beside the Laguna. The weather was clear but "bracing" with a temperature of -7 to -6°C. We were, after all, at about 1000 metres elevation.

Our drive took us to the opposite side of the Laguna via the village of Gallocanta itself, where we collected our local guide Javier Mañas. The hide was called "Observatorio de La Reguera". It was raised up on stilts so one could see over the reed beds and the Cranes roosting on the Laguna. As dawn slowly broke, with the sun just peeping above the surrounding hills, the sight of over 18,000 Cranes calling to each other on the Laguna was a true natural wonder. White Storks were also present in some numbers. As the daylight increased groups of Cranes took off to feed in the surrounding fields. A bonus was seeing a Wild Boar trotting across the mud flats of the Lagoon with the cranes completely unperturbed by it. At this stage we too felt it was time to trot off

back to our hotel for a late breakfast.

After breakfast we drove back to the village of Gallocanta to the Observatorio Los Aguanares to see the Cranes again. As the temperature was rising, we saw groups of many of the 18,000 birds rising on thermals and then flying off in large V formations to resume their migration northwards. One could not help but wish them well on their journey to countries like Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany and Poland.

Once the majority of the Cranes had departed we commenced a clockwise tour around the edge of the Laguna in our people carriers, looking at Calandra Larks, flocks of Linnets and Tree Sparrows. We stopped just beyond the village of Bello for a picnic lunch where we were interrupted by a heavy shower, and then continued our slow drive around the Laguna. Birds of prey performed well with notables being, Hen Harrier, Merlin, and a juvenile Golden Eagle. Barry's comments:- Javier later told us this eagle had been hanging around for some time taking out the odd Crane for lunch, the distinctive white rump and underwing markings helped with the ID, but we were all astounded by its size having fairly close views, (part justification of my first diagnosis of White-tailed Eagle which are very rare this far south).

By the end of our circuit more Cranes were arriving on the Laguna from the south for their overnight stop. As the afternoon drew to a close we too all stopped off at the Allucant Hostel in Gallocanta run by Javier Mañas for a welcome tea or coffee. After that, it was back to our hotel for a beer, the check list, and dinner to end a memorable day.

## Day 6

# Saturday 3rd March

#### Gallocanta





It was dark as we set out this morning, and after a 20 minute drive west of Gallocanta we arrived at a patch of 'paramo' habitat on the C211 called La Junta to listen for Dupont's Lark. As we arrived we could hear a number of birds singing their distinctive song, some not too far away from us. As it lightened we tried to pinpoint the birds but they lived up to their reputation of being elusive. We spent some time looking for birds amongst the low vegetation but, amazingly, no movement was seen and we had to console ourselves with only hearing the song of about seven birds. As the light increased the birds fell silent and we left them to their secretive existence and departed for some local tracks, finding little owl and more of the species with which we were now becoming very familiar.

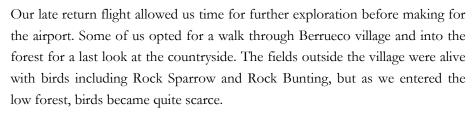
After a welcome and warming breakfast we took one of the vehicles and parked it in Gallocanta and then walked to the town via some back tracks. Singing Woodlarks and calling Cranes accompanied us, and we found some nice specimens of an earthstar fungus among the Holm Oaks before arriving at Javier's Café for a welcome cuppa. We were now on our final circuit of the Laguna where John had chosen a comfortable elevated spot for our picnic, but we quickly realised it was Saturday and the locals had the same idea, causing a race for the picnic tables, and so we ate our lunch accompanied by boys playing football and families enjoying a jolly get-together.

# Day 7

## **Sunday 4th March**

#### Gallocanta – Zaragoza - London







Gonzo the dog decided to accompany us and disappeared regularly to investigate sounds and smells; he cooled off in any available puddle and caused some amusement. Eventually after the woods changed from Holm Oak to pine we found a calling Crested Tit and a Coal Tit, two more birds for our lists.



Returning to the hotel we had a lovely lunch at the hotel before loading the vehicles and, following our goodbyes to Anna and Gonzo departed for Belchite and El Planeron.

