

# Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 - 26 October 2014



Black Wheatear



Common Cranes



Blue Rock Thrush



Lammergeier

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Dove, Crag Martin, Red-billed Chough and Griffon Vulture. We looked for Wallcreeper but without success so they would have to wait till later in the day.

We then set off towards Peña Falconera (or El Huevo de Morrano), an impressive conglomerate cliff. Our route passed the villages of Bierge and Adahuesca, and was surrounded by agricultural fields. We also crossed a typical Mediterranean forest containing Juniper, Wild Olive and Holm Oak trees. There were some isolated ponds and we saw Mistle Thrushes and Blackbirds drinking, and with the temperature very close to 30 °C, we listened to Sardinian and Dartford Warblers singing.

The cliff was inhabited by a family of noisy Ravens and a group of more than 15 Griffon Vultures. We reached the pinnacle and scanned the cliffs behind, hearing and seeing Crested Tit, Goldcrest and Kestrel. We then reached the pass where we had our first picnic lunch.

After the picnic we headed towards Mirador del Río Vero. On the way we stopped on the Romanesque bridge over the Vero River, built in the XI century and surrounded Poplars in autumn colour. It was a nice walk, watching Firecrest, Long-tailed Tit and Treecreeper in the forest close to the river. We also enjoyed watching a Dipper for half an hour.

We continued and reached the incredible viewpoint of Mirador del Río Vero. It was a very hot afternoon with the temperature reaching 28°C. Griffon Vultures were circling on the thermals, and the autumn light was painting a beautiful picture on the cliffs and the trees in the valley.

We invested some time scanning every single cavity looking for the very elusive Wallcreeper. After some minutes Laura spotted a Wallcreeper about 100 meters away, flapping it's wings while feeding in the shade created by a cavity on the cliff. It was not easy to find, but eventually all the group managed telescope views of the Wallcreeper. Everyone was able to watch the pink patterns on the wings each time the Wallcreeper moved up or down the cliff. On the way back to the hotel we scanned other cliffs and spotted a male Blue Rock Thrush as it flew over our heads.

## Day 3

Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> October

### Alquezar

Our main objective today was to go to Santa Cilia and visit the Griffon Vulture Feeding Station based in a village and managed by the Fund of Friends of the Vultures, an organisation involved in Vulture research and protection.

After a 45 minute drive westwards, we arrived at the village and were greeted by a Lammergeier and a female Hen Harrier flying over our heads. We met our local guide and manager of the Fund, Manuel Aguilera and we followed his vehicle along the track to the feeding station. The same Lammergeier that welcomed us was now flying at the left hand side of our vehicle about 30 meters away showing us his elegant flight.

More than 100 Griffon Vultures came to feed on the food that Miguel had prepared for them. Our local guide explained how to distinguish a juvenile, a pre-adult and an adult Griffon Vulture according to their feather

pattern and bill colour. Usually after the Griffon Vultures have fed, the Lammergeier then feeds on bones which is why we saw the Lammergeier welcoming us early in the morning.

Once the Griffon Vultures had fed we returned to the village and visited the Centre run by the Griffon Vulture Friends Fund. We looked at the diorama and watched a video about the Vultures which showed us the differences in the feather patterns and colours of the different aged birds.

Next we went to a village garden containing a shelter for our picnic lunch. We had good views of the area where the Griffon Vultures are usually fed, and during the picnic saw a Firecrest and some Meadow Pipits.

After lunch we continued our trip and visited a viewpoint at the Guara Water Reservoir hoping for closer views of Wallcreeper. We were not disappointed. After some minutes scanning at Mirador del Calcón we finally spotted a new Wallcreeper and it was certainly closer than the one we had seen the day before. We all enjoyed watching it moving up and down the wall, always in the shade. After watching it for some minutes we walked towards the dam to try and have a different view of the Wallcreeper. We again saw a Wallcreeper but this time lower down compared with the first sighting and we were unsure whether it was a second bird or the same one. We saw the Wallcreeper close to a *Ramonda miconii*, still in flower, and some *Saxifraga longifolia*, both endemic plants of the Pyrenees. After a very successful day we drove back to Alquezar.

## Day 4

Thursday 23th October

### Alquezar - Piraces - Bujaraloz - Gallocanta

Today we moved from the Guara Mountains to the Lagoon of Gallocanta with some birding stops enroute.

We left Alquezar and after driving south for 30 minutes we reached a landscape containing cereal fields. Here we enjoyed our first sightings of Corn Bunting and Zitting Cisticola very close to the road.

Continuing our journey we reached a secret valley that reminded us of the landscape of the Far West with characteristic sandstone erosion. It was warm and we parked the vehicles for a walk along a path. Scanning the top of the rocks gave us fantastic sightings of three Black Wheatears and a Blue Rock Thrush.

As we continued towards the village of Piraces a Little Owl was spotted in an abandoned building close to the Cinca River Channel so we stopped to take some photographs. Whilst there, a Reed Bunting came close to one of the vehicles.

