

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 - 31 October 2018



Watching Cranes early morning at Gallocanta



Early morning at Gallocanta



Griffon Vultures at Santa Cilia



Roosting Cranes

Report and images compiled by John Willsher



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: John Willsher (leader), Javier Manas (local guide, Gallocanta),
Manu (Santa Cilia, Vulture feeding) with six Naturetrek clients

Summary

A very enjoyable week looking for the bird specialities of the Aragon region of Spain. First travelling south to Gallocanta where we spent two full days, watching large numbers of Cranes leaving their roost in the lake and finding many other species in the surrounding farmland and hills. We followed this with a day travelling north, stopping in the unique steppe-like habitat of the El Planeron reserve near Belchite before arriving in Alquezar in the Sierra de Guara. This restored medieval town, a World Heritage Site, was our base for nearly three full days of exploring the gorges and uplands of this region of the pre-Pyrenees. We enjoyed several sightings of Wallcreepers plus spectacular views of feeding Vultures. The mostly sunny weather enhanced the many wonderful bird sightings and highlighted the gorgeous, colourful autumn foliage provided by stands of bright yellow poplar trees and the various shades of green, yellow and russet-red foliage of the vineyards. Weather on the last day was not so good but we returned to the airport via Embalse de Sotonera and managed to add a few species to our list.

It was a great week of good company, mixed weather, but dramatic scenery and some amazing bird sightings.

Day 1

Thursday 25th October

Stansted-Zaragoza-Gallocanta

The small group travelling from Stansted arrived in Zaragoza in the late evening and met up with Perran and Lorraine who were already in Spain. Due to the late flight time (the only one available) we had to quickly make our way by taxi to the bus station in order to pick up our minibus then we were soon on our way around Zaragoza and heading south on the Autovía Mudéjar. past the grape growing town of Carinena and through the old walled town of Daroca. This led to a climb over the Puerto de Santed pass at 1154m then down to Gallocanta which lies in a basin at about 1000m. As we arrived at our hotel in the village we could see distant lights reflected by water in the lake and could immediately hear many Cranes calling in the moonlight. We soon settled into our hotel and met our host Javier who told us that the official Crane count was 17,000 so we quickly got to bed in anticipation of our predawn Crane watch.

Day 2

Friday 26th October

Gallocanta

We started out early on a cool, calm and slightly overcast morning, with our guide Javier, who took us to a position looking from the north-west end of the lake at the observation point near Pico los Ojos, to be there at first light. We were soon in position as the sky was lightening with brilliant red sky over the hills to the east. We could hear many Cranes calling from the centre of the lake where they had spent the night. As it got lighter we could see large groups standing in the shallow water all the time calling to each other. Groups of Cranes began to fly out to the surrounding fields calling loudly; there seemed an endless supply as group after group flew away from the lake. As it got light we saw hunting Marsh and Hen Harriers plus numerous groups of Skylarks and Corn Buntings flying over. Some Roe Deer were spotted and later a beautiful male Hen Harrier. In the shallow water of the lake were many Shelduck and Mallard plus four Avocets and some Ruff.

We returned to Gallocanta for a welcome warm up and breakfast. Later as Jenny and Javier went off to get picnic supplies in Usted, the rest of the group walked to a viewpoint overlooking the lake near the new interpretation centre. Out at the edge of the water some Dunlin and Ruff were feeding, another Marsh Harrier was seen along with House Sparrows, Rock Sparrows, Spotless Starlings and of course more Cranes.

With lunch organised we set off to explore the areas around the lake beginning by travelling along lakeside tracks to the south-east end of the lake scanning the arable fields hoping for some Sandgrouse. None were seen but we had sightings of two distant Griffon Vultures, Kestrels, Stonechats, and flocks of Goldfinches, Skylarks and Calandra Larks. Several groups of Cranes were feeding in the arable fields around the lake, another Hen Harrier was hunting along the lake edge and a Merlin was spotted perched in a stubble field. At the edge of one field in a patch of the blue flowered vetch Lucerne were many Clouded Yellow butterflies.

The old interpretive centre was open and we enjoyed the view from the high observation platform across the freshly cultivated arable fields towards the lake. There were more Cranes, a Marsh Harrier and a Red Kite. Moving on we passed Bello on the tarmac road but soon turned back onto the dirt tracks again making a stop at a convenient picnic area to have lunch. After lunch we continued our clockwise circumnavigation, avidly scanning the flat wide landscape for another species that Javier had heard was still in the vicinity – Great Bustard. They leave the Gallocanta area at this time, heading further south. We stopped at the tower hide of La Reguera where some took the opportunity of a walk to the hide. From the platform we could look over the lake, this being the first time for two or more years that there has been a significant area of water - enough to hold many ducks. They were mostly Mallard but there were also Shoveler, a few Teal, two Red-Crested Pochard and some Lapwings.

