

# Wild Spain - La Montana Palentina

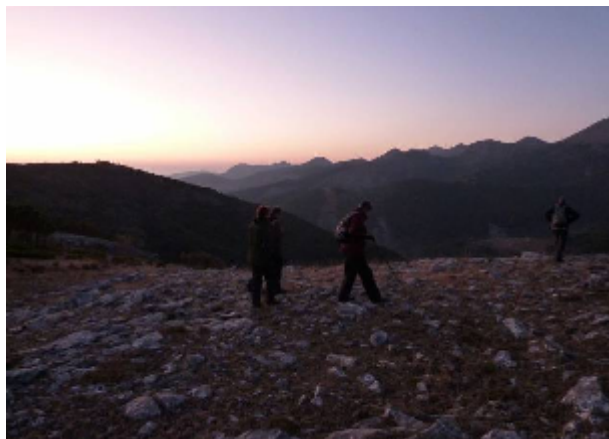
Naturetrek Tour Report

17 - 24 September 2009

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Fire Salamander (*Salamandra atra hispanica*)



Walking in La Montana Palentina



Wild Cat & Fox



Woodlark

Photos and report compiled by Byron Palacios



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Nacho Zubelzu (Local Guide)

Participants: Charles Jones  
Paul King  
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Bob Olliver  
Julia Olliver  
Heather Procter  
Brian Goodwin  
Penny Pennington

## Day 1

Thursday 17th September

After arriving into Santander on time, Tino and Nacho were already waiting for us at the arrivals gate. It was a beautiful early evening as we started driving towards Aguilar de Campoo. Parts of the road were misty and with some drizzle, but it became much better near Aguilar, (the town is very famous for producing the well-known Maria vanilla tea biscuits!). About 2 miles away from Aguilar, the small village of Cordovilla de Aguilar was our final destination and our base for the next week. Here, a 'crowd' of six people (the only hamlet's inhabitants) welcomed us by waving, while Tino's wife Rosa gave us a very warm welcome to their lovely 'casas rurales' El Mayorazgo. Surrounded by an old stone wall, the three Spanish style cottages provide very homely and comfortable individual accommodation. Tino and Rosa live in the next village just half a mile away, and from there they bring a large heatproof container about the size of a fridge with all Rosa's culinary specialties in it, which she uses to cook supper every night. After we finished a delicious meal, washed down with Vino de Toro wine, we retired to our rooms, looking forward to starting the next day.

## Day 2

Friday 18th September

After a restful night, we all enjoyed several hot cups of tea and coffee along with breakfast in our cottages. We started the day at 8.30am, mainly walking the small tracks around the village, looking for birds, plants and butterflies. The morning was very grey and mild, and the muddy tracks showed how heavy the rain was the previous night. In despite of that, the bird flocks started to move around us and we got fantastic views of Great-spotted Woodpecker, Blackcaps, Serin, Robins, Tree Pipits, Yellowhammers, Cirl Buntings, Garden Warbler, Iberian Chiffchaff, Bullfinch and many Pied Flycatchers. One of the small tracks was full of Ravens, Serin and more Pied Flycatchers; some of these were moulting adult males.

We came back in order to take our picnic lunch in the lush garden, enjoying the surroundings and the good fresh local products of our picnic. We then started the afternoon heading slightly north into Fuentes Carrionas National Reserve, where we planned to spend the rest of the afternoon walking around, but a few showers made it difficult, until eventually heavy rain spoiled the rest of the walk. We decided to drive back to our cottages by tea time, followed by nibbles and drinks before another delightful local supper prepared by Rosa.

## Day 3

## Saturday 19th September

We awoke to a promising day, with much better weather. We had a very good start indeed as Great Spotted Woodpecker, Tree Pipit and Rock Sparrows were seen very well from the car park. We moved into our vehicles in order to start our third day of activities in the hills and huge outcrops north of Cordovilla (within La Montana Palentina (Fuentes Carrionas National Reserve) at Branosera, 1,750 metres above the sea level). The forest was outstanding and we were gladly surprised to see lots of mixed flocks of birds, dominated by a huge amount of Nuthatches, Coal Tits and Pied Flycatchers. Once at the top of the forest, we arrived at a clearing area which was good for a variety of wildlife including some invertebrates such as Lang's Short-tailed Blue, Clouded Yellow and Wallbrown, Bush-cricket, etc. Some Griffon Vultures, Red Kite, Sparrow Hawk, Iberian Chiffchaff, Citril Finch, Long-tailed Tits, Mistle Thrush and Raven were spotted here too.

