

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

20th – 26th October 2022



Great Bustard



Griffon Vulture



Common Cranes



Lammergeier

Tour report by Andy Smith, images by Pablo Perez



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Tour participants: Andy Smith and Pablo Perez (leaders) with thirteen Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Thursday 20th October

We arrived at Zaragoza Airport at the end of the afternoon and after clearing formalities, meeting Pablo and collecting vehicles we drove through the evening towards Gallocanta. We arrived around 8pm, settled in and enjoyed an excellent dinner before retiring for the night full of anticipation for the days ahead...

Day 2

Friday 21st October

Sunny with scattered cloud and a southerly wind; occasional light showers, mild.

Up before dawn, we headed around the lake to a well-positioned tower hide. We arrived at first light, in time, we hoped, to see some of Gallocanta's roosting Cranes before they set off to their feeding grounds for the day. The thousands that the lake is famous for hadn't arrived yet this year, it being so warm throughout much of Europe, and we had to be content with a few hundred. Nevertheless, these made for a splendid sight as, shortly after our arrival, they took to the air en-masse and made off in great bugling chevrons. Also leaving night-time roosts, excitingly for us, were Harriers, and as we scanned across the surrounding reedbeds, marsh and grassland of this superb area we counted at least 20 Hen and a dozen Marsh as they too made their way off to hunting areas in the surrounding countryside. Water Rails squawked from the reedbeds and Cetti's Warblers blasted out their abrupt little songs whilst out on the lake there were throngs of duck and Coots and on the far shore a couple of Foxes out hunting. It was a lovely scene but breakfast beckoned so we tore ourselves away. Driving back to Gallocanta along a track across an area of stony fields we flushed a flock of 28 Little Bustards, a fine sight in the early morning light and a great conclusion to an excellent little outing.

Post-breakfast we took a short walk to a lakeshore hide close to our guesthouse and found a couple of hundred Cranes feeding out on a grassy peninsula. Further careful scanning revealed some other large birds too, a group of 22 Great Bustards – not bad! A two Bustard morning! A pair of Black Redstarts, several flocks of Linnets and some Spotless Starlings added further interest here before we returned to the guesthouse, boarded the minibuses and headed off around the northern shore of the lake.

So ensued a very enjoyable few hours either side of a picnic lunch during which we circumnavigated the whole of the Laguna de Gallocanta, making various stops and short walks. The wide-open landscape was a treat to be in and there were lots of birds to enjoy. Highlights included regular sightings of Hen and Marsh Harriers, our first few Griffons, a couple of Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying low over our heads, some 200 or so Greater Flamingos, 70 Ruff feeding in a shallow bay, a field full of Calandra and Short-toed Larks and lots of flocks of Corn Buntings. We ended up back at this morning's observation tower where improved light conditions enabled us to have a better look at all the waterfowl. There were many hundreds of birds present with the bulk being Shoveler, Mallard, Teal, Common Pochard and Coots. There were also a few Pintail and Gadwall, good numbers of Shelduck, several Little Grebes and some Black-headed Gulls. A final surprise appeared in the form of a Merlin perched on a boulder as we drove the tracks back to the village. It had been a good day!

Day 3

Saturday 22nd October

Overcast at first then sunny with scattered cloud and a southerly wind. Very warm.

Some of the group got up extra special early and headed off to a remote piece of relict steppe where we positioned ourselves in readiness for a hoped for encounter with one of Europe's most enigmatic birds. We were definitely in the right place as about an hour before sunrise and whilst still fully dark we started to hear repeated snatches of a beautiful and ethereal song. This was Dupont's Lark! There were four singing fairly close by and we carefully approached one which continued to sing strongly. We were close but it was too dark to see the bird among the scattered stones and low scrubby vegetation. We waited and the singing continued, a really very lovely and unusual song, then, just as it got light enough to actually see and start to look for the bird all four abruptly stopped singing. What teasers! The performance was over and we knew that we had almost no chance of seeing one as Dupont's are famous for running rather than flying when disturbed. Oh well, at least we'd heard them!

