

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 29 February 2016



Alpine Accentor



Gallocanta



Santa Cilia



Sierra de Tramaced

Report and images by Laura Benito and James Lees



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Tour participants: Laura Benito and James Lees (leaders) with eight Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Tuesday 23rd February

Stansted- Zaragoza- Alquezar

The group and James arrived in Zaragoza in the afternoon. After a short delay, we headed to the north, driving to the village of Alquezar. Large numbers of Spotless Starlings and Magpies were around the city of Zaragoza. Many groups of Cranes, making beautiful formations, were crossing the sky, starting their migration to the North of Europe. Red Kite, Common Buzzard and Marsh Harrier were seen over the fields next to the motorway.

We arrived in Alquezar at night; the citadel was illuminated and the full moon was above the town. The views were fantastic! We finished the day with an excellent Spanish meal cooked by Gervasio's mother, Maribel, after which we were ready to have a rest in order to start the next day with energy.

Day 2

Wednesday 24th February

Alquezar-Colungo-Puente las Gargantas-Vero Gorge

We started before breakfast; we walked through the town towards the superb Vero gorge. We scanned the first cliff, seeing a few Crag Martins flying, Rock Sparrows calling from the cliffs and the Starlings imitating the Golden Oriole call. We walked on to the next viewpoint and James spotted the first Wallcreeper on the cliff! All of us had good views of it over 20 minutes, flying up and down the wall, and flicking its wings. We continued watching as a pair of Red-billed Chough flew over and stopped at the top of the cliff. A Sardinian Warbler and a Blackcap were singing in the almond trees. The surprise was to find two Alpine Accentors feeding in one of the gardens below, giving us superb views of them.

After this nice start to the day, we were getting hungry so it was back to our hotel for a special breakfast. We were on the way back to the hotel when we spotted a Blue Rock Thrush on the cliff, warming in the sunshine.

After breakfast, we drove to Adahuesca for picnic supplies. Shopping done, we moved to Colungo, stopping in the Roman bridge for a walk following the River Vero, searching for Dipper, which we saw briefly, disappearing in the distance. We enjoyed good views of the Firecrest and a group of Long-tailed Tit. Our next stop was Puente las Gargantas, a bridge above a gorge of conglomerate rock, and an interesting spot for plants with Pyrenean Saxifrage (*Saxifraga longifolia*), now without flower. A big group of Cranes were flying in the distance, heading north, crossing the sky, making the distinctive call and creating a magic atmosphere. Suddenly a pair of Lammergeier appeared, flying above the horizon and disappearing behind the mountains. From the bridge we spotted our second Wallcreeper, feeding on the cliff; with a lot of effort, finally all of us could had good views of it.

We continued to the Mirador del Vero, a good viewpoint over the gorge of the River Vero. Around the car park we spotted *Narcissus assoanus*, beautiful with their yellow flowers. From the mirador, we saw some Griffon Vulture activity; some of them were on the nest! We had our picnic in a car park with good views of the gorge. We had good views of a Crested Tit while we were preparing the picnic. After lunch we headed back stopping in "el Tozal de Mallata" for a nice walk in the pinewoods towards the gorge, to have a look at the cave paintings. In

the pines a Firecrest was seen. Large lines of Pine Processionary caterpillars (*Thaumetopoea pityocampa*) were crossing the track. At the gorge, a lot of Griffon Vultures were flying around and an Egyptian Vulture and Peregrine Falcon were both sitting in the cliff.

It was time to drive back to the Hotel, to have a rest. Later, after the checklist in the hotel bar, having a drink, we walked to the Restaurant for another typical Spanish dinner.

Day 3

Thursday 25th February

Alquezar- Santa Cilia-Mirador de Morrano- Alquezar

After an early breakfast and a quick stop in Adahuesca to buy some bread and picnic supplies, we headed west to Santa Cilia. Once we arrived in the small town, we met our guides Manu and Jessica. Manu Aguilera of the “Friends of the Vulture Association” (Fondo Amigos del Buitre) is a dedicated raptor conservationist who has been operating a vulture feeding station since the late 1980’s (and he has been studying vultures for more than 40 years; he also collaborates in some projects related to raptors around the world). Jessica is working with him in the feeding station of Santa Cilia.

We followed him in his vehicle to a spot above the village, where we parked and walked for 15 minutes, towards the feeding area. Some Griffon Vultures started to fly above our heads and suddenly a Golden Eagle appeared, flying over us and disappearing in the horizon. A good start! We sat down on a bare, rocky slope with good views of the landscape of “Olla de Huesca”. The vultures began to land in the slope just in front of us. They were landing all around Manu waiting for the food. We had good views of more than 100 vultures, only a few metres from us. An adult Lammergeier flew over the feeding area among the vultures, looking around, but finally disappeared in the horizon. Once the meal finished we moved a little bit back, hoping the Lammergeier would return, but with no success.

We set off downhill towards minibuses and returned to the village where we visited the Visitor Centre of “amigos de los Buitres” and had our picnic in the sunshine, enjoying the landscape and the tranquillity of the moment. On the way back we stop in the canyon of el Morrano to check the walls and the landscape but it was very quiet, so we decided to drive back to Alquezar.

