Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

19th - 26th February 2022



Bearded Vulture by Ian Tooley



Common Cranes by Ian Tooley



Wallcreeper landing by Ian Tooley

Tour report by Byron Palacios



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Introduction

Despite early forecasts of some rainy days, we had clear sunny days which enhanced the amazing bird sightings we had on this two-centre tour in north-east Spain. Our full days in the Sierra de Guara, based at the gorgeous village of Alquézar, gave us several records and great views of Wallcreeper sightings, plus an array of other beautiful birds such as European Serin, Red-billed Chough, European Siskin, Peregrine Falcon, and lots of vultures including Griffon, Bearded, Egyptian and Eurasian Black! Crag Martins, Blue Rock Thrush, Corn Buntings, Rock Sparrows and a beautiful pair of Black Wheatear and an unprecedented number of large groups of Common Cranes, high above heading north for their mountain crossing. The vulture watching experience began with an eye-level flypast by an adult Lammergeier, then the fantastic spectacle of Griffon Vultures 'up close and personal', an experience only possible because of the dedication of Manu Aguilera who, as a founder member and president of Fondo de Amigos del Buitre, FAB, has been protecting the vultures for more than 30 years. At Gallocanta, the amount of roosting Common Cranes blew our minds everyday as we saw thousands of these birds feeding along the adjacent fields to the lake or simply getting ready to fly a long journey northwards. Other species of wildfowl and a variety of larks were also seen here. All this wonderful birdlife was enjoyed alongside spectacular scenery and landscapes and scrumptious food!

Day 1

Saturday 19th February

Stansted - Zaragoza - Alquezar

We arrived at Zaragoza in the late afternoon after an early afternoon flight from Stansted. As soon as we arrived, our vehicle arrived to take us northwards in bright sunshine towards Huesca. Our first bird at the airport was a White Wagtail, then around Zaragoza, large numbers of Spotless Starlings and Magpies. Further north, wintering Red Kites, Marsh Harriers and Griffon Vultures hunted over the rolling agricultural land. In the more wooded country, many Common Buzzards were seen. A field south of Huesca we also had several White Storks.

When we arrived in Alquezar just before dusk, and we stopped briefly to look down on this attractive restored medieval village, lit up by street lights and the citadel illuminated by floodlights, perfect to enjoy our delicious nibbles and fantastic local wine!

We soon settled into our comfortable hotel and finished the day with an excellent typically Spanish meal at Restaurante Casa Gervasio. Later, we had a quick walk to the promenade to get a closer view of the floodlit Moorish citadel, but unfortunately the lights were now off so we returned along the cobbled streets to our hotel.

Day 2

Sunday 20th February

Alquezar and surroundings

After a relaxing delicious breakfast, we walked down the narrow streets of Alquézar heading towards the Colegiata and admiried the impressive gorges this building was attached to when built originally by the Moorish; taken over by the Spanish after the 12th Century, this prominent building stands out over the canyon of the river

Vero. Plenty of Rock Doves were seen here and lots of Serin, Chaffinch, Black Redstart and Blackcaps. The first Griffon Vultures started flying over the gorges, at times really close showing off very well! Red Kites, European Siskin and Eurasian Kestrels were also seen here, as well as Crag Martins and a lovely Blue Rock Thrush pottering around the rock face. We took a stroll up the narrow streets of the village hoping to catch up with a Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture) we saw flying towards the village; we were then interrupted by the noise of hundreds of Common Cranes crossing right above us and against the blue sky, it was amazing! All heading north and willing to cross the Pyrenees as the weather conditions were perfect to do so!

After this we walked back to our hotel in order to drop our gear and rucksacks and off and then went to have a local lunch on the main church street. We all enjoyed it very much! After this, we took a quick break followed by another walk following the trails above the village which produced a nice array of birds such as Eurasian Blackcaps, Great and Blue Tits, Black Redstart, Crag Martin, European Stonechat, Northern Raven, Red Kite, Griffon Vultures and amazing views of three Egyptian Vultures. We then started to walk back towards the Colegiata were a pair of Wallcreepers were spotted by some of us - fantastic!

