

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 28 October 2012



Gallocanta



Griffon Vulture watching at Santa Cilia



Wallcreeper

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, to find Wallcreeper: with a stay at Laguna Gallocanta south of Zaragoza, to watch the southward migration of Cranes. With good weather at Alquezar five Wallcreepers were seen and at Santa Cilia extremely close views of approximately 200 feeding Griffon Vultures was an amazing experience. Additional species included amongst others, four Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Red Kite, Peregrine, Red-billed Chough, Crested Tit and Firecrest . The good weather and the autumn colours in the Sierra Guara highlighted the magnificent scenery of the area. The weather at Gallocanta, with cloudy conditions, prevented much southward movement of Cranes. However the 1500 or so birds leaving their roost on the dry laguna before dawn calling evocatively, was well worth the early start to get in position. A good variety of other species included twelve Great Bustards, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, and large flocks of larks, finches and Tree Sparrows. The area was very good for birds of prey with more Griffon Vultures, many Marsh and Hen Harriers, plus three Merlins. A pre-dawn search for Dupont's Larks resulted in several birds heard singing.

Day 1

Monday 22nd October

Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived on time at Zaragozar after a late afternoon flight from Stansted and were soon on our way northwards towards Huesca. Roads were quiet so we made good time, arriving at Alquezar in time for the short walk through the old town to our restaurant for a late dinner.

Day 2

Tuesday 23rd October

Alquezar

Meeting at first light on a fine morning we walked through the town to the promenade overlooking the Vero Gorge. Several singing Black Redstarts on the house roofs were our first birds, followed by Spotless Starlings. A Sparrowhawk crossed the gorge and a pair of Red-billed Chough sat on top of the rock wall opposite whilst below Rock Sparrows called. A couple of Grey Wagtails flew over as we moved on to the viewpoint beyond the Castillo y Colegiata where we enjoyed the view down the Vero Valley. A Black Redstart perched conveniently in a nearby Agave and as the early morning sunlight was warming the rock wall we searched for movement. After some time a Wallcreeper was spotted flicking its way around low down on the cliff. Not the best view but we all managed to get 'scope views as it moved around the rock face before it flew down and away around a corner. Some of us also were lucky enough to see a second bird briefly. It was now time to think about food so we returned enthusiastically to the hotel to enjoy an excellent breakfast.

Breakfast finished, we headed to Adahuesca for picnic supplies, where those outside the shop saw Cirl Bunting, Blue Rock Thrush and Spotless Starlings. We then headed towards Colungo for an excursion following the Vero northwards. First stop was the impressive Romanesque Vero Bridge, with the riverside poplars a brilliant autumn yellow. A Red Kite was seen and in the riverside bushes a party of Long-tailed Tits were busy along with a few Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps.

Continuing on past Colungo, our next stop was at the Puente de las Gargantas. From the bridge over the deep gorge we soon spotted another Wallcreeper moving around on the conglomerate ravine wall then another appeared and there was a brief flurry of activity as they chased each other around before both sadly flew down the gorge and around a corner out of sight.

After a few more kilometres we reached some pinewoods where we walked to have a look at the cave paintings of Tozal dera Mallata. A Firecrest, Crossbill and two Crested Tits were seen in the woods and at the gorge several Griffon Vultures glided down to their roosting ledges. There was a brief view of a Peregrine Falcon and a really beautiful clear distant view of the high Pyrenees to the north. What was noticeable here and at our picnic stop a little further on was the continuous visible migration of finches overhead. Small flocks of Chaffinches with a Brambling heard with one flock, Siskins, Goldfinches and Linnets. There also were Meadow Pipits and a few Skylarks also on the move all heading southwards. At Mirador del Vero, there is 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.

Retracing our tracks towards Colungo and then back to Alquezar some of us set off to walk down into the Vero Gorge - a route which provides a close view of the geology and terrain at the bottom of the gorge where there is always a chance of a closer encounter with a Wallcreeper. Sadly not to be this time although a Dipper was seen heading upriver. We ended our walk with a drink on the promenade.

Later we walked the short distance to the Restaurant Gervasio for a typical delicious wholesome meal.

Day 3

Wednesday 24th October

Alquezar

After a 7.45am breakfast and quick picnic supply 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 Santa Cilia for 30 years. We 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 with stunning distant views - ideal Vulture flying weather. Manuel, wearing his customary old red coat, then distributed a wheelbarrow load of butcher's waste that he had collected. Before he even opened the sacks, 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, sometimes getting into the wheelbarrow. They seemed so at ease with Manuel as he talked to them and reprimanded them like children, and it felt a privilege to be with such a dedicated conservationist.

Later we withdrew to 100m or so distant. An adult Lammergeier was soon flying overhead, followed later by another. Reluctantly we left the vultures and set off downhill to our minibus to return 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 warm weather watching three Lammergeiers, including a dark immature bird, still active around the feeding site. Overhead a pair of Golden Eagles drifted over.