But it wasn't until after lunch when we were about to witness a remarkable wildlife event. We managed to find a great spot – already well known by Tino – usually good for some mammal watching. A Red Fox happened to be there hunting some mice when suddenly a Wild Cat was spotted in the next meadow, both looking healthy and seemingly having a feast feeding on small prey. A second Wild Cat was spotted in the meadow located to the right of the latter two! The first Wild Cat crossed into the Red Fox meadow, making them face up each other for a while. Everything seemed to be fine as both continued with their hunting, but something was not right and when they finally came face-to-face, the encounter was inevitable and suddenly a fight started. This good sized Wild Cat (even bigger and bulkier than the Red Fox!) started his defensive movements while the Red Fox was circling round the feline trying to bite him. After almost a minute of combat, the Red Fox managed to scare and chase the Wild Cat off the meadow – it was a very unique wildlife experience!

We finished the loop and went back to the different reserve entrance point, then walked down the dirt track which leads to the closest village, and then took our 4x4 and headed into Cordovilla for a well deserved break and to enjoy another fantastic dinner....what a day...!

## Day 4

## Sunday 20th September

Today we decided to do some birding at the car park while waiting for Nacho to come with some fresh bread for our picnic lunch. He arrived and we immediately set off heading south to Rebolledo de la Torre. We made our first stop half way down the village and walked along the dirt road and saw a pair of Roe Deer running across the rocky fields. There was also a good active flock of birds led by Blue Tits, Chiffchaff (Iberian), Long-tailed Tits, Blackcaps, Dunnocks, and great views of Firecrests feeding on fresh hawthorn bushes and also flying right above us, whilst a good size group of Griffon Vultures were taking-off as the warmth of the day allowed them good thermals.

We continued our drive into Rebolledo de la Torre which is known for having one of the most important Romanic churches of Spain built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Tino kindly shared with us the ancient historical background of this fascinating church. After we had our picnic lunch we drove towards the valley of Gama where, in spite of the variable weather (wet to dry and vice versa) we managed to see important habitat and lush landscapes, along with some good birds such as Northern Wheatear, perched Peregrine Falcon, Griffon Vulture and a pair of Short-toed Eagles, Kestrels, and Stonechats, and more Roe Deer.

As we were driving back to our cottages, we stopped in Aguilar de Campoo to have a hot drink and to see this small medieval town. Locals couldn't help stare at us while we were frenetically trying to catch photos of a gorgeous Hummingbird Hawkmoth feeding on the ornamental pots of geraniums which hung from the streetlight lamp-posts. Back at the cottage, the group enjoyed some drinks before Rosas's delicious specialties arrived for supper!

## Day 5

## Monday 21st September

After an early start (and a frosty morning!) we drove about 70km south towards Palencia to get to Fuentes de Navas. The area is one of the three most important western Palearctic migratory corridors and ringing stations in Spain. It was part of a massive marsh area drained about 100 years ago by the local farmers in order to transform them into agriculture fields. Since 1999, the local government and NGO's have been working hard to bring to these marshes back to the wildlife scene, having established information centres, birding hides and a ringing and surveying station which is very active all year round, especially during the migratory season.

Our first stop was along a bridge next to the main road. Our birding day started with a group of Great Bustards, Marsh Harriers, Tree Sparrows, Chiffchaffs, Green Finches, Buzzards, Kestrels, Hen Harrier, Kingfisher, Yellow Wagtails, White Stork, Little Egret, Tree Pipit, Fan-tailed Warbler, Grey Herons, Reed Warbler and Cetti's Warblers. We continued towards the car park of one of the main marshes where a vast amount of Northern Wheatears were seen, together with Crested Larks, Pied Flycatchers, Greenshank, White Stork, Lapwing, Grey Heron, Great White Egret, Winchat, Marsh Harriers and a few Yellow Wagtails.