We finished the day and retired to our rooms for a break followed by drinks and nibbles at the hotels bar and a delicious dinner at Casa Gervasio.

Day 3

Monday 21st February

Alquézar & surroundings - Lecina

Meeting just before dawn on a cool morning, we walked through the town towards the Colegiata overlooking the Vero Gorge. A Blackcap sang in the almond trees below, Rock Sparrows called from the cliff and numerous Crag Martins were busy in the early morning sunlight. A pair of Red-billed Chough flew over and a flock of Hawfinch were seen briefly. A couple more Red-billed Chough announced their presence with loud cries and a few Rock Sparrows perched on the agave plant giving us good views; a lovely Blue Rock Thrush and a Sparrowhawk were also spotted here. After our fill of as many as ten birds, we were getting hungry so it was back to our hotel for a delicious breakfast.

After breakfast, we jumped in our van and started or drive towards the village of Colungo in order to explore the upper area of the river Vero and its breathtaking gorgeous. Our first stop was made at the El Palomar gully where we enjoyed watching the landscape and sheer rocky cliffs and water rushing beneath them and linking to the Puente Las Gargantas, a bridge high above a gorge mostly comprised of conglomerate type rock where base rosettes of Pyrenean Saxifrage (Saxifraga longifolia) dotted the gorge walls. Further north at Mirador del Vero, a good viewpoint overlooking a part of the Vero Gorge, we had a spectacular view of the snow covered high Pyrenees to the north. Here we saw plenty of Griffon Vulture activity, but their nests did not seem to be occupied yet this year, only two or three, but it was great to see them flying very close and landing on the ledge of the cliffs. We also saw two large groups of Cranes heading towards the Pyrenees on this lovely sunny and blue skies day.

Around the car park, many spikes of a handsome Crocus (*C. nevadensis marcetii*) were in bloom with its purple streaked white petals; also some tulips leaves but too early for them to flower. A flock of Long-tailed Tits and a pair of Firecrest and a bunch of Rush-leaved Jonquils (*Narcissi assoanus*) kept us occupied here.

We then continued driving further making a diversion towards the picturesque village of Lecina were we had our picnic lunch whilst enjoying the surroundings. After lunch, we headed back to Alquézar for a little break gathering together again to take a little check at the gorges next to Colegiata; we found a lovely and very active Wallcreeper flying up and down the wall, with the most fantastic light on it - what a wonderful creature!

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 Restaurante Gervasio for another typical delicious wholesome meal.

Day 4

Tuesday 22nd February

Santa Cilia de Panzano

After a delicious breakfast, and a quick picnic supply stop in Adahuesca, we headed west towards the small village of Santa Celia where we met with our friend and founder of the FAB (Fondo Amigos de los Buitres) Manu Aguilera. Manu is a dedicated raptor conservationist who has been operating a vulture feeding station at Santa Cilia for over 30 years. He also advises vulture projects around the world.

We followed him in his vehicle to a spot above the village where we parked and walked the last few hundred metres towards the feeding area. Above us Griffon Vultures were already gathering in the blue skies and around the hill rocky tops; all of a sudden, a beautiful adult Lammergeier flew right over the feeding spot coming directly towards us, passing at close range and almost at eye level...what an excellent start! We then walked along the trail towards the feeding spot and sat down at the edge of a bare rocky area with long distant views over the beautiful surrounding countryside just as vultures began to land on the rocky slope above us. Even before Manu had 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. Then a Eurasian Black Vulture landed amongst all those Griffons and meters away from us, it was a brilliant comparison of the two species together at such short distance!

Once the meal was finished and things quietened down, we withdrew to 100 metres or so distant, hoping the Lammergeier would return. We waited awhile watching the Griffons picking over the scraps and then two Lammergeiers flew by, again really close which was fantastic! After enjoying this wonderful show, we set off downhill towards our van and returned to the village in order to visit the Museum Amigos de los Buitres where we experienced an excellent diorama presentation, with very realistic life size models, about the role of vultures in the nature. After saying goodbye to Manu, we walked a short distance to the village's green where we enjoyed our delicious picnic lunch under beautiful sunshine! We enjoyed watching butterflies and flowers whilst keeping an eye on the feeding area where more Lammergeiers were landing.

