

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

16th – 23rd February 2023

Tour report by Pablo Perez



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Tour participants: Pablo Perez and Marcus John (Leaders) with 13 Naturetrek clients

Summery

This tour takes place at the end of winter in mid-February - an ideal time to observe the two most outstanding birds of the tour - Wallcreeper and Common Cranes. Besides being able to enjoy these two fantastic species, we were able to see other exciting birds such as the Black Wheatear, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, the impressive Golden Eagle and even more notable, Bonelli's Eagle. We have certainly had eight fantastic days with excellent weather and also staying in very comfortable hotels with first class meals. It turned out to be a really memorable trip with up to 100 species seen.

Day 1

Thursday 16th February

England - Gallocanta

In the morning, three visitors who were already in Zaragoza joined the other 10 visitors and co-leader Marcus who arrive by plane to Zaragoza, where Pablo the tour leader meets them. After gathering the two vans, we drove to the new hotel of this tour, the Hospederia de Guara in Bierge, located in the Somontano de Huesca. There we left our bags and went to visit the charismatic medieval village of Alquezar, located in the heart of the Sierra de Guara. We crossed its gothic arches and artistic alleys, to reach its imposing cliff overlooking the Vero River from where the impressive collegiate church of Santa María la Mayor dominates.

There we spent a couple of hours, where at first, we were excited watching the first Griffon Vultures flying over us and the fortress of the collegiate church. After a while of searching, we could see a couple of attractive solitary Rock Thrushes, beautiful blue birds that are hard to spot among the rocks. A pair of Sparrowhawks also appeared among the bushes and a group of Crag Martins. Time passed and still the precious bird did not appear, until moments before we thought about leaving, after six in the afternoon, Jacky finally located a Wallcreeper in the high bricks of the tower. There we were able to watch it briefly until it disappeared from our sight.

Certainly, we were really happy to have seen this elusive bird, and we went to enjoy our first dinner at the excellent hotel where we were treated with so much care.

Day 2

Friday 17th February

Manu Vultures – Predicadera – Guara Reservoir – Peña Falconera

After an excellent breakfast we headed to Santa Cilia de Ponzano, where we met with Manu and Diego, important members of the Friends of the Vulture Foundation. For more than 30 years, Manu has been feeding the vultures on the same stony slope where they originally saw the then, very scarce Bearded Vulture throw a bone from the air to break it and eat it.

We watched Manu, dressed in his red jacket, talking to his winged friends and feeding them personally. It is certainly a spectacle to watch these huge birds feeding and interacting with each other, while they patiently wait for Manu

to talk to them. It is indeed intimidating to see these large birds inspect us with their eyes, just as it is interesting to see how the vultures have their feeding orders and how they generate the saliva that hangs from the tip of their beaks.

After feeding the Griffon Vultures, Manu suggests that we move a little from the feeding area to wait for the Bearded Vultures to perch on the ground to pick up those small bones and feed on them, as we were able to see with three impressive adults. Some of these had a lighter color typical of the Pre-Pyrenees, in Guara, where we were, and others had a more orange tone, these being neighbours of the Pyrenees. We could also see how they had some rivalry between them, as they chased each other to defend the territory.

Later we visited the museum of the association to enjoy our first snack in a nice park with fantastic views.

Continuing through the Sierra de Guara, we approached the environment of San Cosme and Predicadera to contemplate its spectacular views of its tremendous cliffs and then continue to the dam of the reservoir of Guara where we could see wild specimens of Iberian Goat, which has been recently introduced. We also had some pleasant observations of the wintering Red Kites, which are so frequent at this time of the year, as Aragon is one of the most important wintering sites in southern Europe.

Finally, before returning to the hotel we stopped at the viewpoint of Peña Falconera, with stunning views of the Natural Park of Sierra de Guara. We could also enjoy Green Hairstreak, Small Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral and Wall butterflies.

Day 3

Saturday 18th February

Abiego – Vero River Canyon – Lecina – Albarda Bridge - Alquezar

Thanks to the good recommendation of Ana from the hotel, we approached the neighbouring village of Abiego, where on a stone wall, there are some impressive fossil footprints of approximately thirty million years old, of animals similar to the current Wild Boars. This area had interesting birds such as our first Woodlark and Crested Lark, and a distant Greenfinch that shone in the fantastic Mediterranean sun.