Before turning back back towards Gallocanta we explored the gravel tracks meandering through the arable fields to the northwest of the lake - another area where Javier had told us Great Bustards had previously been seen. After travelling some way and just as we had given up hope we turned round to return to Gallocanta and Jenny spotted six birds flying. Luckily they landed and we all piled out of the van and managed to get the telescope onto them and enjoyed watching them for several minutes. We returned to Gallocanta and enjoyed going over the day with our lists, followed by an excellent meal with many choices.

Day 3

Saturday 27th October

Gallocanta

Today we had another pre-dawn start, travelling about 20 kilometres west to a hilltop to listen for Dupont's Lark. We arrived while it was still dark, cool and raining. Not the best conditions, but we parked on the roadside and listened. Initially nothing was heard, but after a few minutes one faint distinctive song could be heard then, as a glimmer of light appeared in the east, we started to hear more birds. We braved the drizzle and assembled on the roadside listening intently to the distinctive songs, trying to make out from which direction they came across the low 'paramo' habitat. We walked along the road, drove on a little and estimated five birds had been singing but they all remained elusive. After about an hour, when the Dupont's Lark's songs had finally diminished we needed to warm up, so were all happy to return for a very welcome breakfast.

Later, despite there still being some light rain, we set off to explore an area north of the lake, stopping first at a point overlooking an area of arable farmland known as Laguna de la Zaida, as it is sometimes flooded when

water is available. It has been dry for several years but it was hoped this year it might be flooded. There were some small areas of water with a few ducks but nothing significant yet. We did see four Marsh Harriers and a Red Kite. We travelled further north to the small freshwater Laguna de Guialguerrero. On the water were many Pochard, Mallard a few Teal plus Great Crested Grebes and Coots. Three Grey Herons and a Cormorant roosted in the vegetation at the edge and White Wagtails patrolled the muddy margins. As we turned the vehicle round and started our return a Peregrine Falcon flashed past chasing a Mallard; we watched briefly but it was unsuccessful and soon disappeared. The only highlight on our return to Gallocanta for lunch was a Merlin spotted perched on a stone wall. As it was still raining we ate our picnic inside at Allucant enjoying hot drinks from the bar.

After lunch we visited the Observatorio de Los Aguaranes at the northern end of the lake where we again could see a few waders: Avocets, a Black-tailed Godwit, plus several Ruff, Dunlin and Lapwings. We then moved on for another exploration of the fields northwest of the lake where we had two more beautiful male Hen Harriers and eventually the sight of 20 flying Little Bustards. Back on the main road we stopped to check numerous birds around a grain store finding Spotless and Common Starlings, numerous Rock Sparrows, Crested Larks and Linnets. Of course all these sightings were supplemented by numerous groups of Cranes feeding in the fields.

Day 4

Sunday 28th October

Gallocanta - El Planeron - Zaragoza – Alquezar

On a cold clear morning with snow dusting the distant hills we left Gallocanta travelling north to Carinena then east through the extensive vineyards to Belchite, where we had a brief stop at the ruins of the old destroyed town, a memorial to the tragic circumstances of the Spanish civil war. After a refreshment stop in the new town we continued east beyond Coda to a viewpoint overlooking the wide sweep of El Planeron - a unique Steppe habitat with multicoloured cliffs of Gypsum, Red clays and Marls in the distance. Later we turned off the road onto gravel tracks for an exploration of this dramatic landscape. This is a desert-like habitat, protected as a reserve for the many specialist species living there. We travelled through areas favoured by Dupont's Lark, hoping we might hear or hopefully glimpse a bird but all we saw at this quiet time of day and season were flocks of Calandra Larks with Skylarks and a Marsh Harrier. We ate our picnic admiring the view of this fascinating region.

Soon we had to make our way back to Belchite then northwards travelling through the gypsum steppes and hills towards Zaragoza. We crossed the Ebro river where in fields nearby many White Storks had gathered, then a slight detour took us across the Monegros region to Sarinena and Barbastro to arrive at Alquezar just after 5pm in time to settle in and have a quick walk to the gorge viewpoint. It was beginning to get dark and the town was still busy with weekend visitors. We did manage to see a few birds - Crag Martins, a couple of Blackcaps and a Black Redstart. Later we met in the hotel bar to enjoy a glass of the local Somantano wine before making the short walk to the hotel restaurant for a delicious typical Spanish meal.