Our next stop was Sariñena Lake where we had our picnic lunch close to the Visitor Centre. Sand Martins, House Martins and Barn Swallows flew over our heads. A group of Black-headed Gulls were on the lake, and Sardinian Warbler and Serin were calling in a nearby tree. From the viewpoint we saw several Marsh Harriers flying over the reeds. Before leaving the Lagoon we had a walk close to the shore where we saw an Iberian Hare and discovered some Badger footprints.

Moving on, we stopped at some fields close to Bujaraloz. We visited the small lagoon of La Salineta and were delighted to spot a group of ten Great Bustards.

Next we crossed an area of small salty lagoons, the biggest being Laguna de La Playa. Close to the road we watched a Merlin chasing larks and we had a flock of a hundred Calandra Larks flying parallel with us.

After a long travelling day we finally arrived at our hotel in Gallocanta and enjoyed a delicious dinner.

## Day 5

Friday 24<sup>th</sup> October

### Gallocanta

This was our first full day in Gallocanta and we were awake at 7:00am. It was a chilly morning at 4.5°C and the sky was full of stars. Javier, our local guide, joined us and explained the plan for the day.

We drove to Navajo Pardina at the western side of the Lagoon and Javier showed us an area where there were 1,500 Common Cranes. We waited, hidden close to an abandoned building, and the activity of the Common Cranes rose with the sunlight of the dawn. From the same viewpoint we saw a group of Tree Sparrows feeding on the fruits of brambles. We had nice views and it was a good photographic opportunity. We also spotted Eurasian Curlew, Avocet and Shoveler. After a successful first visit to the Lagoon, we drove back to the hotel where they served us a delicious breakfast.

After breakfast, the weather was very pleasant and we walked to the eastern side of the Lagoon towards the El Cañizar Observatory, and the Visitors Centre located on the southern shore. Our most interesting sightings were a Hobby feeding on prey, Zitting Cisticola, Stonechat, Goldfinch, Kestrel and Hen Harrier.

At midday we stopped in the Visitors Centre for our picnic lunch. At the top of the Visitors Centre was a platform from which a good view of the area was obtained. We spotted five Great Bustards on the western side of the Lagoon, and a juvenile Hen Harrier hunting.

We then drove to another Observatory, La Reguera Tower, to look for Common Cranes coming from the fields where they have been feeding during the day, to roost in the Lagoon. At 5:30pm we watched a massive group of Common Cranes and Calandra Larks fly over our heads towards the lagoon. We also saw a large group of Green Sandpipers, and both Marsh and Hen Harriers came to roost very close to the tower. We watched till 7:00pm before returning to our hotel for dinner.

## Day 6

Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> October

### Gallocanta

Today we had an early start and left the hotel at 6.30am. The temperature was 9°C and as the sky was clear we enjoyed seeing millions of stars in the sky. Our main goal was to visit La Yunta to look for Dupont's Lark which is very selective in its territories and tends to live in flat fields on clay soils covered by very specialised vegetation.

We arrived in the dark, opened the vehicle windows, sat quietly and waited. Finally at 7.50am our patience was rewarded when a Dupont's Lark was heard. With the sun rising we were unable to see the bird but were pleased to have heard it. We then returned to the hotel.

Next we visited an area called Hermita, with a Hermitage on the top of a hill and good views of the Lagoon. We left the vehicles close to the Hermitage and walked westwards, surrounded by the fragrance of Rosemary. After a few minutes walking, we spotted four female Little Bustards close to an abandoned building and hay stack. We 'scoped the birds but the weather was hazy and they moved out of sight behind a hill. We moved the vehicles to get closer views of them. From our second spot, close to the hay stacks, we had much better views before they flew away over our heads, probably scared by a car that was coming towards us. We also saw a Merlin and a couple of Little Owls.

As it was very hot and the middle hours of the day can be quiet for bird activity, we returned to the garden of our hotel for a picnic lunch.

In the afternoon we returned to La Reguera tower to have another look for Common Cranes coming in to roost at dusk. On the way we spotted six Great Bustards. At the Torre de la Reguera we waited patiently for the Common Cranes. We did see some but the numbers had decreased, probably because the Lagoon was very dry. On the other hand, the activity of the roosting Hen and Marsh Harriers was increased and we also saw five Short-eared Owls mobbing some of the Harriers.

As darkness fell we returned to our hotel for dinner. On the way a Long-eared Owl flew in front of our vehicle.

## Day 7

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> October

Gallocanta - Belchite - Burgo de Ebro - Zaragoza Airport - Stansted

Today was the last day of our trip. We left Gallocanta at 7.45am and headed towards Belchite, the first of two spots we planned to visit on our way to the airport.

After 90 minutes driving, we reached the El Planeron Preserve, created by the Spanish Ornithology Association to protect Steppe birds such as sandgrouse and larks including Dupont's. Once we had entered the El Planeron Preserve, it took no more than two minutes to see a group of 25 to 30 Black-bellied Sandgrouse take off and fly towards us; a very good sighting of that particularly shy species. We continued driving very slowly on the tracks, listening and watching. We also walked along a path signposted for Dupont's Lark but we didn't see or hear any. We did spot two Lesser Short-toed Larks and very curious and nervous Dartford Warblers. At our last stop in the El Planeron area, we visited a small pond surrounded by tamarisks where we spotted some Greenfinches.