After lunch and in the early afternoon, we drove back to Alquézar in order to take a break followed by a walk down to the Colegiata's gorge where lots of birds such as Blackcaps, Red-billed Choughs, Serins, a pair of Peregrine Falcons and Sardinian Warblers were very active. We also managed to find a Blue Rock Thrush and another gorgeous Wallcreeper that we all enjoyed watching lots!

We then gathered together again – as usual – at the hotel's bar to enjoy wonderful local drinks and nibbles, followed by a splendid paella cooked especially for us at Casa Gervasio Restaurant!

Day 5

Wednesday 23rd February

Alguezar – Monte Aragón Castle – Sariñena – Gallocanta

After another splendid and relaxed breakfast, we were ready to hit the road and leave the beautiful Alquézar and head south towards Gallocanta. We made a couple of stops along the way; the first one was at Monte Aragón Castle where we had wonderful views of the geology of the Sierra de Guara, alongside this breath-taking Mediterranean scrubby dry habitat. We enjoyed watching plenty of Serins and Griffon Vultures here; also, Red Kites, Northern Ravens, Lammergeier, Crested and Thekla's Lark, Eurasian Kestrel, Dartford Warbler and a gorgeous Black Wheatear. We continued our drive straight south from the castle until we arrived at the village of Sariñena where we had lunch right next to the marshes. Lots of Western Marsh Harriers, Grey Herons, Eurasian Coots and Northern Shovelers were seen here. After lunch, a quick stroll by the marshes produced Willow Warblers and a few Eurasian Penduline Tits.

Time was now getting on, so we continued our journey south to Daroca and over the final range of hills to Gallocanta and to our hotel right in the village. We had the chance to admire the lake and to watch and hear thousands of Common Cranes gathering and ready to roost! It was a long day but very varied and successful. Once settled in our rooms, we gathered together again for drinks followed by a delicious dinner experience alongside the kind hospitality of Javi and his dedicated team!

Day 6

Thursday 24th February

Gallocanta and surroundings

We started out very early on a frosty morning with our host and resident birder Javi who took us to a point looking from the north-west side of the laguna in the opposite shore of Gallocanta. We reached one of the local observation towers and waited for dawn to come. We were soon in position overlooking the lake as the sky was lightening over the hills to the east, watching and hearing thousands of Common Cranes. As it got lighter, we could see ranks of them spread along the lake in the shallow water just offshore. The official count for that day was just under 30.000 Cranes and 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 Cranes against the lightening sky and distant hills was amazing. Other early morning birds were Hen and Marsh Harriers, Corn Buntings, Tree Sparrows and plentiful wildfowl; we also saw a family group of seven Wild Boar paddling across the mud. After an hour or so, most Crane activity reduced to a trickle so we returned back to our lodge enjoying great sightings of Spanish Sparrows, Thekla's, Crested and Calandra Larks, amongst others. Once in the hotel, we all warmed up with a very welcoming breakfast.

After breakfast we returned to Gallocanta to watch for Cranes leaving. It was bright sunshine with a clear sky and we were sure there would be enough warmth to generate thermals and some migration. Sure enough, soon after we arrived, several groups noisily circled above us gaining height then drifting off over the hills to the north. Around midday we travelled along lakeside tracks to the south-east end of the lake scanning the arable

fields for elusive sandgrouse but there was no sign today. There were several Kestrels along the way and field-side bushes contained numerous Linnets, Serins, Corn Buntings and Tree Sparrows. We walked to a tower hide where, we identified some ducks. In the freshwater areas at the head of the lake they were mostly Teal, but in the more saline areas, numerous Shelducks were feeding. Some distant Roe Deer were also seen.

Moving on round the lake we checked out the old interpretive centre, using the facilities and enjoying a film about the lake. From an observation platform at the end of the building, groups of Cranes could be seen feeding, and high above a group was seen arriving from the south.