Back in Alquezar some of us decided to have a walk around the town. Later, all together after our checklist, we enjoyed another delicious meal.

Day 4

Friday 26th February

Alquezar- Sierra de Tramaced- Montmesa-Gallocanta

We had another early walk, before breakfast, to look for Wallcreeper and Alpine Accentors, having good views of them and also of Egyptian Vulture, Blue Rock Thrush and Red-billed Chough. After breakfast, we started to drive to our next destination. We headed to Huesca, to the “Escarpes de Piracés”, a striking and beautiful landscape created by the erosive action of the wind on land formed by rocks and deposits of sandstone and clay. We stopped to search for Black Wheatear and found a couple, quite close to us. Scanning the cliffs, finally we found an Eagle Owl in a cave on the opposite side. It was a surprise for all of us!

We continued our journey southwards stopping at the reservoir of Montmesa, where we had our picnic while a lot of different groups of cranes were flying across the sky, on their way back north. Spectacular! Lapwings, Marsh Harrier, Linnets and Calandra Larks were flying around the area. We continued our journey driving south to Daroca, crossing Zaragoza, and over the final range of hills to Gallocanta. Sonia and Nacho, the owners of the Hotel Secaiza, were waiting for us.

After settling in to our rooms, we went to the lagoon to see the cranes arriving at the lagoon in the evening. We spent an hour there, but the temperature was cold, so we decided to come back to the hotel. Finally, after this long day, it was time to relax and enjoy our dinner.

Day 5

Saturday 27th February

Gallocanta

The plan of the day was to start very early to be in position on the north-west side of the lagoon, at an observation point called Los Ojos, for first light in order to see the cranes taking off to their feeding areas ... But when we got up this morning, we realised that all was covered by snow, as it had been snowing all night! It was impossible to go out from the hotel, so we spent all day in the hotel, just making some little walks in the surroundings of the town of el Berrueco. In spite of bad weather we managed to see: Brambling, Rock Bunting, Crested Lark, Woodlark and Cirl Bunting.

Day 6

Sunday 28th February

Gallocanta

Another day covered by snow, but this time the sun came out, and there were no blizzards. The snowplough finally worked to clear the roads and we managed to drive carefully round the lagoon to do some birding.

Our first stop was in the town of Gallocanta to see some groups of cranes grazing in the fields nearby. We had nice views of them in the snow, and some other flying over us. The scenery was spectacular!

We continued our driving and, from the van, we saw a Merlin hunting a Linnet. Our next stop was La Yuta, trying to hear or even see Dupont's Lark: we tried but the rain didn't let us. We drove back to Allucant's hostel where Javier and Lizan were waiting for us with a delicious lunch and very welcome hot drinks!

We continued our drive around the lagoon in the afternoon, but things seemed to be very quiet and the weather didn't help us, so we decided to come back to the hotel, with time to relax and enjoy the views from the hotel; the landscape was gorgeous!

Day 7

Monday 29th February

Gallocanta- Madrid

We left Gallocanta very early in the morning and we headed south west towards Madrid. The roads were clear, so we drove without any problems, and arrived in time to catch the flight home.

The enthusiasm, energy and sense of humour of the group was very helpful and contributed enormously to the success of the trip.

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Crane footprints

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>				✓			
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>						✓	
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>						✓	
4	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				✓			
5	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓	✓		✓	
6	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				✓			
7	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓			✓			
8	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				✓			
9	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				✓			
10	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				✓			
11	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				✓			
12	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		✓	✓				
13	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		✓		✓			
14	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
15	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		✓	✓	✓			
16	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓			✓	✓	
17	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>						✓	
18	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓			✓		✓	
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
20	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
22	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
23	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				✓		✓	
24	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				✓			
25	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓			
26	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓						
27	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓		✓	✓			
28	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
29	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
30	Eurasian Eagle-owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>				✓			
31	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	✓						
32	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				✓			
33	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓					
34	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>			H				
35	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
36	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>						✓	
37	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓	✓				
38	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				✓			
39	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓			✓			
40	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		✓	✓	✓			
41	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>				✓			
42	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
43	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
44	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓					
45	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
46	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>					✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29
48	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				✓	✓	✓	
49	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
50	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				✓	✓	✓	
51	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓	✓	✓			
52	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓					
53	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓			✓		
54	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓				
55	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓			
56	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
57	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		✓	✓				
58	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓					
59	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	✓	✓			
60	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		✓	✓	✓			
61	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
62	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					✓		
64	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓			
65	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
66	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓			
68	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		✓	✓	✓			
69	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
70	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>				✓			
71	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓					
72	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
73	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
74	Alpine accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>		✓		✓			
75	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
76	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	✓		✓	
77	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
78	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>					✓		
79	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		✓	✓				
80	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓					
81	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
82	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
83	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
84	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>				✓	✓	✓	
85	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>						✓	
86	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>					✓	✓	
87	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓	✓		✓		
88	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>					✓		