

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 - 23 February 2014



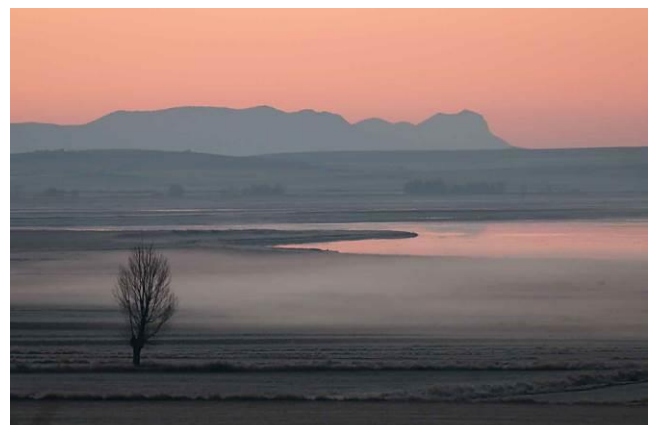
Common Crane in flight



Calandra Lark



Alquezar



Gallocanta at dawn

Report & images 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 northward migration of Cranes. With good weather at Alquezar a Wallcreeper was seen and at Santa Cilia very close views of approximately 200 feeding Griffon Vultures was superb. Additional species included five Lammergeier, Golden Eagles, numerous Red Kites, plus Marsh and Hen Harrier and Red-billed Choughs. Interesting stopover points on our journey south to Gallocanta included a canyon, a freshwater lagoon, the vast plains of Los Monegros, and the unique landscape of El Planeron near Belchite. At Gallocanta 50,000 Cranes leaving the laguna at sunrise provided atmospheric sights and sounds.

Day 1

Monday 17th February

Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived in mid afternoon in Zaragoza after a morning flight from Stansted and as soon as we had our rental minibuses were on our way northwards towards Huesca. Our first birds were large numbers of Cattle Egrets plus many Grey Herons and two Night Herons in a field near the Ebro River. Further north wintering Red Kites, Marsh and Hen Harriers hunted over the rolling agricultural land. In the more wooded country, as we approached Sierra Guara, Common Buzzards were seen.

Arriving in Alquezar as it was getting dark we soon settled into our comfortable hotel. We finished the day with an excellent typically Spanish meal at Restarante Gervasio's and then a walk to the promenade to see the Moorish Citadel, lit up and towering over the town.

Day 2

Tuesday 18th February

Alquezar

Meeting just before dawn on a cool morning we walked through the town with its singing Black Redstart to the promenade overlooking the Vero Gorge. At the viewpoint we scanned the cliffs - Blackcaps sang in the almond trees below and the first circling Griffon Vultures were spotted. We then headed past the Citadel to the eastern viewpoint where we were rewarded with the sight of a Wallcreeper working its way around the rock crevices in the vertical cliff. A couple of Red-billed Chough announced their presence with loud cries. By now we were getting hungry so it was back to our hotel for a delicious breakfast. Breakfast done we headed first to Adahuesca for picnic supplies while those not shopping found Corn Bunting and Spotless Starlings. Then it was on towards Colungo for an excursion following the Vero northwards. First stop was the old Vero Bridge, where we searched the river for Dipper without success. In the nearby field hedge a Cirl Bunting was singing. Through Colungo, where a Red Kite was perched on a pole, our next stop was at Puente las Gargantas a bridge high above a gorge mostly comprised of conglomerate type rock another Wallcreeper hotspot. We searched the holes and crevices but today all was still. The large base rosettes of Pyrenean Saxifrage (*Saxifraga laongifolia*) dotted the gorge walls. In pinewoods a few more kilometres north we walked to the gorge to have a look at the cave paintings of Tozal dera Mallata. In the pines a few Crested Tits, and a Firecrest, were seen. Nearer the caves a clump of Rush-leaved Jonquils (*Narcissi assoanus*) were much admired.

Retracing our steps back to the vehicles we continued north stopping in a car park overlooking the Box and Juniper covered hillside where we had our picnic. Later we returned to Mirador del Vero, a good viewpoint overlooking a part of the Vero Gorge with many Griffon Vulture ledges - some already occupied with a few birds on nests. Several Griffon Vultures and a Peregrine were active in the sky above the gorge and around the car park many spikes of a handsome Crocus (*C. nevadensis marceii*) were in bloom with its purple streaked white petals. We headed back towards Colungo stopping for another look from the Puente las Gargantas but sadly no Wallcreeper here today.

