Spain – Birds and Wines of Navarra

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 20 May 2013







Not the best Spring weather



On a Lammergeier



Ortolan Bunting & Black-eared Wheatear

Report and images compiled by Byron Palacios



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Day 1 Tuesday 14th May

London Heathrow - Bilbao - Alfaro

It was a rainy evening with some fog when we left Bilbao with the group after the flight arrived from the UK in the early evening. We hit the motorway heading straight south into El Reyno de Navarra and towards the little town of Alfaro, located right on the upper basin of the River Ebro. We arrived at our hotel in the late evening and after a few snacks and drinks we retired to bed.

Day 2 Wednesday 15th May

Sotos de Alfaro - Bodegas Marques de Montecierzo - Bardenas Reales Natural Park

The weather was windy and cold this morning. Anyhow, we gathered downstairs for breakfast, meeting our two Canadian fellow travellers Gary and Elaine, all in good spirita despite of the weather! We left the hotel and drove through Alfaro, quite a short distance, and soon hit some dirt tracks down to the River Ebro's reserve Sotos de Alfaro. A Black-crowned Night-Heron was spotted as soon as we arrived and, considering the cold and windy weather, lots of good birds were seen along the river bank such as Cetti's Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Linnet, Serin, Golden Oriole, Corn and Cirl Buntings, and Nightingale. We then checked the agricultural riparian areas where Woodchat Shrike, a stunning Eurasian Wryneck, more flying Golden Orioles, Zitting Cisticola and Blackcap were also seen beautifully!

As a heavy shower started it was the perfect moment for us to do our first planned visit to one of the local and exclusive wineries, Marquez de Montecierzo, built in an old refurbished flower factory. This family-owned and 100% organic 30-hectare vineyard located in the outskirts of Castejon produces one of the finest wines of Navarra, keeping high standards of product quality to maintain its gold-medal standards. Father and son, Joaquin and Roberto, have run the vineyard since 2004; they took us on a tour through the cellars and the production areas whilst sharing the history of the place as well as the whole process of their wine-making industry. After the tour, the wine testing began...superb! All of us certainly took some of our favourite wines with us, or ordered some to be delivered to our homes in the UK! After this visit, rain was still persistent so we had our 'picnic' lunch back in our hotel, having a short break afterwards. In the mid afternoon we headed east towards the Bardenas Reales Natural Park as the afternoon looked promising and better for birding.

We arrived at the park and made a few stops on the way to the Castiltierra (a natural pyramidal formation, and symbol of the park) which produced some Montague's Harrier, Black-eared Wheatear, and close views of a group of flying Griffon Vultures. We continued onto the park, and after spotting a flying Egyptian Vulture we decided to make a stop to see some activity going on - this produced great views of Black Redstart, Black-eared and Northern Wheatear, Lesser Kestrel, Short-toed Lark, Corn Bunting, Linnet, another Egyptian Vulture and cracking views of Dartford Warbler.

We continued driving, passing two Red-legged Partridges on the way and making a stop on the top of the track where Northern Wheatear, Black Redstart and Skylark were spotted. We looked around for more activity but the late afternoon was getting slow sowe started to drive back to Alfaro spotting other birds on the way home, such as Montagu's Harrier, Tawny Pipit, Short-toed Lark, Crested Lark, Griffon Vulture, Black-eared and Northern Wheatears, Southern (Iberian) Grey Shrike, Black-winged Stilt, Back-headed Gull, White Stork and Little and Cattle Egrets. Once in the hotel, we took a break before gathering together again for dinner.