This vast protected area of steppe we labelled lark city, as Lesser Short-toed and Calandra Larks and Skylarks were all in full song. This was reputed to be a good spot for Dupont's Lark but we were there at the wrong time of day. We heard Pin-tailed Sandgrouse calling in the distance but were unable to locate them

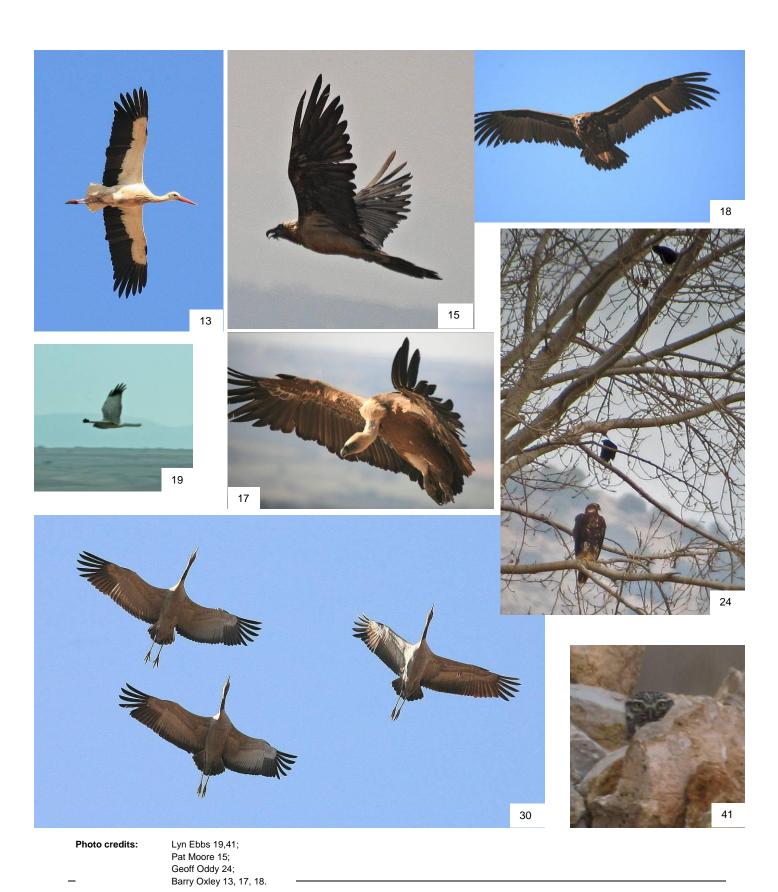
visually. It was an amazing landscape with rodent holes everywhere, probably of the Mediterranean Pine Vole of which we had glimpses, and were listed as being present. However, it was time to make for the airport and so we reluctantly left for Zaragoza. After an uneventful flight home we said our grateful thanks and goodbyes to John before connecting with our minibus.

Finally, it was great having old friends and new on this our first RSPB/Naturetrek holiday and I trust you all enjoyed it as much as me. Let's hope this is the beginning of a successful new initiative which will be to the value of both RSPB members and the RSPB. My very grateful thanks to John for his expertise and knowledge of the area we visited, and for his patience shepherding his co-driver around, and forbearance in my bit of "offroading". Thanks also for Lyn's patience and help sorting the daunting IT and pictures.

Barry

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# **Species Lists**

Birds (✓= recorded but not counted; K = thousand; H = heard only)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Common name Common Shelduck Eurasian Wigeon Eurasian Teal Mallard Northern Pintail Northern Shoveler	Scientific name Tadorna tadorna Anas penelope Anas crecca Anas platyrhynchos	27	28	29	1	2	3	4
2 3 4 5 6 7	Eurasian Wigeon Eurasian Teal Mallard Northern Pintail	Anas penelope Anas crecca					✓	✓	
3 4 5 6 7	Eurasian Teal Mallard Northern Pintail	Anas crecca							
4 5 6 7	Mallard Northern Pintail						✓	✓	
5 6 7	Northern Pintail	Anas platyrhynchos				✓	✓	✓	
6 7				10		✓	4	10	2
7	Northern Shoveler	Anas acuta					✓		
		Anas clypeata					✓		
8	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina	20						
	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa	✓			1	2	3	1
9	Little Grebe	Podiceps cristatus				✓			
10	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	10			✓		5	
11	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	3						
12	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	6			5	1	5	
13	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	10			30	40	✓	
14	Red Kite	Milvus milvus	8	10	3	3	1		
15	Lammergeier	Gypaetus barbatus			4				
16	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus			2				
17	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus	2	40+	250+	50	✓	20	10
18	Eurasian Black Vulture	Aegypius monachus			1				
19	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus				2	2	2	
20	Northern Harrier	Circus cyaneus					5		1
21	Northern Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis			✓				
22	Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	✓	1			1		1
_	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	8	2	2	8	6	2	2
24	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos			<b>✓</b>	2	1		✓
_	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	2	2	2	2	3	2	2
26	Merlin	Falco columbarius					3		
_	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus		2					
	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus				<b>✓</b>			
_	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	2			<b>✓</b>			
	Common Crane	Grus grus	10K	100		✓	18K	4K	1K
_	European Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria						20	
_	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	6			6	30	10	
	Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus	2			<b>√</b>			
	W Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	2						
_	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	1?						
_	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	Pterocles alchata						Н	
	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	Columba livia	<b>✓</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>√</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>√</b>
_	Stock Dove	Columba oenas						2	
	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	20	6	6	6	<b>✓</b>	6	2
	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	4	4	2	2	<b>✓</b>	<b>√</b>	20
_	Little owl	Athene noctua	<u> </u>	•	_		3	1	
	Tawny Owl	Strix aluca		Н				'	
_	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	1	- ' '			2	1	
_	European Green Woodpecker	Picus viridis	1				∠ ✓	'	Н
	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopus major		1					- ' '