Back in Alquezar we set off through the town and down the footpath for a walk through the gorge. A Kestrel was busy around the cliff and numerous Song Thrushes and Blackcaps were active in the valley scrub on the way down. At the bottom we walked upstream a little and admired the vast cliffs and large cave undercut in the cliff by the river. We scanned for Wallcreeper but only Crag Martins were busy feeding in the sky above us. We headed downstream on the cliffside walkway only to be thwarted by a footpath closure due to unstable rocks so we had to return the same way slowly making our way back up the numerous steps to the town where we enjoyed a drink in the sunshine on the promenade. Later, after discussing our day's sightings in the hotel bar over glasses of the delicious local Somantano wine, we walked the short distance to the Restaurant Gervasio for another typical delicious wholesome meal.

Day 3

Wednesday 19th February

Alquezar

After an early breakfast and quick picnic supplies stop in Adahuesca, we headed west towards Santa Cilia. Here we met our guide Manuel (Manu) Aguilera Sanz of the Asociación Amigos del Vulture Fund.

Manu is a dedicated raptor conservationist who has been operating a vulture feeding station at Sta Cilia for 30 years. He also advises vulture projects around the world. We followed him in his vehicle up above the village, parked in an area where Dartford Warblers were seen and heard, then walked the last few hundred yards towards the feeding area. Above us Griffon Vultures were already gathering and a pair of Peregrines soared amongst them. We sat down at the edge of a bare rocky area in warm sunshine with long distant views over the beautiful surrounding countryside – ideal conditions for vulture watching. Even before Manuel started distributing his wheelbarrow load of butcher's waste Griffon Vultures were landing all around him, so accustomed are they to this operation. We had brilliant close views of roughly 200 vultures vying with each other for the food and we watched in amazement as these large birds, only a few metres from us, devoured the scraps. Once the meal was finished and things quietened down, we withdrew to 100m or so distant. From here an adult and an immature Lammergeier were watched sometimes interacting with each other over the feeding area. Later another adult bird appeared.

Eventually we set off downhill towards our minibus and after watching a Golden Eagle flying above us returned to the village where 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. Driving a short way back behind the village, with a distant view of the feeding area, we enjoyed our picnic in the sunshine whilst at least two Lammergeiers circled above the area.

On our return journey we stopped for a short walk up to a viewpoint overlooking the sandstone and conglomerate cliffs of Huevo de Morrano. Another Lammergeier was seen overhead and along the distant cliffs many Crag Martins active in the afternoon sunshine. Back in Alquezar many more Griffon Vultures were soaring over the town, a flock of Red-billed Choughs came in to roost and there were two more sightings of Wallcreeper.

Day 4

Thursday 20th February

Alquezar-Belchite-Gallocanta

After an early breakfast we were soon on our way. It was a clear morning with views of the snow topped Guara and the distant high Pyrenees. We headed first towards Huesca then south through large areas of arable farmland to the Sierra de Tramaced - a fascinating eroded escarpment. We passed a White Stork on its nest then we stopped at a canyon near Piraces, a spectacular landscape with a Blue Rock Thrush, distant Ravens, and two Thekla Larks. We searched the numerous cliff holes for Eagle Owls which nest in good numbers in this area but none were showing today.

Taking a short cut alongside the Monegros Canal for a few kilometres we turned towards Sarinena. At Laguna de Sarinena we scanned around the lake which had mostly roosting Mallard and Shoveler. At the edges of the extensive reedbeds were several Grey Herons and a Marsh Harrier was hunting. Here we had our picnic in the warm sunshine. We continued our journey southwards across the arable lands of Los Monegros. Crossing the very full Rio Ebro we travelled through Quinto and on towards Belchite. We stopped first at a viewpoint overlooking the dry steppe landscape of El Planeron to admire the view over this unique steppe habitat. Then we turned onto gravel tracks to explore El Planeron reserve area. There were Calandra and Crested Larks plus a flock of ten Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying rapidly away.