Setting off again, we passed Bello and then headed back onto dirt tracks towards the lake, stopping at a picnic area to enjoy our picnic. After we finished lunch, we continued our lake circuit through the arable fields, many with flocks of Skylarks, Calandra Larks, Linnets, Tree Sparrows, numerous Kestrels, Hen Harriers and a Little Owl basking in the sunshine.

After a very productive day, we returned to the lodge in order to take a break before gathering for drinks and nibbles followed by another delicious dinner!

Day 7

Friday 25th February

Gallocanta and surroundings

Another pre-dawn start heading towards the opposite site of the village where we enjoyed another dawn experience by the shore. It was a bit quieter than the previous morning as most of the groups of Common Cranes headed north on the previous day; yet, they were thousands still grazing and getting ready to go. Lots of Cranes flew right over our heads landing on a field just adjacent to the track we were on, we had amazing close views of a large group; as soon as we drove a bit closer, they flew farther away. Lots of Marsh Harriers, Kestrels and two Hen Harriers were already busy flying around trying to get an early lunch! After a couple of hours, we returned to our lodge to warm up and enjoy a very welcome breakfast.

After breakfast, we drove a short distance to the church from where we took a nice walk along the various tracks that overlooked the lake. Here, a plentiful of larks were seen very well: Skylark, Calandra, Crested and also a group of at least eight Black-bellied Sandgrouse which flew in front us close enough to see their patterns. We then move to a higher pass on the road to Daroca where a brief stop produced Thekla Lark and Woodlark; we also had great views of Cirl Bunting. It was nearly 1pm so we decided to drive back to the lodge and set up our picnic lunch out in the garden under a nice warning sunshine! We took a short break afterwards before heading out to the field again in the afternoon.

The afternoon was nice but slightly quieter, with loads of the usual birds flying around. A male Hen Harrier was spotted nearby and also lots and lots of more Common Cranes, Spotless Starlings, Northern Lapwing, Stonechats and dozens of Calandra Larks. The highlight towards the end of the afternoon was a lovely female Golden Eagle which flushed hundreds of Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls in the air; a brave Carrion Crow was also mobbing her. We had wonderful views of this lovely raptor!

After a good end of the day, we returned to our lodge in order to get ready for drinks and nibbles followed by a delicious dinner!

Day 8

Saturday 26th February

Gallocanta – Belchite – Zaragoza – London

After a relaxed breakfast, we packed up all our belongings and said goodbye to Javi thanking him for his great and kind hospitality during our stay in Allucant. We then headed northwest in order to pay a visit to the area of Belchite, where the SEO's El Planeron Reserve is located. The stunning redness of this desert-like habitat was breath-taking, the dry landscape with hills covered in multiple layers of soil was rather dramatic. The wind across this flat desert-like landscape was strong and cold. Our first bird was a stunning Iberian Grey Shrike and a distant Greater Short-toed Lark; apart from some Mallard and Teal on the small shallow lagoon, Red-legged Partridge, White Wagtail, European Rabbits, Skylarks in the fields and Crested Larks beside the tracks, things were quiet.

Finally, we had to go, making our way through the gypsum steppes and hills towards Zaragoza and our flight home. As always, the enthusiasm of the group contributed enormously to the success and enjoyment of the trip tucked in a very remote corner of north-eastern Spain, the old Kingdom of Aragón!



Early birding at Alquézar Gorge by Byron Palacios

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Checklist

Birds (H = Heard only)