After breakfast back at the guesthouse we all set out for a walk around the north-west end of the lake towards a hermitage and chapel on the crest of a nearby ridge. Walking through the outskirts of the village, past gardens, patches of scrub and small fields with lines of trees we picked up quite a nice range of birds including several Rock Sparrows and Black Redstarts, a couple of Crested Larks, a Zitting Cisticola and some sizeable flocks of Linnets and Goldfinches. We also encountered a satisfying range of butterflies with Long-tailed and Adonis Blues, Mallow Skipper, Bath White and Berger's Clouded Yellows being the highlights.

Our route took us past a shallow muddy bay full of birds where we stopped for a while and had some close views of Black-winged Stilts, Ruff, Dunlin, Little Stints, Common Snipe and Black-headed Gulls. Climbing up a gentle hill towards the hermitage afforded us panoramic views of the lake and its hinterland. Eighteen Great Bustard (presumably some of yesterday's birds) were seen flying in the far distance and closer to we found a smart Iberian Grey Shrike perched on some low scrub. Several Griffons passed very low over our heads and as we watched them circling and gaining height we noticed first one, then two, then three much more distant raptors which resolved themselves into Golden Eagles, all immatures – not bad! Finally, a Peregrine appeared overhead too, and concluded a productive morning.

After lunch back at the guest house we took a spin a few kilometres down the road to a beautiful cliff-lined valley where a short walk produced several Crag Martins, a number of Serins, a couple of dozen wild-type Rock Doves, some Long-tailed Tits, a Firecrest and a pool full of Iberian Marsh Frogs. After this we backtracked toward Gallocanta and finished the afternoon back at yesterday's tower hide overlooking the north-western end of the lake. The light was excellent and the lake once again full of Duck, Coots and over 600 Cranes whilst both Hen and Marsh Harriers hunted over the reedbeds and grassland and the Great Bustards were back on their promontory on the far side of the lake.

Day 4

Sunday 23rd October

Sunny with scattered cloud and a southerly wind which moderated in the afternoon. Very warm.

We left Gallocanta after breakfast and headed north and east. We passed thorough historic Daroca and circuted Carinena before cutting across country to the town of Belchite (of Spanish Civil War fame) where we stopped for

coffee. From here we headed north across the celebrated reserve of El Planeron. With its vast open steppes and colourful badland bluffs it was certainly a starkly beautiful place with a very particular atmosphere. We made a number of short stops and found a few good birds including a Hoopoe, some Thekla's and Lesser Short-toed Larks and a couple of Sardinian Warblers. One stop produced a very distant Golden Eagle perched atop a bush but later we came across two more, sparring together low over a ridge quite close to us. We had some excellent views of them and could really appreciate both their size and their aerial agility.

A little later we emerged from the wilderness of El Planeron and dropped down into the wide, flat Ebro valley. We passed Fuentes de Ebro and made for Zaragoza. We noted several White Storks still on their lamppost nests and during a petrol station stop we had excellent views of a Hobby hawking for insects. From Zaragoza we continued along the motorway to Huesca and then turned onto lesser roads up into the hills. A few Red Kites added interest along the way as we passed through some lovely scenery until, rounding a bend, we saw the spectacularly positioned town of Alquezar down below us. After a little time negotiating its labyrinthine medieval laneways we reached our hotel and settled in prior to a delicious dinner.

Day 5

Monday 24th October

Sunny and very warm with scattered cloud and a gentle breeze.