			February/March							
	Common name	Scientific name	27	28	29	1	2	3	4	
46	Dupont's Lark	Chersophilus duponti						7H		
47	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra	1			1	50	6	4	
48	Lesser Short-toed Lark	Calandrella rufescens							30	
49	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	3		1	6	20	4	2	
50	Woodlark	Lullula arborea			1	2		6	6	
51	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis					5	50	10	
52	Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogene rupestris	10	50	6	6				
53	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis							3	
54	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea						2		
55	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	2	2			2	2	1	
56	White-throated Dipper	Cinclus cinclus			1					
57	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes				Н				
58	Dunnock	Prunella modularis		2						
59	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	1	1	1	✓			✓	
60	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros	1	2	1	✓		✓	✓	
61	Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus							✓	
62	European Stonechat	Saxicola torquata				2	10	10	4	
63	Black Wheatear	Oenanthe leucura				1				
64	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius	2	2						
65	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	2	20	10	10	✓	2	3	
66	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelus		15	10	4	✓	Н	2	
67	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus		2	✓	✓			1	
68	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cettia					✓			
69	Dartford Warbler	Sylvia undata			Н					
70	Sardinian Warbler	Sylvia melanocephala		1	Н	Н				
71	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	10	20	6	6				
72	Common Firecrest	Regulus ignacapilla		1				Н		
73	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus							✓	
74	European Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus							1	
75	Coal Tit	Periparus ater							1	
76	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	2	6	4	✓			2	
77	Great Tit	Parus major	2	6	2	<b>✓</b>			2	
78	Wallcreeper	Tichodroma muraria		1	1					
79	Southern Grey Shrike	Lanius meriodionalis				2	✓			
80	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	20			4	✓	✓	9	
81	Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax	2	6	2	50		5	✓	
82	Western Jackdaw	Corvus monedula					✓			
83	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	✓			2	10	10	10	
84	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	1	2	4	✓	✓	✓	✓	
85	Spotless Starling	Surnus unicolor	50	5	20	20	20	10	10	
86	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	<b>√</b>	✓	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>	
87	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus					100	100	50	
88	Rock Sparrow	Petronia petronia		<b>✓</b>			2		4	
89	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	<b>✓</b>	<b>✓</b>				✓	20	
90	European Serin	Serinus serinus	Н			2			<b>√</b>	
91	Greenfinch	Carduelis chloris				<u>−</u>				
92	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	<b>✓</b>	Н		<b>✓</b>	50	50	<b>✓</b>	
93	Common Linnet	Acanthis cannabina					50	100	100	

			February/March						
	Common name	Scientific name	27	28	29	1	2	3	4
94	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes			✓				
95	Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus				1		1	1
96	Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia				✓		2	✓
97	Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus					2	2	
98	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra	10	✓	✓	30	200	100	100

#### Mammals

Roe Deer, Capreolus capreolus Iberian Hare?, Lepus granatensis granatensis

Rabbit, Oryctolagus cuniculus Wild Boar, Sus scrofa

Red Fox, Vulpes vulpes Beech Marten (poo), Martes foina

Mediterranean Pine Vole?, Pitymis duodecimcostatus

Butterflies

Green Hairstreak, Callophrys rubi (16) Speckled Wood (Spanish race), Pararge aegeria

Red Admiral, Vanessa atalanta Small White sp, Pieris sp Clouded Yellow, Colias crocea Holly Blue, Celastrina argiolus

Plants of Note

Little Blue, Cupido minimus

Grass leaved Narcissus, Narcissus assoanus (1a) Crocus, Crocus nevedensis marceti (2)

Sweet Violet, Viola suavis (3 Ramonda, Ramonda myconi Mastic tree, Pistachia lentiscus Box, Buxus sempervirens

Laurustinus, Viburnum tinus Century Plant, Agave Americana

Strawberry Tree, Arbutus unedo (9) Holm Oak, Quercus ilex

Field Marigold, Calendula arvensis Maidenhair Fern, Adiantum capilus venerus

Butchers Broom, Ruscus aculeatus Stone Pine, Pinus pinea

Broomrape sp, Orobanche sp. Rosemary, Rosemary officinalis (16)

Earthstar fungus (17)

Some of the plants of El Planeron

Thyme, Thymus vulgaris

Tamarix, Tamarix canariensis

Asphodel, Asphodellus aestivus

Everlasting, Limonium sp.

Salicornia, Salicornia sp.

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