The journey back was through the foothills of the Sierra Guara with its varied terrain of rocky hills, river valleys, farmland of freshly sown small fields and vineyards. Birds here included Common Buzzards, Red Kites, Grey Heron, and many Black Redstarts. A stop and another Lammergeier spotted then short walk brought us up to a viewpoint overlooking El Huevo de Morrano an impressive cliff made up of sandstone and conglomerate rock. Flying around were Griffon Vultures, a Peregrine Falcon and many Crag Martins whilst below in a pine tree a couple of Crested Tits were busy.

Back in Alquezar some of us walked north up to the wells of Basacol this gave good views back to the town and of the Vero Gorge and as a bonus four Hawfinch were seen.

Day 4

Thursday 25th October

Alquezar-Gallocanta

Unfortunately today started wet but we were loaded up and on our way by 9am. After leaving the Sierra Guara foothills we headed south through large areas of arable farmland passing through small towns such as Novales with their now unoccupied Storks nests on pylons, grain silos and churches. The rain was now easing up and we were now in the Sierra de Tramaced, a fascinating eroded escarpment area.

Our first stop was a canyon near Piraces, we searched for Black Wheatear a speciality of this area but no luck, however even in the murky conditions the scenery of the canyon and strange sandstone pillars was fascinating.

Along an irrigation canal at the base of the escarpment were large numbers of Rock Sparrows, a Green Sandpiper and later stopping alongside some recently cut rice fields. Cattle Egrets, Lapwings, Snipe, White Wagtails and several Water Pipits were actively feeding in the wet muddy stubble. Many Marsh Harriers and Red Kites were seen from the van as we travelled on to our lunch stop at Laguna de Sarinena. Unfortunately it was still raining but we gained some cover under the eaves of the interpretive centre (sadly closed) to eat our picnic. Many ducks were on the water, mostly Mallard but also Shoveler and groups of Teal. Several Grey Herons were at its edge and the large surrounding reedbed had hunting Marsh Harrier. On a short walk we encountered Goldfinches, Stonechats, Chiffchaffs and Serins.

Lunch done we headed towards Zaragoza and the Autovia Mudejar south towards Daroca. Weather had improved and scenery was beautiful in the late afternoon sunshine. We passed through the old walled town of Daroca and up and over the 1150m high Puerto de Santed Pass to Gallocanta. The laguna had water and in the distance we could see some groups of Cranes standing in and around the lake bed preparing to roost. We soon settled in and later enjoyed a delicious meal at our welcoming hotel at Berrueco.

Day 5

Friday 26th October

Gallocanta

Next morning we started early with our guide Javier from Gallocanta. He advised us where the Cranes were roosting so we headed for the far side of the lake getting into position looking from the west side of the laguna at first light. Luckily the early light rain had stopped and we could just see and hear Cranes calling. As it got lighter we could see ranks of them spread along the lake bed. After some minutes groups started taking off flying from the lake bugling loudly as they headed to their feeding areas. We watched many groups leaving over the next half hour or so. There were in addition coming out of their reedbed roost several Marsh and Hen Harriers including one or two beautiful male Hen Harriers and many flocks of Corn Buntings and Skylarks. It was then time to head back round the laguna via Bello and the bakery (lunch bread) for breakfast.

Later at the southeast end of the lake we headed for the tower hide of Canizar. Numerous flocks of Linnets, Skylarks and Goldfinches were feeding in the weedy fields, a few Griffon Vultures drifted over the hills to the northeast and a late migrant Whinchat was seen. From the tower four Roe Deer were spotted. Moving round to the southern end, we were able to watch from the raised platform giving us a good view of this end of the laguna. There were distant Lapwings, some groups of Cranes flying in from their feeding fields, Crested plus Calandra Larks and Corn Buntings.

Driving past Bello and back around the lake towards Gallocanta along the narrow tracks through the arable fields we spotted twelve Great Bustards a bit distant and wary but good to see. After sightings of many more Calandra Larks and Skylarks and Black-bellied Sandgrouse we headed to the Ermita and its covered picnic area. The sun was now out but it was still windy and cool. After lunch we retraced our route back to our early morning viewpoint, the tower hide of Le Reguera overlooking the northeast end of the lake. Many Tree Sparrows were seeking safety in the bushes around a barn and in the reeds, Reed Buntings. Other species included Northern Wheatear, White Wagtails, many Skylarks, Merlin and more Harriers. Continuing our way around the lake we made our way back to Gallocanta, Berrueco and our hotel.

Day 6

Saturday 27th October

Gallocanta

In the darkness before dawn we arrived at a hilltop several kilometres west of Gallocanta in search of Dupont's Larks. It was overcast and cool but not too cold. We stopped the vehicles and listened not sure what to expect at this season, but in a short time several birds were heard singing their strange songs, then more were heard, at least six in total. However as soon as it started getting light, singing diminished. We walked, watched and listened for some time for one late singer but we could not see it. A view of a couple of birds in the low vegetation which we hoped would be Dupont's proved to be a Lesser Short-toed Lark and Skylark. Satisfied that at least we had heard the birds we finally returned for breakfast.