Our final stop was at Burgo de Ebro, a town close to the Ebro River where we saw several White Storks. According to the locals, they now stay all year round, probably due to the amount of food they can find. We enjoyed our picnic lunch in a park close to the Ebro River, under trees which protected us from temperatures close to 29°C.

After the picnic we had a short walking close to the riverside where we saw Great White Egret, Great Cormorant, Grey Heron, Cetti's Warbler, Grey Wagtail and Mallard.

Finally, at 2.00pm we drove to the airport for the group to fly back to the UK.

It was a pleasure to meet, guide and know such an enthusiastic group.

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Great Bustards

## Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	October						
			20	21	22	23	24	25	26
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓				✓
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					✓		
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>							✓
5	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>							✓
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>					✓		
7	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>					✓		✓
8	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	✓			✓
9	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>			✓				
11	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
12	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
15	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>				✓	✓		
16	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				✓	✓	✓	
19	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>					✓		
20	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>							✓
21	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>				✓	✓	✓	
22	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>						✓	
23	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓				
24	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>					✓	✓	✓
25	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>					✓	✓	
26	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				✓			
27	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					✓	✓	
28	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
29	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓			
30	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>							✓
31	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓			
32	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
33	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>						✓	
35	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>						✓	
36	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>					✓		
37	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				✓			
39	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
40	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		✓	✓				
41	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓					
44	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓		✓		
45	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓					
46	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>				✓			✓



	Common name	Scientific name	October						
			20	21	22	23	24	25	26
48	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>						H	
49	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
51	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				✓			
53	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓	✓	✓			
54	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>				✓			
55	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				H			H
56	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓			✓		✓
57	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	H	✓			
59	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		H		✓			✓
60	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		✓		✓			
61	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓	✓				
62	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓				
63	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓					
64	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		✓	✓				
65	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		✓					✓
66	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓				
69	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
70	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
71	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					✓		
74	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>				✓			
75	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		✓		✓			
76	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓					
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					✓	✓	
79	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		✓					
80	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓	✓			
81	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓
82	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓
83	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓	✓			
85	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>					✓		
86	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					✓	✓	✓
87	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
90	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓					
91	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				✓		✓	

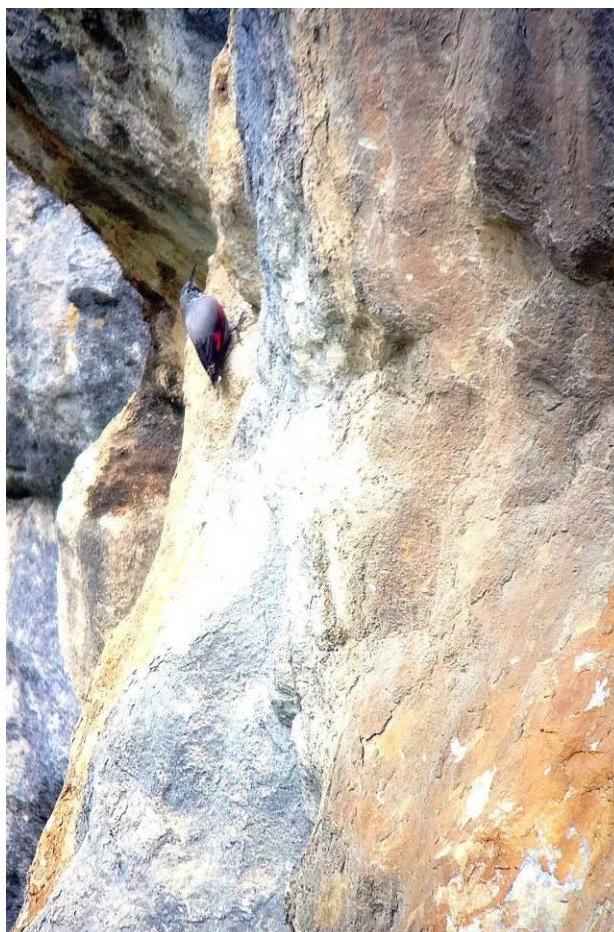
## Mammals

1	European Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>	✓						
2	Common Weasel	<i>Mustela nivalis</i>					✓		
3	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>					✓		

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Butterflies

1	Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>		✓					
2	Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias sareptensis</i>		✓	✓	✓			
3	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓					
4	False Grayling	<i>Arethusana arethusa</i>		✓					
5	Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary	<i>Boloria selene</i>		✓					
6	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓				
7	Esper's Marbled White	<i>Melanargia russiae</i>			✓				
8	Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>			✓	✓			
9	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓				
10	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>			✓				
11	Mazarine Blue	<i>Polyommatus semiargus</i>				✓			
12	Adonis Blue	<i>Polyommatus bellargus</i>				✓			
13	Small Blue	<i>Cupido minimus</i>				✓			



Wallcreeper