Day 3

Thursday 16th May

Pitillas Lake and surrounding areas

After a delicious local breakfast, we headed north to Pitillas Lake. It was a sunny morning with some wind which was gradually increasing making our birding a bit difficult, but we still had some interesting birds during our first stop at a lake where Yellow-legged and Black-headed Gulls, House Martins, Barn Swallows, Great Crested Grebe, Purple Heron, Moorhen, Pochard and Common Coot were seen. We found a small group of waders such as Redshank, Ringed Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Grey (Black-bellied) Plover, Dunlin and Common Sandpiper, 'wading' right by the edge of the water. Other interesting birds such as Skylark, Crested Lark, Eurasian Hoopoe, Marsh Harrier and Griffon Vulture were also seen here. We continued our birding taking the other end of the track which surrounds the Pitillas Lake and some of the birds seen here by the dirt track included Short-toed Lark, Northern Wheatear, White Storks, Marsh Harriers, Red and Black Kites and Linnet.

We made a stop by an old sheep farm which produced fantastic views of Rock Sparrows nesting in one of the banks on the side of the nearby ravines; European Bee-eaters were seen here too. We moved to a different part of the track which surrounds the lake, which produced good birds such as the beautiful Ortolan Bunting, Blackeared Wheatears; we also saw Tawny Pipits mating, Corn Buntings and Linnets. We continued our drive and we stopped to see a Eurasian Kestrel hovering nearby, and then we spotted a perched sub-adult Short-toed Snake-Eagle which took off and hovered right above us, giving us great views of this lovely raptor!

They day was dry and sunny, the wind was there but it was quite bearable, so we set up our lunch by the main visitor's centre overlooking the west shore of the lake, where Great Reed and Reed Warblers were seen, alongside Crested Larks and Eurasian Hoopoe. After lunch, we scanned other corners of the lake following the many tracks around which produced a group of Black Terns, Linnet, Shot-toed, Calandra and Crested Larks, Montague's Harrier, Griffon Vulture, Iberian Yellow Wagtail, Black Redstart, and Tawny Pipit, amongst others. Black clouds where heading our way so we decided to head back to Alfaro and take a break, and we made it just in time. We gathered together again to work on our checklist of the day, follow by a nice supper.

Day 4 Friday 17th May

Bardenas Reales – Bodegas Ruiz-Jimenez – Isaba

We started arly today and went to the Bardenas Reales Reserve where we caught up with some birds such as Calandra, Crested and Greater Short-toed Larks. The weather was unsettled, with on and off showers and sunny spells throughout the morning, and it was the right time to head towards the edges of Navarra/La Rioja where the headquarters of Bodegas Ruiz-Jimenez is based. We were welcomed by one of its main executives who took us around the vineyards and basements from where they produce high quality wine following high standards of production, including organic and conventional grapes, most of them produced and grown by themselves. We then proceeded to try their beautiful wines; we couldn't resist getting a few bottles of our favourites!

After this interesting visit, we started our journey to the Navarre Pyrenees, taking an unexpected detour as one of the main routes was closed due to resurfacing work. We took a very old and cross-country route which was longer but very scenic and allowed us to see the transition from the plains up to the mountains. We had great views of Egyptian and Griffon Vultures as we approached the mountains. We finally arrived at Isaba where our host and friend Julian was waiting to greet us and show us our rooms. We settled in and enjoyed a break, gathering together again to enjoy a fantastic dinner!

Day 5

Saturday 18th May

Belagua Valley - Minchate

Now being in mountainous habitat, the dramatic change from the plains and steppes made the morning even more exciting. The weather though was unexpected as snow covered the whole area. We coped with it and decided to go out and drive down the road into the Belagua Valley. We were there for a couple of hours, and saw a few Griffon Vultures and a Sparrowhawk, but it was really hard to get on other raptors. Some Alpine and Redbilled Choughs seemed to be coping with the harsh weather conditions, and we were sorry to see Red-backed Shrikes struggling through this unexpected weather for them, hoping they all made it safely. Local birds such as Crested Tits, Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, Water Pipit, and Bullfinch seemed to be fine with this 'late winter' hit.

We managed to set our picnic lunch along a nice cabaña by the mountains which was a good place to shelter for a bit as the harsh weather was hitting outside. After lunch, we tried to keep going higher in altitude but the snow along the main road was an impediment for us to continue our excursion. As windy weather conditions did not help in the end, we decided to drive back to our hotel in the late afternoon for a break, followed by drinks, nibbles and later a wonderful supper and wine.

