

Best of The Basque Country!

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 26 May 2019

Report compiled by Pablo Perez



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Tour participants: Pablo Perez (leader) with five Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 18th May

Soon after the group arrived at the airport we headed into Bilbao city for lunch at the charismatic restaurant of Iruña, dating from 1903. Those were our very first “Pintxos” - the local Basque Country tapas which are very distinctive. Then we strolled along the river of to look around the famous Guggenheim museum and some other iconic historical features such as de Diputación or the Gran Via.

From Bilbao we went to the spectacular San Juan de Gaztelugatxe chapel where it was raining, and although we took some atmospheric photos we didn't see many birds other than Yellow-legged Gull. Towards Gernika we had a photo stop above Bermeo town and then went into the city, where we could visit the “Casa de Juntas”, the historical Basque Assembly Hall.

After a quick visit to the Roman ruins of Forua, and having seen our first Black Kites, we had dinner in Restaurante Portuondo before we had our first night's sleep at the Hotel Mundaka in one of the most charming fishing villages in the Bay of Biscay.

Day 2

Sunday 19th May

Taking advantage of the great bird hides in the Orueta marsh we watched some interesting birds such as the Black-winged Stilt, Common Redshank and a group of Eurasian Spoonbills, before heading into the near Urdaibai Bird Centre. This is an old can factory turned into a remarkable bird information centre where Txepe provided us great information about the local birds, such as the Sand Martin and the Yellow Wagtail, just before we were entertained by a spectacular fly by of a Hobby.

On our way to the Laida Beach for “Pintxos” at the Atxarre restaurant, we had a short stop to check some of the funeral steles (a type of gravestone) and their importance in Basque history which is directly linked with the Celtic history.

Due to the persistent rain we decided to visit the charismatic fishing village of Elantxobe where we could see some local birds including our first sighting of a Shag. We also visited the Ereño quarry which is the origin of the widespread pink limestone in some of the most iconic buildings on Biscay.

We were lucky enough to have improved weather on our approach to San Cristobal bird hide. We had good views of a Melodious Warbler and a Peregrine Falcon, before getting into the hide and having some of the best moments of the trip. We spent about an hour taking really good photos of a flock of migrant waders such as Sanderling, Ringed Plover and Dunlin.

That night we had dinner again at Restaurant Portuondo with superb views of the UNESCO Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve, followed by another night in Mundaka.

Day 3

Monday 20th May

We started the morning near the San Bartolome church in the Axpe neighborhood of Urdaibai, accessing the marsh via the boardwalk. After some time we finally managed to see Cetti's Warbler and had an excellent view of Marsh Harrier and a Common Buzzard. Afterwards we went to visit the town of Atxurre and we had a good view of Dipper and saw a historical old iron making watermill. Later on we were really glad to have Dr. Aitor Galarza with us explaining the situation of the Osprey restoration project in Urdaibai. The weather started to improve and we had good views of Stonechat and European Serin.

In the afternoon we visited the Bodega Berroja winery, makers of the local white wine called "Txakoli", and Natalia explained to us some of the particularities of this much appreciated wine.

We then leave the coast to visit the Urkiola Mountains where we had magnificent views of these vertical cliffs, and of the Red-billed Choughs and soaring Griffon Vultures. Just before the Urkiola monastery we found a small flock of Bullfinch, as well as Nuthatch in some pruned Beech trees, not far for our first group of the Green-winged Orchid *Orchis morio*.

From the mountains we descended to finish the day at our second hotel, the Hotel Palacio Elorriaga, right next to the Salburua wetlands in Vitoria.

Day 4

Tuesday 21st May

It took us almost an hour to reach Laguardia in the southern tip of the Basque Country, in "La Rioja Alavesa". Before the fog lifted enabling us to see the magnificent Sierra de Cantabria mountains we visited one of the many archeological sites in the region, the San Martin Dolmen. As the fog cleared we strolled along the La Paul pool loop looking for birds and orchids. Great Reed Warbler, Hen Harrier, Golden Oriole, Iberian Chiffchaff, Sardinian Warbler, Red-legged Partridge, Nightingale and Purple Heron were seen, as well as a family of Marsh Harriers learning how to hunt for prey.

Next we had the most distinctive food experience of the trip with a private barbeque in the Carravalseca vineyards, where we were lucky enough to see the Bee-eaters while Mr. Rodolfo Madrid, the owner of the winery was explaining us in detail how they take care of the vineyards. With no time for a siesta we went to visit the medieval town of Laguardia to watch a nesting colony of House Martins in the walls of the buildings. The Casa Primicia red wine winery welcomed us to learn about wine properties, and we had an opportunity to taste their products.

Day 5

Wednesday 22nd May

This morning we went first of all to Corres, a town in the heart of Izki Natural Park in Alava. Taking a gentle walk we had a superb view of a perched Egyptian Vulture, that later on took to the thermals and soared up with some Griffon Vultures. We also had a brief view of a Sparrowhawk as well as some more Griffons at their nests. A Firecrest came close enough for us to watch its crest raised in display.

After a quick coffee break in Pobes we met Mr. Joseba from Elai Etxea guest house who gave us a good introduction to the area and we were lucky to get a sighting of a Golden Eagle. Later on we visit the historical site of “Valle Salado de Añana”, a system of man-made fresh water terraces that have been producing salt for at least the last 7,000 years. This is also a great place to see Black Redstart.

In the evening we made our way to see the tallest waterfall in Spain, the “Salto del Nervion” where we also watched a good number of breeding pairs of Griffons, Crag Martins, as well as having an excellent view of a Tree Pipit.