Later we went to the vertiginous viewpoint over the Vero River, where we could overlook the vertical limestone cliffs full of caves, some of which are closed to the public, as they have cave paintings. In these surroundings of the Natural Park of Sierra de Guara we saw several butterflies in these warm winter days as the Clouded Yellow, Small White, and other insects.

We continued on the road to visit the historic and ancient oak of Lecina, and then decided that it was time for lunch, which we did on the pleasant terrace of the bar-restaurant of Colungo. After enjoying a nice salad, we went to visit the historic medieval bridge of Albarda, where we walked looking for the Dipper, but we were not lucky enough to see it this time.

Already eager to try again to see the enigmatic alpine bird, we headed back to Alquezar. We tried again with great enthusiasm and saw lots of Blackcaps and Sardinian Warbler, but we struggled to see the Wallcreeper, until finally we had a brief view before returning to dinner.

Day 4

Sunday 19th February

Bierge – Quicena – Riglos - Gallocanta

Before leaving the town of Bierge, we visited the historic medieval hermitage of San Fructuoso, where there are interesting historical paintings on the walls.

On our way south, we stopped in the vicinity of Quicena to look for one of the most interesting species of the trip, which would be a lifer for many of the people on the trip. The Black Wheatear, which we were able to watch as a pair moved through the rugged rocky landscape that this endangered resident bird is so fond of. In addition, some of the group saw Dartford Warbler and heard the first Thekla's Lark.

As the previous observations of the Wallcreeper had not been as good as we would have liked, we headed to another good destination to try in the Mallos de Riglos. There we had our lunch and a nice coffee, and then went into the picturesque village capped by its impressive cliffs of conglomerate rock, the gates to the Pyrenees, the so-called Mallos de Riglos.

It was certainly a spectacle to contemplate those vertical walls traversed by the brave climbers, and we certainly invested a lot of effort, but to the frustration of the guide Pablo we could not contemplate the enigmatic bird. We did see Cleopatra butterfly and shield bug.

In the afternoon, from Riglos we drove to the next lodging, the village of Gallocanta located in Zaragoza and bordering the province of Teruel.

Javier and Bipul gave us a warm welcome to Allucant and entertained us with their exquisite dinner.

Day 5

Monday 20th February

Gallocanta Lagoon

We were nearing the end of the time in which Common Cranes winter in Spain, it is key to know what the birds do in these final days. That first morning we went to the Tornos viewpoint to see how the northern European birds that had chosen to spend the winter in the Gallocanta Lagoon, left the shelter of the night in its waters, to fly at dawn in large groups to feed in the Jiloca River. It was very impressive to see rivers of cranes flying in large groups of hundreds of birds as they disappear with the imposing sunrise.

Shortly after the Cranes disappeared, Marcus spotted a beautiful young Merlin perched on the ground. Near him but not too close, was a group of Tree Sparrows, and in the same direction in the distance some Red Foxes in the lagoon, showing why Cranes choose to sleep in the water, to avoid the presence of such predators.

Later we went to the nearby observatory tower of Cañizar where we saw our first Marsh Harrier. There were also some distant Roe Deer, including a male with antlers in velvet. Afterwards we went to enjoy an excellent breakfast at the hotel.

After breakfast we continued the circular tour of the lagoon and finally Pablo was delighted to find an interesting owl perched on some stone piles. We continue the circular route by car to stop in Bello for a coffee. Continuing the circular route of this endorheic lagoon, we observed flocks of wintering larks including Calandra Lark. We chose had a snack at the observatory of La Reguera, where we could see a large number of ducks, where the Shoveler and the Shelducks stood out.

We decided to make a rest stop at the nearby hotel, and then leave the vans and continue the tour walking to the observatory of Los Aguanes. That afternoon some Cranes started to come out in the afternoon in our vicinity and mainly we could enjoy some interesting waders like Ruff and Avocets as well as a beautiful Stonechat male on the reeds. Afterwards we returned to the hotel to enjoy their art gallery, bird books and a well-deserved dinner.