Day 6 Sunday 19th May

San Martin Pass - Fago Gorge - Zuriza Valley

After a relaxed breakfast, we set off towards higher altitude and right to the border of France, in the heart of the Pyrenees. We managed to reach the pass, despite the snow, watching flocks of Spotless Starlings Alpine Choughs, Water Pipits, Northern Wheatears, Linnet, Dunnock, and brief views of some Red-billed Crossbills crossing by.

We tried really hard looking for Alpine Accentor with no success; and this quest took us to cross into France and check around for them. We also looked for White-winged Snowfinch, but the unusual harsh weather conditions threw them to lower altitudes. After spending a good time of the morning searching for them, we carefully drove back into France and to a different spot as the weather was getting bad during our drive down. We then decided to drive further south and towards the valley of Zuriza, making a quick coffee stop on the way. The weather looked very promising at this end. We saw a lovely pair of Citril Finches sunbathing and at a relatively low altitude than they are normally found. Anyway, it was great seen them very obliging as they were right next to us!

We drove to the point known as Fago, a impressive set of gorges were we patiently checked every portion of it and our scanning was paid off with amazing views of a pair of nesting Golden Eagles. We enjoyed this pair in flight and also perched by their nest, having superb views of this emblematic European raptor. Minutes later, and flying amongst several Griffon Vultures, Raven and Red-billed Choughs, was a single Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture), but not fpr long enough for everyone in the party to see it. The weather was looking clearer and better in the northern part of the mountains, so we headed back to the Zuriza Valley. We enjoyed our lovely lunch by the gorges and the beautiful landscape, with Peregrine Falcons, Red-billed Choughs and Northern Ravens around the cliffs.

The drive to Zuriza took us back into drizzly weather but we still stopped at a view point from where we quickly spotted a lovely Lammergeier soaring above us and giving us a great show; this time, for everyone to enjoy as we all had great views of it! Soon, snowflakes started to come through, so we drove up into Zuriza diverting to the left and into the Belagua valley again, heading to Isaba, where we arrived back at the hotel for drinks and dinner.

Day 7 Monday 20th May

Isaba – Burgui – Foz de Arbayún – Bilbao airport

We had our breakfast and got our belongings packed and ready to go. It was in a beautiful sunny morning where we had to say "Adios!" to Isaba and the wonderful Navarra Pyrenees in order to start our long journey to Bilbao. From Isaba, we drifted down El Roncal Valley where we made a stop at the village of Burgui in order to check a portion of the River Esca. We found a beautiful White-throated Dipper, Grey Wagtail, lots of House Martins, Barn Swallows, European Kingfisher, and Griffon Vultures flying in the blue sky. We continued our drive up the hill road and climbing to the pass known as Las Coronas (985 metres) where we made a stop to overlook the valleys and the snow-capped portion of the Pyrenees that we had explored on the few previous days; we also had great views of Wood Lark, Firecrest and Crested Tit at this spot.

We headed south following the River Salazar and drove uphill again through serious gorges making a stop at the Foz de Arbayún, a very impressive canyon ideal for raptors and many rock-cliff species, such as Griffon Vultures, Crag and House Martins. We also had beautiful views of Alpine Swifts flying very close over our heads; Western Bonelli's Warbler was beautifully seen around the bushes around, and also a pair of handsome Subalpine Warblers which were also nesting in one of the crags. Other birds like Black and Red Kites, Egyptian Vulture, Red-billed Chough, Robin, Blackbird, Blue Tit and European Swift were also seen during the short stop we made here. We continued our drive passing the area of Lumbier where we made a final stop in search for other birds but we just found some of the same birds such as Eurasian Stonechat, Corn Bunting, Serin, Goldfinch, amongst others.