Under a clear sky we turned back towards Vitoria driving through the Puerto de la Herrera. At the Hotel and before dinner we enjoyed a quick visit of the Arkaute pool in Salburua where we had good views of a Great and Little Egret, Common Pochard, Zitting Cisticola, White Wagtail and Spotless Starling.

Day 6

Thursday 23rd May

We had an early start today, with a walking visit to the Ataria pool in Salburua wetland where we found Reed and Great Reed Warblers, Tufted Duck, several Pairs of White Storks at their nests as well as Grey Heron and Little Grebe.

We left Alava to access to the province of Gipuzkoa, where we drove up to Arantzazu Sanctuary in the heart of the Aizkorri Natural Park in the Gohierri Highlands. We visited the “Gomiztegi Caserio”, which is a local shepherd school and also a traditional Idiazabal cheese factory, where we took the opportunity to enjoy tasting the different local brands of cheese and Gipuzkoa Txakoli wine. From the Caserio to the Sanctuary we had an easy nice stroll with a numerous local species of ferns and beautiful flowers as well a sight of Kestrel, Wren and Blackcap.

On a rather rainy afternoon we made our way from Arantzazu straight to our last hotel destination in Zumaia, the Jesuskoa Hotel where we had a good dinner and plenty of time to enjoy the peace and quiet of the place.

Day 7

Friday 24th May

We made the best of a rainy day and first visited the famous “Geoparque de la Costa Vasca” to admire the iconic geological features called Flysch - layers of sediment that provide a good amount of data for the geologist and great observations for naturalists. Walking from the Elorriaga viewpoint we had a nice view of the Atlantic Ocean and our first good sighting of a Melodious Warbler, and also an interesting view of a Red Kite being mobbed by a Carrion Crow. We also saw some Linnets and a pair of Nuthatch feeding their chicks.

The rain became heavier and we found an excellent shelter in the historical church of Zumaia where a local guide explained to us about the old art works in the building, and we also visited the historical fish auction building of San Telmo.

After some delicious “Pintxos and Txakoli”, we headed to the town of Lastur in the interior part of the Geopark, where we visited the watermill and had some nice “chistorra bocadillo” for lunch.

Day 8

Saturday 25th May

We met our friend Eneko, a local young birder from Zarautz and visited the Txingudi Marshes near the Plaiaundi information centre. It was a cloudy morning, but at least the rain had stopped, and we had excellent views of a Booted Eagle, Curlew, Whimbrel, Spotted Flycatcher, Red-backed Shrike, and a superb glimpse of a Black and a Red kite fighting in the air. These wetlands are really accessible and host some interesting surprises if you visit at the correct time.

San Sebastian city was calling us for Pintxos, after which we had a few free hours sightseeing in the city.

As we reached the hotel the weather improved, so some of us explored the Sakoneta beach from the Itxaspe viewpoint where we had some nice views of Sardinian Warblers.

Day 9

Sunday 26th May

A late flight and an early start enabled us to explore one more coastal wetland, the Iñurritza marshes in Zarautz where we had a stroll, finding Melodious Warbler, Stonechat, Tree Sparrow, Ringed Plover and had a good sighting of a Little Ringed Plover chick. There were also some interesting plants linked with sand dune ecosystems.

With more than 100 species of birds, lots of pintxos and different tastes of local wines we made our way back to Bilbao Airport for our departure.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					✓				
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					✓			✓	
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					✓				
5	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓						✓	
6	European Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>			✓						
7	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				✓	✓			✓	
8	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					✓				
9	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				✓					
10	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			✓		✓	✓			
11	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓					✓	
12	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓			
13	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>			✓		✓				
14	Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>				✓					
15	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓			
16	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>					✓				
17	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓		✓			✓	
18	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			✓					✓	
19	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>					✓				
20	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
21	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>								✓	
22	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					✓				
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					✓				
24	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
25	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				✓					
26	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>						✓		✓	
27	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				✓				✓	✓
30	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
31	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			✓		✓			✓	
32	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			✓						✓
33	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>									✓
34	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>								✓	
35	Wimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>								✓	
36	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓					✓	
37	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓					✓	✓
38	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			✓			✓			
39	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓							✓
40	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>								✓	
41	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓
42	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓						
43	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia var. domestica</i>	✓	✓							✓
44	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				✓		✓			
45	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>							✓		
46	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>			✓	✓✓					
47	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May									
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	
48	European Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>				✓						
49	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				✓						
50	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>			✓							
51	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓							
52	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		✓								
53	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		✓								
54	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>								✓		
55	Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>		✓	✓							
56	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓			
57	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
58	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>			✓							
59	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
60	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>					✓					
61	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓		✓			✓			
62	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓	✓					
63	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓							
64	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		
65	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>					✓					
66	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
67	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓			
68	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>				✓			✓			
69	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>		✓			✓					
70	Great Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>			✓		✓					
71	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓				
72	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>			✓						✓	
73	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		✓				✓			✓	
74	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			✓		✓		✓			
75	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>				✓			✓			
76	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓			
77	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓			
78	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓	✓				✓			
79	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>				✓	✓					
80	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
81	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				✓		✓				
82	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>						✓		✓		
83	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓			
84	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>				✓						
85	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
86	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓			✓			✓	
87	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			✓							
88	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			✓							
89	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
90	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>									✓	
91	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>					✓					
92	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>		✓								
93	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
94	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>					✓					
95	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
96	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
97	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓							
98	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				✓			✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
99	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓		
100	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>					✓				