The rest of the morning was spent walking the track through the Holm Oak scrub from the Hotel to Gallocanta. Cirl and Rock Buntings, Long-tailed Tits, Woodlarks and 2 Golden Eagles perched high up on the rocky hilltop were the bird highlights but there were also many interesting fungi along the way. While everyone visited the new Interpretation Centre, which gives a very good exhibition of the landscape use and wildlife of the area, the picnic was set up in the Hostel Allucant courtesy of Javier. Here we enjoyed our picnic in the warmth and there was the bonus of drinks available at the bar and an interesting exhibition of mammal photography. Later we spent the afternoon exploring the area north of the lake and then back around the west side for a last look for Sandgrouse and Bustards but we only managed Calandra Larks and of course Cranes all smart in the afternoon sunlight plus more Hen Harriers and a couple of Merlins.

Returning to Gallocanta we stopped to look at masses of birds on the wires on the outskirts of the village, these were all Rock Sparrows.

Day 7

Sunday 28th October

Berrueco - Belchite - El Planeron - Zaragoza - London

After a leisurely breakfast, unfortunately on rather dull and damp morning, we had a walk, through and beyond Berrueco on the hill track towards Castejon. Black Redstarts along with Spotless Starlings were in the village and Cirl Buntings, Serin plus Chaffinch and a Firecrest in the woods beyond. As we turned to return the weather now improving, we heard the sound of distant Cranes and several migrating groups high above us passed over coming from the north flying towards the lake, a memorable sight on our last day.

We had delicious paella at the hotel then set off for our late evening flight from Zaragoza via the special dry steppe land near Belchite. The weather was now bright autumn sunshine as we made our way via Daroca north to Carinena where we turned eastwards through the autumn coloured vineyards to Belchite. The late afternoon light and really clear conditions at El Planeron made for a spectacular view as we scanned the steppe land towards the distant escarpments, it was however very windy which soon had us back in the vans. We drove into the reserve parked and walked along a track noted as a stronghold of Dupont's Lark sadly none seen. Numerous Lesser-short-toed Larks were in the area flying over calling. Exploring further into the reserve yielded Harriers, a flock of Red-billed Choughs Crested Calandra and Sky Lark. Lastly, next to a seasonal pond a flock of Cranes rested, a fitting end to our trip. It was now time to make our way to Zaragoza and our flight home.

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = Heard only; F = female)

	Common name	Scientific name						
			23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>					4	5
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				20		✓
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			100s	✓	✓	✓
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			20			
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			100			
6	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			8			
7	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			1			
8	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			3			
9	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		1	2			1
10	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			4			
11	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1	1		15
12	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	10+	6	10+	3		1
13	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		4				
14	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	100+	200		6		8
15	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			10+	6	1	2
16	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				6	6+	1
17	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	2	2	4		
18	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		3	20+		2	1
19	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		2			2	
20	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	2	5+	4	3	1
21	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1F	2	
22	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1				
23	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>				12		
24	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			100	1500	✓	1000
25	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			50+	50+		
26	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			5			
27	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			1			
28	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			20+			
29	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				19		
30	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
31	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	4				6	2
32	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	2	4	✓	✓	□	✓
33	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			□	1	□	□
34	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		1				
35	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	1		1			
36	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2	1			2H	
37	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>			10			20+
38	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	4	6	2			11
39	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloews monedula</i>	1					
40	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	10+	10+	2	2		2
42	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	3					
43	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	H	2				
44	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	4	✓	2	✓	✓	✓
45	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	1	✓			✓	
46	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				50+	4-500	200+
47	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>					1	100+

	Common name	Scientific name						
			23	24	25	26	27	28
48	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>					6H	
49	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	H	8	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		1		1		
51	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		1			3	
52	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	15		✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	4		3	1		
54	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	10+	30+	5			
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			1			
56	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	20+	H			10	
57	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	10+	3	✓	5	6	✓
58	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	20+	✓	6			
59	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		1				
60	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	4	✓	✓	1		
61	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	1	H				1
62	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H			H	
63	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	4	1				
64	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓		✓			
65	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	50+	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	□	1	□	□	□	□
68	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2	2	2			4
70	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			1			
73	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		4	8	✓	✓	✓
74	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				1		
75	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	3	1	2			
76	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	1					
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓			
78	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			3	50+	✓	
79	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	20+	2	2-300	2	200+	
80	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	□	4	□	□	□	□
81	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	3+	2	1			
82	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	15+	3	100+	✓	✓	✓
83	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	100+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		□	5	□	□	□
85	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		4	□	□	□	□
86	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	2000+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	1		3			
88	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	2	1		20+	✓	40+
89	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	H		✓		
90	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	3					
91	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	1000s	✓	✓
93	Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	2					
94	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		4				
95	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	2	2	✓	100s	✓	✓
96	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		2				
97	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>					2	
98	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	2	H		5	8	✓

	Common name	Scientific name						
			23	24	25	26	27	28
99	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			2	3	4	

Mammals

Roe Deer

Rabbit

Fox

Butterflies

Wall

Clouded Yellow

Banded Grayling

Small White

Marbled White sp.

Red Admiral

Peacock

Blue sp.

Other taxa

Viperine Snake

Praying Mantis

Locust sp.

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Lammergeier