After our picnic lunch, we drove towards the other end of the plains, to the opposite side of the marshes, a good place to see Little Bustards and Black Storks, but despite scanning the fields intensively, we had no sign of these birds. We did get good views of Red and Black Kites and hundreds of Buzzards, plus a solitary Southern Grey Shrike perched on a small bush, but not even Lesser Kestrel, which make us feel a little unlucky. We managed to find more Great Bustards in one of the fields, but soon it was time to start our journey back to Cordovilla to enjoy a relaxing evening and another superb dinner.

## Day 6

## Tuesday 22nd September

It was a beautiful morning in Cordovilla, ideal to visit the Embalse de Aguilar de Campo. We made our first stop around Cillamayor, where Meadow Pipits and Iberian Green Woodpecker were seen at first. Walking up the track, Crested Larks were crossing by and a Woodlark was perched in a bush singing away and then displaying in flight. An unexpected Booted Eagle was soaring in front of the mountains adjacent to the valley showing itself off very well. More birds seen along the fields were Skylarks, Meadow Pipits, Raven, Kestrel, Green Finch, Serin, and Linnet, amongst others.

We continued driving down towards the Embalse and made another short stop in a pine forest. Here, we had fantastic views of Crested Tit, Goldcrest, Coal, Blue and Great Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper, Meadow Pipit and interesting butterflies. We made a very quick stop at the hydroelectric plant located right on the north edge of the Embalse de Aguilar. A good number of Great Crested and Little Grebes, Cormorant, Crag Martins and Grey Herons were seen here. A Dipper and Grey Wagtail were also seen down the small creek beside the dam.

We arrived at our picnic lunch site where lots of Crossbills, Nuthatches and even Red Squirrels were taking advantage of a fresh water fountain located amongst the picnic tables. There were also a pair of Crested Tits, Nuthatch, Coal Tits, and more, all bathing in the small fountain. After we enjoyed our lunch, we drove to the south edge of the dam, where Ospreys, Spoonbill, Grey Heron, Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls, Turnstone, Little Stints, Little Plovers and Meadow Pipits were seen 'wading' around!

We then spent a while in the colonnaded centre of Aguilar de Campoo, birding along the River Pisuerga, where Dippers, Firecrest, Goldcrest, Goldfinch, and Chiffchaff were seen, and as a bonus we saw a very elusive European Mink (*Mustela vison*) hopping along the river edges, incredible!

We walked into the town centre, looking at the amazing church and the old 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century buildings on the main street, and also enjoyed a very delicious thick hot chocolate! We later returned for dinner of vegetable stew, meat and fish from the region and delicious local wine and pudding!

## Day 7

## Wednesday 23rd September

We had an early start this morning, leaving the houses in darkness, and heading to the heart of La Montana Palentina in order to try to see Iberian Wolf. On the way up, a single Wild Cat was caught by the vehicle's front lights in one of the meadows next to the road. We arrived and parked the vehicles down the hill, and walked to the view point. The view from here is astonishing; the pink-orange coloured light of the sun rising in the horizon and hitting the summits of the mountains and peaks, along with the Red Deer rutting noises, were simply a perfect painting for our eyes! We scanned with our scopes and binoculars the whole valley and mountains but we just could not see more than two solitary foxes, a few cattle and very relaxed Red Deer herds within the valley. After a few hours, a group of Chamois were spotted in the mountain behind where we sat.

As the morning was passing by, we decided to continue towards our next spot, and after a well deserved coffee break in the village of Cervera, we arrived at the fantastic forest (mainly *Robus pirenaica*) of Celada de Robledo, one of the most important ancient forests of the Fuentes Carrionas National Reserve. The track up the mountain here is amongst a fantastic oak forest, ideal for Middle-spotted Woodpecker, which was heard tapping several times but unfortunately it was never seen. A very quiet walk through the forest took us to close encounters with groups of Red and Roe Deer, while noisy and numerous Nuthatches, Blue, Great, Coal and Crested Tits were around us, as well as elusive Short-toed Treecreepers on the tree trunks. The variety of fungi along the track was incredible. Lunch was taken at a spectacular spot which overlooked the impressive limestone cliffs of the mountains.

We returned to 'Las Casas Rurales' while Nacho (who's also one of the most important wildlife illustrators and artists of Spain!) was setting up a 'mini exhibition' of some of his superb wildlife art and paintings which we all enjoyed. We then gathered together as usual to go through our checklist and also to make plans for the final and enjoy another – and sadly last one – of Rosa's dinners.