We started the day with a lengthy spell at the viewpoints in Alquezar scanning the exposed rock faces for Wallcreepers. We had great views of Red-billed Choughs, Blue Rock Thrushes, Black Redstarts, Crag Martins and a Sparrowhawk or two but Wallcreepers eluded us. The best cliffs at Alquezar are divided between two viewpoints so we split the group to maximize our chances. No sooner had we done so then a shout of "Wallcreeper!" went up from one group. The rest of us hurried over but by the time we got there the birds had flown out of view. We waited and scanned but they didn't return and that, ironically, turned out to be the only Wallcreepers (there had been two together) that any of the group saw on this trip. As with the Cranes at Gallocanta, it seemed that the prolonged unseasonal warmth was holding things up and that the Wallcreepers were still, very largely, much higher up in the mountains. In a "typical" year, things would have been different.

Either side of a picnic lunch we explored along the nearby Vero Valley in the minibuses, making a number of stops and short walks. Red Kites and Griffons were our familiars as we marvelled at the consistently spectacular scenery. We ate our picnic at one breath-taking viewpoint where a little visible migration in the form of flocks of Chaffinches and Skylarks was going on, then took a walk through the surrounding pine woods. The woodland was very quiet for wildlife but the path took us out to a further viewpoint and a couple of caves complete with some interesting neolithic cave paintings.

Returning to Alquezar we finished the day back at the cliffs scanning for our quarry. The Choughs, the Crag Martins and the Blue Rock Thrushes were all still around and some of us saw a trio of Rock Sparrows and a flock of passing Siskins, but once again, the Tichodroma eluded us.

Day 6

Tuesday 25th October

Sunny with scattered cloud, still, very warm.

This morning we drove across to Santa Cilia and rendezvoused with Manuel and his team at their vulture feeding station. Manuel led us out to an open area on the scrubby hillside with panoramic views to the south. The Griffons were waiting; there were various groups of them sitting around on suitable rocky outcrops and lots more wheeling around in the sky above us, perhaps 200 in all! We found places to sit on the bare rock whilst Manuel positioned himself some little way away from us. He was already surrounded by hordes of Griffons. They were obviously familiar with him and he very comfortable with them. He emptied a sack of scraps for them causing a huge, raucous, squabbling melee which kept many of the vultures occupied for a good while. Meanwhile he sat back and other vultures gathered around him, close enough to touch whilst he talked to them and fed them further scraps from his bag. It was an extraordinary performance. We too were very close to the birds; you could not want for a better experience of Griffons! After a while we moved back a bit to see if any of the rather shyer Bearded Vultures would come in and sure enough, within a few minutes we saw first an immature and then an adult circling towards us. Over the next half an hour or so we had fantastic views of these mighty and charismatic birds, at times at eye level or even below us, as they cruised around, building up confidence to come in for some food. When it was finally time to leave, we all felt that we had witnessed something pretty special.

We returned to the village, had a look around the impressive little visitor centre and ate our picnic by the tiny village park. Looking back up to the feeding station on the distant hillside we could see a Bearded Vulture on the ground with some Griffons. Meanwhile a Golden Eagle cruised along the ridge and a Woodlark flew over the car park.

Leaving Santa Cilia we drove to the nearby Embalse de Guara. This small dam and lake tucked into the hills has some good cliffs around it where we again scanned for Wallcreepers. We had no luck here either but we did find half a dozen Iberian Ibex on the rocky slopes (a bit of a surprise), plus Crag Martins, Serins and Rock Doves and, out on the lake, a Grey Heron, three Great Cormorants and several Mallards.

Returning to Alquezar in the late afternoon, some of us went down to the viewpoints again. We saw Choughs, Black Redstarts and Blue Rock Thrushes again but sadly no Wallcreepers. At least we tried!

Day 7

Wednesday 26th October

Sunny with scattered cloud, still, warm.

We left Alquezar after breakfast and began our journey back to Zaragoza. We decided to go via Rodellar, another village with cliffs noted for their wintering Wallcreepers. We had a good look around and it was certainly a beautiful and spectacular place but we found little other than the now familiar Black Redstarts, Serins and White Wagtails. A small flock of roadside Woodlarks added some interest as we drove back down the valley, and in the woods where we had a last picnic we found three Crested Tits, a couple of Firecrests and, bizarrely, a trio of colourful Red-billed Leiothrix, an invasive alien from China which have quite a toe-hold in some parts of Spain.