Day 5

Monday 29th October

Alquezar-Santa Cilia

We started the day with a superb breakfast and were on our way at 8.45 to get to our rendezvous with the vultures at 10.00. We made a quick stop for picnic supplies in Adahuesca, then on to Santa Cilia to meet up with Manu and Theresa. He was waiting for us in the village and after we watched a Bearded Vulture which appeared conveniently at that moment amongst the Griffon vultures high above us we followed him in his vehicle up above the village, parked our van, and walked up towards the feeding area, through the aromatic maquis scrub of Rosemary, Juniper and Cistus. As we climbed the vultures increased in numbers above us. Many Griffon Vultures were now gathering and before we reached the feeding area they were already dropping down onto the ground. We sat down at the edge of a bare rocky area, with long distant views over the beautiful surrounding countryside and before Manu even started distributing his wheelbarrow-load of butcher's waste, vultures were landing all around him. We were soon up close and personal with at least 200 as they vied with each other for the food. We watched in amazement as these large birds, only a few metres from us, devoured the scraps. Manu rationed the food - keeping some back which he periodically offered as titbits, which some birds took directly from his hand. He chided them if they got too greedy and rough with their neighbours.

As things quietened down, we withdrew to 100 metres or so, hoping a Bearded Vulture might appear. We waited awhile, enjoying the view, with the vultures still hanging around the feeding area. Eventually we had to return back downhill towards our minibus to make our way back to Santa Cilia. In the village Theresa, of the Guara Park authority, facilitated the excellent diorama showing the dependency of each species on one another in the food chain of the region. It had been an unforgettable morning but we had to leave. We thanked Manu for allowing us to share the feeding spectacle of his vultures and to witness his dedication to their protection. We left the village but as we reached the lower road Manu tooted his horn behind us as there was a Bearded Vulture right above us. We were quickly out of the van to watch it as it soared above us in the bright blue sky.

Part way back we stopped at a viewpoint overlooking the sandstone and conglomerate cliffs of Huevo de Morrano and ate our picnic enjoying the fantastic view in the sunshine. Numerous Crag Martins were flying around the cliffs which today had some Griffon Vultures on the ledges.

Back in Alquezar we met up for a walk down to the promenade for another look at the cliffs, almost immediately another Bearded Vulture was spotted high above the Citadel gliding across the town. We soon began scanning the cliffs and despite some human climbers on the cliff our first Wallcreeper was found which we watched for 15-20 minutes before it flew off high over the town. We searched the other cliff at the east end where noisy Choughs were getting ready to roost.

Later in the hotel bar we enjoyed adding to our checklist after what had been another outstanding day and this evening our meal in the hotel restaurant included an excellent paella.

Day 6

Tuesday 30th October

Alquezar-Vero Gorge

We met just as dawn was breaking on a clear morning, walking again down through the town to the promenade overlooking the cliff wall above the Vero Gorge. We searched the cliff and its caves as it slowly lightened but it

was very quiet with little activity and no sign of that elusive Wallcreeper. It was cold in the shade with a strong breeze coming down the gorge so we walked on to the eastern viewpoint hoping to warm up in the sunshine, searching again the vertical cliff above the Rio Vero. There was more bird activity here in the warming sunshine with Crag Martins, Blackcaps, Robins and Red-billed Choughs. The sun was higher now so it was time to check the first cliff again as the top half was bathed in the sunshine. We looked across to the main cliff from a small viewpoint accessed by a paved path under a giant crack in the cliff below the Citadel. Very quickly a Wallcreeper was found which we watched for several minutes and a further two birds were seen flying away. We returned for breakfast in good spirits and enjoyed a delicious spread of tortilla, tomatoes in oil, toast, bacon, croissants and a variety of local jams, freshly squeezed orange juice, coffee and tea.