			February 2022								
	Common name	Scientific name	20	21	22	23	24	25	26		
1	Greylag Goose	Anser anser				✓	✓				
2	Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna					✓	✓			
3	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata				✓	✓	✓			
6	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
7	Northern Pintail	Anas acuta					✓				
8	Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca				✓	✓				
10	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina				✓	✓	✓			
12	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa				✓	✓		✓		
16	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	Pterocles orientalis						✓	✓		
17	Rock Dove	Columba livia	√	√	√	√	√		✓		
18	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	√	√	√	√	√	√	✓		
19	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto				✓		✓	√		
20	Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus					Н	Н			
22	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra				✓	✓	✓			
23	Common Crane	Grus grus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
25	Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus				√	√				
27	Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus					√	√			
31	Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus					√	√			
32	European Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria					√	√			
46	Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago				√	√				
52	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus				√	√	√			
58	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia				√	-	-	√		
59	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo				√					
61	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea				· √	√	√			
62	Great Egret	Ardea alba				· ✓		•			
63	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta				•			√		
65	Bearded Vulture	Gypaetus barbatus	√	√	√	√					
66	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus	· √			•					
67	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus	· √	√	√	√		√	√		
68	Cinereous Vulture	Aegypius monachus	•		√	•					
71	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos						√			
73	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	√	√							
74	Northern Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis	√	_							
75	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus	_			√	√	√	√		
76	Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus				•	√	√			
77	Red Kite	Milvus milvus	√	√	√	√	V	√	√		
79	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
80	Little Owl	Athene noctua	V	V	V	V	√	V			
83	Tawny Owl	Strix aluco		Н			V				
86	Great Spotted	Dendrocopos major					√				
	Woodpecker	= 1.1.4. 000p00 major									
88	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	✓			√	√	√	✓		
90	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus		✓	✓						
91	Iberian Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis							✓		
93	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	✓	✓	√	✓	✓		✓		
94	Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax	√	√	√	✓					
96	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone			√	√	√	√	√		

			February 2022							
	Common name	Scientific name	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	
97	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	√	
100	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
101	Great Tit	Parus major	✓	√	√	✓	Н	√	√	
102	Eurasian Penduline Tit	Remiz pendulinus				✓	Н			
104	Woodlark	Lullula arborea			√			✓		
105	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis					✓	√		
106	Thekla's Lark	Galerida theklae					√	√	√	
107	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata				√	√	√	√	
108	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra					√	√	√	
109	Dupont's Lark	Chersophilus duponti							Н	
	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla							√	
110	Mediterranean Short-toed Lark	Alaudala rufescens							√	
111	Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris	√	√	√	√				
114	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti	-			Н				
115	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus	√	√	√					
116	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus	,	,		√				
117	Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita				√	√			
119	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	√	√	√	√	•			
120	Sardinian Warbler	Curruca melanocephala	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	√	· ·	√				
121	Dartford Warbler	Curruca undata		V		√				
122	Common Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla		√		V				
124	Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea								
125		Tichodroma muraria		✓ ✓	,					
	Wallcreeper		√		√	,	,	,		
128	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	√	√	√	√	✓	✓	√	
129	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	✓	√	√	✓				
130	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus		✓	✓					
131	Redwing	Turdus iliacus	✓							
132	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
134	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
136	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
138	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius	✓	✓	✓					
139	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola				✓	✓	✓	✓	
141	Black Wheatear	Oenanthe leucura				✓				
143	Rock Sparrow	Petronia petronia		✓	✓					
144	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus					✓	✓		
145	Spanish Sparrow	Passer hispaniolensis					✓	√		
146	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
149	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba			√	√	√		√	
150	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis						√		
152	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	√	√	√	√	√	✓	√	
155	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris						√		
156	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		√	√	√	√	· ✓	√	
157	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
158	European Serin	Serinus serinus	√	√	√	√	√	√		
159	Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus	√	√	•	· ·	•	,		
160	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	V		√	√	√	√	
164	Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus				V	V	✓		
. 0-	Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus						V		

Other species

Common name Scientific name

Mammals

Red FoxVulpes vulpesRoe DeerCapreolus caprealusEuropean RabbitOryctolagus cuniculus

Wild Boar Sus scrofa

Butterflies

Red Admiral Vanessa atalanta

Continental Swallowtail Papilio machaon gorganus

Small TortoiseshellAglais urticaeBrimstoneGonopteryx rhamniCleopatraGonepteryx cleopatra

Small White Pieris rapae

Mountain Dappled White Euchloe ausonia

Green-striped White Euchloe belemia

Speckled Wood Parargw aegeria

Green Hairstreak Callophrys rubi

Clouded Yellow Colias crocea

Other

Hummingbird Hawkmoth Macroglossum stellatarum

Green Huntsman Spider Micrommata virescens