A little further on we heard the distinctive song of Dupont's Lark but had no sighting of this elusive bird. We searched further suitable habitat but all sadly unsuccessful. Time was now getting on so we continued our journey past the wartime ruins of Belchite to Carinena then south to Daroca and over the final range of hills to Gallocanta. A quick stop at the viewpoint overlooking the lake confirmed there were many thousands of Cranes already roosting in the shallow water. As we checked in to our hotel with its view over the fields to the lake and the sunset we looked forward to our dawn Crane watch.

Day 5

Friday 21st February

Gallocanta

We started out early, with our guide Javier, who took us to a position looking from the NW side of the laguna near the Los Ojos observation point at first light. Unfortunately weather had not been good through the night but at least the rain had stopped. We were soon in position overlooking the lake from our viewpoint just as the sky was getting light over the hills to the east. It was overcast but 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. The official count for the previous day had been 55000 and we could now see vast numbers in the lake. After some minutes, groups started taking off and bugling loudly as they flew away to their feeding areas in the arable areas around the lake and beyond. The silhouette of large groups against the lightening sky and distant hills was amazing. Other early morning birds were Hen and Marsh Harriers, Corn Buntings, Tree Sparrows and on the way back some Rock Sparrows on a roof. After an hour or so most Crane activity reduced to a trickle so we returned to Hotel Secaiza for a warm up and a welcome breakfast.

Setting off after breakfast we returned to Gallocanta to watch for Cranes leaving. The cloud had thinned and it was getting brighter so maybe there would be enough warmth to generate some thermals and some migration. After a while we watched some Cranes returning to the lake then flying up trying to get height to cross the hills to the north. A few groups managed to soar up high and drift off north but many groups were seen to give up and glide back to the lake.

Around midday we travelled along lakeside tracks to the southeast end of the lake scanning the arable fields for those elusive Sandgrouse but no joy, only small flocks of Sky Larks, Linnets and Corn Buntings. We walked to a tower hide where sheltering from a cooling wind we identified ducks, Lapwings, Marsh Harrier and Curlew. Moving on round the lake we checked out the old interpretive centre, using the facilities and having our picnic in the sunshine on the sheltered southern side of the building. Hundreds more Cranes, many Lapwings, and some Roe Deer, could be seen from the raised viewing platform.

Beyond the village of Bello we took to the dirt tracks again across the arable farmland towards the lake. The highlights in this section were five Great Bustards looking stately as they slowly walked near the edge of the lake. We disturbed small flocks of larks including Calandra, and saw Kestrel and Merlin. From the tower many ducks could just be seen far out in the water and of course more Cranes. At this time we noticed many groups of Cranes arriving high from the west and drifting down to settle amongst the resident roosting birds at the lake edge.

Day 6

Saturday 22nd February

Gallocanta

Another pre-dawn start, this time to travel about 20km to a hilltop to listen for Dupont's Lark. We arrived and parked on the roadside and listened. It was just getting light from the east but it was moonlight - very clear and below freezing with spectacular clear views of the moon and through the 'scope, a crescent Venus in the eastern sky. We could hear several birds singing but it was too dark to see anything. We assembled on the roadside listening intently to the distinctive songs trying to make out from which direction they came, from high in the sky or from across the low 'paramo' habitat. John, Conny and Derek decided to walk slowly across the area while others walked or slowly cruised in the vehicles along the road bordering the low steppe like habitat. Results were varied. Conni had a fleeting view of a bird as he walked and Ian heard a bird singing beside the road which then flew rapidly up into the sky and out of sight. After about an hour the Dupont's Larks had finally stopped singing and after watching a Merlin and male Hen Harrier we returned to a welcome breakfast.

After breakfast we set off to walk the footpath through the woods to Gallocanta. The weather was bright and sunny and now warming up. Cirl Buntings and several Woodlarks were singing along the way. Red-legged Partridges and three Golden Eagles were seen as we approached Gallocanta. While Jenny and John went to pick up the minibus from Berrueco the rest of the group visited the interpretive centre or watched the lake. Cranes were now leaving en masse, rapidly gaining height above us and heading off northwards. Numerous ducks of several species were seen on the lake and ten Avocet. The picnic today was organised at Hostal Allucant with welcome drinks from the bar.