It was sadly time to go to Bilbao in order to be on time at the airport to catch our flight home. We made a brief stop at Pamplona where our fellow Canadian birders continued their exciting adventure towards Barcelona. We wished them well and carried towards Bilbao's airport. We arrived in Heathrow on time after a smooth flight, collected our bags and said the final goodbyes! We had a nice experience in the ancient Reyno de Navarra, enjoying its diverse landscape and habitats, its food and wine, and of course, its birds, which in spite of the unusual weather, performed really well. We hope you come back to this lovely land one day...AGUR!!!

Wine tasted during the tour

EMERGENTE (Crianza 2005, Marques de Montecierzo - Navarra)

SELECCION (Merlot 2006, Marques de Montecierzo - Navarra)

VALCALIENTE ROSADO (Tempranillo-Grenache 2011 – Rioja/Navarra)

VALCALIENTE CRIANZA (Tempranillo-Graciano 2009 – Rioja/Navarra)

VALCALIENTE RESERVA (Tempranillo-Grenache 2006 – Rioja/Navarra)

PRINCIPE DE VIANA 1423 (Tempranillo & Cabernet 2001, 1423 – Navarra)

ALZANIA (Crianza 2003, Alzania – Navarra)

ARISTU (Crianza 2006, Lumbier – Navarra)

MINOTAURO NEGRO (Grenache 2004, Ada – Navarra)

MONTECRISTO (Moscatel 2009, Camilo Castilla – Navarra)

SENORIO DE ARTAZU (Tempranillo 2005, Sotes - Navarra)

INURRIETA 400 (Crianza 2004, Inurrieta - Navarra)

SUR (Grenache Graciano & Merlot 2006, Inurrieta - Navarra)

MEDIODIA (Rose Grenache 2008, Inurrieta – Navarra)

NORTE (Merlot & Cabernet 2005, Inurrieta – Navarra)

ORQUIDEA (Sauvignon Blanc 2008, Inurrieta – Navarra)

GRAN FEUDO (Reserva Especial Crianza 2005, Julian Chivite - Navarra)

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Species Lists

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

			May					
	Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19	20
1	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa	✓	✓	✓			
2	Common Quail	Coturnix coturnix		h	✓			
3	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	✓	✓	✓			
4	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina		✓				
5	Common Coot	Fulica atra	✓	✓	✓			
6	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus		✓	✓			
7	Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus	✓	✓				
8	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		✓	✓			
9	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	✓	✓	✓			
10	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	✓	✓	✓			
11	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea		✓	✓			
13	Squacco Heron	Ardeola ralloides		✓				
14	Black-crowned Night-Heron	Nycticorax nycticorax	✓					
15	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	✓	✓				
16	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo			✓		✓	✓
17	Red Kite	Milvus milvus			✓		√	✓
18	Black Kite	Milvus migrans		✓	✓		√	✓
19	Bearded Vulture	Gypaetus barbatus					√	
20	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus	✓				√	✓
21	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus	✓	✓	√	√	√	✓
22	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus		✓	✓			
23	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus		✓	✓			
24	Northern Harrier	Circus cyaneus			✓			
25	Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus	√	✓	√			
26	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus				√	✓	
27	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos					✓	
28	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus	√	√	√			✓
29	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	 	√	√		✓	✓
30	Lesser Kestrel	Falco naumanni	√					
31	Eurasian Hobby	Falco subbuteo	√					
32	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus	<u> </u>				✓	_
33	Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius		√				_
34	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula		· ·				_
35	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos		√				_
36	Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola		· /				-
37	Dunlin	Calidris alpina		\ \ \ \				-
38	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus		\ \ \ \				-
39	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	✓	\ \ \	✓			+
40	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	→	\ \ \	✓			
41	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	✓	▼	✓			
42	Black Tern	Chlidonias niger	+	▼	,			-
43	Whiskered Tern	Chlidonias hybridus		▼				-
		Columba palumbus	✓	+	√		✓	/
44	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus Columba livia feral	∀ ✓	✓	∨ ✓		•	+
45	Feral Pigeon	Streptopelia turtur	∀ ✓	,	, v			-
46	European Turtle Dove							