The first stop of our excursion today, was the old Romanesque Vero Bridge, which we admired along with the riverside poplar trees now turning a golden yellow. We searched the river for Dipper but there was no sign today. A Short-toed Treecreeper was spotted on a riverside poplar which we watched for some minutes and there were more Red Kites drifting over. We drove on through Colungo, then stopped at Puente las Gargantas, a bridge high above a gorge mostly comprised of conglomerate-type rock - another Wallcreeper hotspot. We searched the walls of the gorge extensively and finally found one on the right hand cliff, we watched it for some time then it flew across the gorge towards us and briefly settled on the left cliff but then sadly flew away followed by another! We did notice other features of the gorge; the walls were dotted with the large basal rosettes of Pyrenean Saxifrage (*Saxifraga longifolia*) which have dramatic plumes of tiny white flowers in the spring, and straggly tufts of a very local, endemic plant - *Petrocoptis guarensis*. A Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo*) at the parking spot had numerous 'strawberry' fruits, and other roadside flowers included Rosemary. Further north at Mirador del Vero, a good viewpoint overlooking another part of the Vero Gorge, we had a view of the high Pyrenees to the north - the highest white with snow. In the gorge a few Griffon Vultures were loafing around on the ledges, caves and limestone stacks areas which in spring have many birds nesting. Another Wallcreeper was watched here as it moved around on the cliff opposite until it flew across the gorge and disappeared on the cliff below us. We returned a little way back towards Colungo and walked through pinewoods where we had excellent views of a Firecrest, and then to the edge of the gorge at El Tozal de Mallata to admire the view and to look at one example of the numerous cave paintings that are preserved and protected in this area.

Later after our picnic we returned to Alquezar in late afternoon when some of us had another wander around the town but there were to be no more Wallcreepers, just Rock Sparrows, Red-billed Choughs, a Sparrowhawk and Crag Martins busily feeding in the late afternoon sunshine.

There was plenty to catch up on for our evening pre-dinner drink and our last evening dinner in Alquezar.

Day 7

Wednesday 31st October

Alquezar-Embalse de Sotenera-Zaragoza

Unfortunately we awoke to rain and the forecast for our last day was not good so we made the most of our last splendid breakfast in Alquezar. Finally after saying our farewells to Gervasio, we were on our way. As we travelled towards Huesca the rain seemed to be easing a little so John decided it could be worth making a detour on minor roads to the reservoir of Sotenera. As we approached the reservoir the rain increased so we did not get the best views. However, we did manage to see a few ducks, Great Crested Grebes and Cormorants. As we left and crossed over a canal numerous Great Egrets, some Grey Herons and some Snipe were seen. We continued

along country roads south until we reached the autoroute and the final stretch to Zaragoza airport where we said goodbye to Perran and Lorraine who were heading for Santander and the ferry back to the UK.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays



Gallocanta

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	October					
			26	27	28	29	30	31
1	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓	✓	✓			
2	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓				
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
4	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓					
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		5				
6	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	2					
7	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		30				
8	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>					6	
9	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		3				✓
10	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			25			
11	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>						10
12	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		3				✓
13	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>						1
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1		1		✓
15	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>				3		
16	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	2		2	200	✓	
17	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2		1	1	1	
18	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	8	✓	✓			
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	6	✓	1			
20	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	1	1	2	3	✓	✓
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			✓	✓	✓	
22	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	6					
23	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>		20				
24	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		H				
25	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			2			
26	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓				✓
27	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	10000	✓	✓			
28	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	4	4	2			
29	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	40	✓	2			
30	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>						4
31	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		1				
32	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓				
33	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	5	✓				
34	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	6					
35	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>						✓
36	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		2				
37	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
38	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓			2		
39	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓
40	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					1	
41	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	3	1	1			
43	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1				1
44	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>			10	✓		✓
45	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>			✓	6	30	
46	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓			
47	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				6	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	October					
			26	27	28	29	30	31
49	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>					2	
50	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				1	✓	
51	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>				1	✓	
52	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓	✓			
53	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
54	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓			
55	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>		H5				
56	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			✓	✓	✓	
57	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					✓	
58	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1	H			
59	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			2	✓	✓	
60	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>				✓	H	
61	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>					3	
62	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				H		
63	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>				1	6	
64	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>					1	
65	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓			
66	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				3	✓	
68	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				✓	✓	
69	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			H	2	✓	
70	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	5		✓	2	1	
71	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓			
72	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	1	2				
73	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
74	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	✓	✓	H		H	
75	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	10	5	1			✓
76	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				2		
77	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓			
78	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
79	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					1	
80	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓			
81	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓			2	
82	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
83	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		H				

Mammals

1	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	7	2				
---	----------	----------------------------	---	---	--	--	--	--

Butterflies

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			1	✓		
2	Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>			1			
3	Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>				✓		
4	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>				✓		
5	Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>	✓					
6	Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>	✓					
7	Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus malvae</i>	✓					

Moths

1	Silver Y	<i>Autographa gamma</i>	✓					
2	Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>				1		