Day 6

Tuesday 21st February

Gallocanta Lagoon – Torralba Siones

Before dawn we went to listen to birds, where in the distance we could hear the call of Little Owl, the Red-legged Partridge and a tremendously desired bird, the Dupont's Lark. Later and fighting against the clock, we returned to the lagoon to see the departure of the Cranes in the morning and just near Bello, we could see a good group of birds very close to the road, which we could photograph for several minutes. We were also able to enjoy the behaviour patterns of the different birds of various ages, as they called to each other in song and took flight in unison. After this wonderful show we went to have breakfast.

Before leaving, some of the group took the opportunity to look at the lagoons near the hotel, where a beautiful female Hen Harrier, some Rock Sparrows and beautiful Flamingos, which are now resident birds in the lagoon, appeared.

We started the afternoon tour with Javi again in the surroundings of the lagoon, seeing our first Hoopoe of the trip and a male Hen Harrier in the distance. This second day in the lagoon we saw a new process: many Cranes coming from Extremadura were coming up to join the Cranes already present.

We followed Javi through Torralba de Siones to a place with sparse vegetation and wide views. We were fortunate at that moment to spot a group of about nine Black-bellied Sandgrouse that landed on the ground. We put all our effort to see them again, but only Pablo was able to spot one on the ground, but with its extremely good camouflage we could not see it again.

Later the group was fortunate to see another Hoopoe, in the vicinity of a traditional extensive sheep farm, once very abundant animals, but unfortunately replaced by the omnipresent intensive sheep farms or macro farms.

Before returning to the hotel, it was getting quite windy, but some people approached the nearby footbridge where the first Iberian Shrike could be seen in a nearby Holm Oak bush.

Day 7

Wednesday 22nd February

Gallocant -Cariñena Reservoir – El Planeron – Belchite – Bujaraloz - Zaragoza

During our last morning in Gallocanta, we went on this occasion again before breakfast walking to the lagoon where we saw something that we had not seen until that day. At dawn, a deafening sound of thousands of Cranes together. They were in small groups, returning to roost in the nearby field until the numbered the thousands. They joined together to wait for the thermals to allow them to cross the Pyrenees into northern Europe. It was certainly the expected departure day and with the highest concentration of up to more than ten thousand birds!

After breakfast, we headed to the reservoir, where we arrived just before the start of the thermals and located a pair of Great Crested Grebes in the water and Coal Tits and Great Spotted Woodpeckers in the pine forests. As the temperatures rose, the great raptor show of the tour began, first a pair of Goshawks, then a pair of Golden Eagles in the high thermals and finally the most desired, a fantastic pair of Bonelli's Eagles showing their nuptial flight display. It was, without doubt, an amazing spectacle of nature and lucky to include such a beautiful and unfortunately threatened bird.

We continued towards the ornithological reserve of the SEO/Birdlife of El Planeron, where we entered from Codo. At our first stop we discovered a large group of Red-billed Choughs in the distance and closer we heard and saw some Greater Short-toed Larks - they are very difficult to see on the ground because of their excellent camouflage with the sparse vegetation. The arid landscape was fascinating with the variety of different colours.

Although we spotted some typical aquatic birds in the small lagoon, the one we did not manage to see, but we did manage to hear, was the Dupont's Lark, in spite of Pablo's efforts!

On this occasion we exchanged the sandwiches for some delicious tapas in the historic village of Belchite, where we could also see the remains of the buildings damaged during the Spanish Civil War.

With enough energy to squeeze the most out of this intense day, we drove to Bujaraloz, and were able to see a good group of Great Bustards in flight. We tried to get a better look at them, but we could only see predators around them, a pair of Golden Eagles and surprisingly a pair of Foxes. Of course, these endangered birds, are real survivors, since their habitat is degraded with the abundant presence of large farms, pesticides and herbicides, power lines and wind turbines, plus they have to defend themselves from natural predators.

Definitely with a big smile after a splendid day of birding, we went to Zaragoza, where the group was already separated into different hotels, as some would fly the next day and others would continue a few more days in Spain, after a fantastic nature watching trip in Aragon, with a total of eleven birds of prey.

Day 8

Thursday 23rd February

Zaragoza - UK

On this day the visitors flew back to the UK in the morning or others stayed in Spain for more days to enjoy their vacations.

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