After lunch we set off to explore northwest of the lake, an area of farmland and a small freshwater lagoon. Many Hen Harriers were seen with some Marsh and at the small lagoon a pair of Marsh Harriers seemed to be exhibiting nesting behaviour. There were several Pochard, Grey Herons, a Little Grebe and a squealing Water Rail was heard. Flocks of Linnets, Corn Buntings, and a few Calandra Larks were in the roadside fields. We returned to Las Cuerlas and continued around the lake this time clockwise, hoping for another view of the Great Bustards and looking out all the time for Sandgrouse. The main activity apart from Reed Buntings, were the several thousand newly arrived Cranes congregating around the lake edge but sadly no Bustards today. The good weather had brought out the weekend Crane watchers in considerable numbers so perhaps they had sought refuge somewhere quieter. Finally around on the southeast side just as we neared the end of circumnavigation four Black-bellied Sandgrouse were spotted and then two more a bit closer gave better views.

Day 7

Sunday 23rd February

Gallocanta - Zaragoza - London

This morning we enjoyed a walk through the village of Berrueco and up a track leading to the far side of the hills to the north, accompanied by Gonzo, the friendly wolfhound from the hotel. We hoped he might flush some deer or Wild Boar but the woods were very quiet apart from a mixed flock of tits. As we returned many Cranes were attempting to get height over the hills. Some managed and drifted off northwards but others gave up and drifted back towards the lake to try again after a bit more sunshine.

We left the hotel at about 12, saying goodbye to Anna, Marta and Gonzo, and after a stop to watch Dartford Warbler and Rock Buntings near Daroca we made good time to the airport and our flight home.

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Grass-leaved Jonquil

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				1		4	
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				3	✓	✓	
3	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>					✓		
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				✓	✓	✓	
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				5	✓	✓	
6	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓			
7	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				10		50	
8	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				1		H	
9	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				3			
10	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	30			15	4		
11	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	100+			20			
12	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	20+			✓		4	
13	Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	2			□			
14	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				4			
15	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				10		14	
16	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	3	4	2	8	2	3	
17	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>			5				
18	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		60	400+	20+	4	5	✓
19	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	2+			8	2	5	✓
20	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1	1			3	15	
21	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1	1	2	1	✓
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	3	2	4	6	2	1	
23	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			1			3	
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1	3	3	3	5	✓	✓
25	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					2	1	
26	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		2	2				
27	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>					5		
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>						H	
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				1			
30	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					1	✓	
31	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>				10000	50000	50000	✓
32	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>						10	
33	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				200+	100	100+	
34	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					4	4	
35	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					✓		
36	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>					✓		
37	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				1000+	✓	✓	✓
38	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>						1	
39	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				10		6	
40	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
41	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	□	✓	✓
42	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
43	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				2			
44	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		2					
45	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓			20+	1	2	✓
46	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		50	50+	2	2		
47	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓		1	3	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23
48	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	1	2	5	2		✓
49	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		5					✓
50	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
52	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				30	✓	✓	
53	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>				H		2	
54	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				2			
56	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		2		✓		10	✓
57	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				✓	✓	✓	
58	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		30	50+				
59	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				H			
60	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>						2	✓
61	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			1				
62	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		10+	20+	✓			
63	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			4				4
64	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>			1	3		3	
65	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		1					
66	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H					H
67	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		1	2				
68	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓				
71	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>				1			
72	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			1				
73	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2	✓	✓			1
74	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	3	3	2			3
75	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			3	2	2	1	
76	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			2	2			
77	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		1					
78	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					✓	✓	✓
80	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>					3	✓	
81	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓		2	3		3	✓
82	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				✓	2		
83	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	1000+	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	H			H			
85	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>					✓		
86	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓
87	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		1	3	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>							2
90	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		2			1	1	3
91	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>						3	

Mammals

1	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>					8		
2	Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			1				
3	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				1			
4	Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>						1	

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Plants of note

9	Grass-leaved Jonquil	<i>Narcissus assoanus</i>		✓					
10	Nevada Crocus	<i>Crocus nevadensis marcetii</i>		✓					
11	Shrubby Globularia	<i>Globularia alypum</i>		✓					

Invertebrates

13	Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>			1				1
14	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>			1				



Lammergeier Adult and Immature