## Day 8

## Thursday 24th September

We started very early on this our last (chilly) morning. We followed the road towards Reinos, where a quick coffee stop was made while we bought some fresh local bread.

We drove into Saja Natural Park on the way to Santander. This beautiful reserve located at 1,300m above the sea level is the most important area due to the ancient beech forest which lies along the 24,500 ha. of pristine forest and edges dotted with scrub and meadowland. During the few stops we made, a few birds such as Water Pipit, Buzzard, Short-toed Eagle, Raven, Dipper and Stonechat were seen. We were looking for Black Woodpecker but we had no luck today. We continued our drive amongst more ancient forest, lush meadows and rivers and waterfalls, until we found a beautiful spot by the River Saja to have lunch in the lovely village of Carrejo, followed by a hot drink at the local village restaurant.

We went back to the vehicles to pack up and make our way to Santander's airport. Tino and Nacho helped us with our luggage and escorted us to the departure area to say farewell to us. We sadly had to say 'Adios' to this fantastic area of Spain - one of the wildest and most ancient's areas in this country...La Montana Palentina!

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## Species Lists

### Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	September							
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
1	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>					✓	✓	✓	
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>					✓	✓	✓	
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>						✓	✓	✓
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>					✓	✓		
5	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>					✓			
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			✓		✓			
7	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			✓		✓			
8	Eurasian White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>					✓			
9	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					✓			
10	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>						✓		
12	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			✓		✓			
13	Eurasian Griffon	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
14	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>				✓				✓
15	Eurasian Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>					✓			
16	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				✓	✓	✓		
17	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓	✓				
18	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Booted Eagle	<i>Aquila pennatus</i>						✓		
20	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				✓	✓?			
22	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					✓			
23	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
24	Northern Lapwing	<i>vanellus vanellus</i>					✓	✓		
25	Little Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>					✓	✓		
26	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>					✓			
27	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						✓		
28	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>						✓		
29	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>						✓		
30	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>						✓		
31	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓	✓	✓			
32	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
36	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis sharpei</i>				✓		✓		✓
37	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓			✓	✓		
38	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>						✓		
39	Wood Lark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>						✓		
40	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>					✓			
41	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓		✓			✓	
42	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>						✓	✓	
43	Northern House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
44	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>					✓	✓		
45	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
46	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>								✓
47	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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48	Spanish Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>					✓	✓		
49	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>					✓	✓		✓
50	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>						✓		✓
51	European Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>					✓			
52	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			✓	✓				✓
53	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
54	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓			✓		✓
55	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Winchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			✓		✓			
60	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				✓	✓	✓		
61	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		✓	✓	✓				
62	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>						✓		
64	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>				✓		✓		✓
65	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>					✓			
66	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>					✓			
67	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>					✓			
68	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓	✓					✓
69	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>				✓	✓	✓		
70	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>					✓			
71	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
72	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		✓	✓					
73	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>				✓				
74	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>						✓	✓	
76	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
77	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
78	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				✓		✓		
79	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓			✓	✓	
80	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>						✓	✓	
81	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>					✓			
82	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
83	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				✓			✓	
85	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>								
86	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
89	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					✓			
91	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>			✓	✓				
92	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
94	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>						✓	✓	
95	Common Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		✓				✓		
96	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	
97	Citril Finch	<i>Serinus citrinella</i>		✓	✓					
98	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓						



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99	Common (Red) Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>						✓		
100	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓	✓					
101	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		✓	✓					
102	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>					✓?			
103	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓				✓		

## Mammals

1	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>						✓		
2	Chamois	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>							✓	
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓	✓				✓	
4	European Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris silvestris</i>			✓				✓	
5	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>				✓		✓	✓	
6	European Rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus sylvilagus</i>					✓			
7	European Mink	<i>Mustela lutreola</i>						✓		
8	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>							✓	

## Butterflies

Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>
Pale Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias hyale</i>
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>
Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>
Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus malvae</i>
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>
Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia napi</i>
Common Grayling	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>
Adonis Blue	<i>Lysandra bellargus</i>

## Moths

Hummingbird Haw-moth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>
Transparent Burnet	<i>Zygaena fausta</i>