				Мау					
	Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19	20	
48	Common Cuckoo	Cuculus canorus			h		✓	h	
49	Tawny Owl	Strix aluco					h		
50	Alpine Swift	Tachymarptis melba						✓	
51	Common Swift	Apus apus		✓	✓			✓	
52	European Bee-Eater	Merops apiaster		✓	✓				
53	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	✓	✓	h				
54	Eurasian Wryneck	Jynx torquilla	✓						
55	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major	✓						
56	Black Woodpecker	Dryocopus martius					h		
57	Red-backed Shrike	Lanius collurio				✓	✓	✓	
58	Woodchat Shrike	Lanius senator	✓	✓					
59	Iberian Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis		✓					
60	Eurasian Golden Oriole	Oriolus oriolus	✓						
61	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	✓	✓	√			✓	
62	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓						
63	Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax	✓		√	√	✓	✓	
64	Alpine Chough	Pyrrhocorax graculus				✓	✓		
65	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	 	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
66	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	· /	•	· ✓	· /	
67	Coal Tit	Periparus ater			h	h	✓	<u> </u>	
68	European Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus			h		•	✓	
	Great Tit		✓		II	V	✓	V ✓	
69		Parus major	✓		✓		✓	∨ ✓	
70	Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	✓	/	∨ ✓		V	∨ ✓	
71	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	✓	V	V			\ <u>'</u>	
72	Thekla Lark	Galerida theklae	V						
73	Woodlark	Lullula arborea						✓	
74	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis	✓	√	√			-	
75	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla		√	√			-	
76	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra		✓	√			<u></u>	
77	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
78	Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris			√		✓	✓	
79	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
80	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti	✓	h					
81	Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita					h√		
82	Western Bonelli's Warbler	Phylloscopus bonelli						✓	
83	Great Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus		✓	✓				
84	Eurasian Reed Warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus	✓						
85	Melodious Warbler	Hippolais polyglotta	✓						
86	Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis	✓	✓				✓	
87	Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla	✓		h	h	✓	h	
88	Garden Warbler	Sylvia borin					✓	h	
89	Dartford Warbler	Sylvia undata	✓	h					
90	Subalpine Warbler	Sylvia cantillans						✓	
91	Sardinian Warbler	Sylvia melanocephala			✓				
92	Common Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla				✓			
93	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	✓	h		h	✓	h	
94	Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla	✓		h	✓			
95	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	✓	✓	✓			✓	
96	Ring Ouzel	Turdus torquatus					✓		
97	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	√	✓	✓	✓	
98	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus			√		✓		

				May						
	Common name	Scientific name	15	16	17	18	19	20		
99	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula			✓	✓	✓	✓		
100	Common Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos	✓	✓				h		
101	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
102	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola			✓			✓		
103	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
104	Black-eared Wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica	✓	✓	✓					
105	Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush	Monticola saxatilis				✓	✓	✓		
106	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata	✓							
107	White-throated Dipper	Cinclus cinclus						✓		
108	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
109	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus	✓							
110	Rock Sparrow	Petronia petronia		✓						
111	Spanish (Yellow) Wagtail	Motacilla flava iberiae		✓						
112	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea					✓	✓		
113	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
114	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris	✓	✓	✓					
115	Water Pipit	Anthus spinoletta				✓	✓			
116	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis				✓	✓			
117	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓			✓	✓	✓		
118	European Serin	Serinus serinus	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
119	European Greenfinch	Carduelis chloris	✓							
120	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
121	Citril Finch	Carduelis citrinella					✓			
122	Common Linnet	Carduelis cannabina	✓	✓	✓		✓			
123	Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra			✓					
124	Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula				✓				
125	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra	✓	✓	✓			✓		
126	Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella					✓			
127	Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia					✓			
128	Ortolan Bunting	Emberiza hortulana		✓						
129	Cirl Bunting	Emberiza cirlus	✓							

Mammals

	1	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes				✓			
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Butterflies

1	Berger's Clouded Yellow	Colias australis			✓	
2	Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui			✓	
3	Meadow Brown	Maniola jurtina			✓	