From Rodellar we headed on past Huesca to Zaragoza airport. The final stages of the journey along the Ebro Valley produced some good last birds by way of a field full of White Storks, a couple of Marsh Harriers and a small group of Cattle Egrets. Then it was the airport and the check-in. Everything went smoothly and we all arrived back at Stansted safely and more or less on time a few hours later.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Pablo for his help and assistance throughout; to Javi at Gallocanta for his warm hospitality, great local knowledge and good company; to the hotel proprietor at Alquezar for his very particular style of hospitality; to the various chefs who prepared such excellent food for us throughout, and to all the members of the group for their good humour and enthusiasm.



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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	October 2022					
		21	22	23	24	25	26
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	100	100				
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	100's	100's	50			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		6	2			
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	100's	100's	50		15	
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	2	12				
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	100	100	20			
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	100's	1000+				
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	22	18				
Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>	28					
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>	2					
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		25	20	100	50	25
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	1	2	150	10	5	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	1	5	15		10	100
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	1+2h	1h				
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	100's	1000+	50			
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	550	650	30			
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	8					
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	200	100				
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	1	15				
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	150	50				
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	1h					
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	70	25				
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	1	10				
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	1					
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		30				
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1h	6				
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	1	1				
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	25	15	70			
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>			1			
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			10			100
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		4	1		3	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>						7
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			1		1	
Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>					4	
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	15	30	60	150	200+	1
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		3	4		1	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	2	1	1	2	1	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	20	12	2			2
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	20	4				
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	1	1	10	6	2	6
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1		1	1	1	1
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			1			
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>						1h
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			1			
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	12	12	8	2	1	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1					
Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>			1			

		October 2022					
Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1			1	
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		4				
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			1			
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>			10	8		5
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	2			4	2	
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	20	10	15	2	4	5
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	4	2	2	4	
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>				1	1	
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>						3
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		1		4		5
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	1	4		2		3
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				1h	1	5
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	20	3		30		
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>			8			
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	10	8	5		1	
Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	350+					
Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>		4h				
Mediterranean Short-toed Lark	<i>Alaudala rufescens</i>	50		5			
Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>			5			
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		5	3	15	30	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	5h	3h	2h			
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		6		h		
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	5	6	1		1	
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		1				
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		1				
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	1			5		3
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		1+1h	1+2h	8h	1+4h	1h
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>			1+1h			
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		1				2
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1h				1+1h
Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>				2		
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		1h		2h		1h
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	100	100	50	25	5	50
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		1	5	6	3	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		5	10		5	1
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		2		1		1
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2		5h	2h	2+3h
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	6	15	2	8	7	8
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2	3	
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	6	5			1	
Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		10		3	1	
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	50	30				
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			50			
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			50	30	20	20
House/Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer spp</i>	100	100+				
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1		1h		
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	3	5	3	1		2
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	8	5		h	1h	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	70	100's	200	100	25	20
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	300	100	10		5	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	50	100's	10			

		October 2022					
Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		11	2h		2	4
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				15		
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	100's	100's	10			5
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			1			
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1		1		
Red-billed Leiothrix	<i>Leiothrix lutea</i>						3

Others

Mammals: Red Fox, Roe Deer, Spanish Ibex & Iberian Hare.

Birds: See attached checklist.

Reptiles and Amphibians: Large Psammmodromus & Iberian Marsh Frog.

Butterflies: Small White, Bath White, Clouded Yellow, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Common Blue, Adonis Blue, Long-tailed Blue, Brown Argus, Red Admiral, Painted Lady, Wall Brown, Southern Speckled Wood & Mallow Skipper.

Odonata noted: Lesser Emperor, Migrant Hawker, Southern Hawker & Common Darter.

Other notable invertebrates: Egyptian Grasshopper, Willowherb Hawkmoth, Hummingbird Hawkmoth and Crimson Speckled Moth.