

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 February - 1 March 2008



Cranes in flight



Alquezar



El Planeron



Vero Gorge

Report compiled by John Willsher and Jason Mitchell
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Participants:	David Malins Janet Nightingale Mick Corcoran Terry Corcoran Anne Beaufoy Dave Lloyd Anne Lloyd Pauline Lewis Simon O'Neill John Cox Angela Cox Sheila Wynn

Summary

A very successful two centre trip, combining a visit to Alquezar in the Sierra de Guara, Aragon Spain, to find Wallcreeper: with a stay at Laguna Gallocanta south of Zaragoza, to watch the northward migration of Cranes. Wallcreepers were a great success with sightings on 3 days. Additional species included Lammergeier, Egyptian Vulture, Golden Eagle, Red Kite, Peregrine, Red-billed Chough and Alpine Accentor; all seen on several occasions.

At Gallocanta Crane migration was spectacular with 48,000 using the lagoon on the day we watched. Many typically dryer land species were seen such as Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and several larks. Dupont's Larks were heard singing at a site near Gallocanta. Marsh and Hen Harriers were common, there was a northward migration of Black Kites observed and more Golden Eagles seen.

Day 1

Sunday 24th February

Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived on time at Zaragozar after an early flight from Stansted, when the minibuses were sorted and we were on our way. We negotiated our way as soon as possible out of Zaragoza, with its massive road and building developments, onto the road north towards Huesca. As it was still early afternoon we decided to turn off and take the slower quieter route east on the A1210 via Tardienta, Granen, Tramaced and Pertusa.

We were soon rewarded with our first Marsh Harriers, a Hen Harrier and numerous Red Kites. Stopping near Tardienta Rock Sparrows were seen and a flock of 24 Cranes passed over. We saw many mixed finch flocks of Linnets, Goldfinch and Corn Buntings and a Southern Grey Shrike. At Tramaced two pairs of White Storks were nesting on a high rock pinnacle. The road then climbed the colourful eroded cliff escarpment. Back in cultivated land again we scrutinised a large Chaffinch flock finding a few Brambling.

Pertusa had Crag Martins and more Storks making a total of more than 50 seen. North of the N240 east of Huesca as we approached Alquezar the landscape was more wooded, fields were smaller and almond trees were blooming in a variety of shades.

Negotiating the narrow cobbled streets we found our hotel and Jose Antonio our host soon had us settled into our very new luxurious accommodation. We assembled in the bar at 7.30 with complementary glass of excellent white wine from the local Somontano region meeting Nuria who was to be our local guide for the next 5 days. An excellent dinner was then provided at the hotel's restaurant Casa Gervasio a short walk along one of the town's narrow streets.

Day 2

Monday 25th February

Alquezar

The day started early with a pre-breakfast walk around the town to search for the Wallcreeper that Nuria regularly sees from her house feeding on the walls of buildings. We started at the promenade overlooking the gorge with the castle high above us. The weather was not ideal with slight drizzle but there were many Griffon Vultures, Ravens, Red Kites and Red-billed Choughs. Blackcaps were numerous in the Ivy below the cliffs and in the flowering almond trees. A couple of Chiffchaffs were seen and several Rock Sparrows were active on the cliffs. The setting of the town even on a dull morning was spectacular. We walked on past one of the old town's water sources, Fuente de Monchiriguel, to another viewpoint and waited but today the Wallcreeper was running late and breakfast called, which was back at the hotel and excellent.

At about 10 we set off in our minibuses to explore areas east and north of the town. On the way out stopping at Ermita de San Antonio where Woodlarks were singing, Cirl Bunting, Black Redstart and Nuria's first Egyptian Vulture of the year were seen. At Colungo we viewed the town's notable ancient olive tree and stocked up with fresh bread. Beyond the town it was all out of the buses when 2 adult Lammergeiers flew overhead followed by a Peregrine, another Egyptian Vulture and finally an excellent view of a Short-toed Eagle; another summer visitor already arrived.

At Mirador del Rio Vero we were able to see nesting Griffon V on ledges along the canyon walls and watch Crag Martins, as we ate our picnic. Amongst the scrubby bushes was a small clump of delightful Rush-leaved Jonquils (*Narcissus assoanus*) and a few Crocus *nevadensis marcetii*.

We returned to Alquezar stopping at the entrance to the town for a photo and a displaying Golden Eagle overhead. Time for another stroll around the town, and this time success, a Wallcreeper found feeding on the house walls and under the eaves in calle La Iglesia was watched for several minutes. Around the Castillo and Colegiata we found a Blue Rock Thrush, 5 Alpine Accentors and overhead 100+ Red-billed Chough heading for their roost. As light was fading another Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Sparrows, Firecrest and Black Redstart were seen and then to finish off another Wallcreeper was spotted on the large rock wall opposite.

So it was back to our hotel to prepare for another delicious Spanish meal at Casa Gervasio.

Day 3

Tuesday 26th February

Alquezar

Today our route took us west of Alquezar first to El Huevo de Morrano. We walked along the bottom of an escarpment where over 100 Griffon Vultures above us were trying to catch their morning thermal. Some of us headed for the rock stack at the eastern end where we were rewarded with another Wallcreeper, initially quite close at the base of the cliff. We watched it hunt and climb for some time before retracing our steps back to our vehicles, hearing and briefly seeing Dartford Warbler on the way. Before leaving we spotted a distant Peregrine on top of the rock stack and another Lammergeier was seen.

Further northwest we came to Santa Cilia passing through the village and up, to where we met Paco a local man who watches and counts the local vulture population. He was waiting with his small van loaded with butcher's offcuts. A volunteer was sought to help carry the meat to the Vulture feeding point on the hillside across the valley. While we waited for Simon and Paco to return we ate our picnic and watched. Soon after the meat was distributed over a large rock slab the vultures appeared but it was some time before they began to close in and only after Paco pretended to spread some more meat. Total numbers were 60-70 with a further 50 flying around. We also saw a Golden Eagle and several Ravens, Woodlarks were singing and a Red-legged Partridge was calling. The feeding station is run by Fondo Amigos del Buitre.

We left our remaining feeding vultures and carried on to Embalse de Guara north of Aguas where we had a flock of 200 Fieldfares which included many Mistle Thrushes. We had superb views of a Firecrest and there was a Peregrine falcon and Buzzard seen before finally we made our return to Alquezar.

Day 4

Wednesday 27th February

Alquezar-Gallocanta

After breakfast and another Wallcreeper sighting by one of the group on its favourite house we made our farewells and left Alquezar to make our way south to Gallocanta, we again took the cross country route but this time guided by Nuria. We stopped at many places including the spectacular gorge at Piraces, where in the village was a Swallow, the storks at Tramaced and a lunch stop overlooking the lake at Sarinena with its Reedbeds and waterbirds. Here we added several wetland species to our list; unfortunately not the Bitterns for which this lake is a notable breeding site, they remained elusive.

Carrying on southwest towards Zaragoza on the A129 then south on the A23 turning off to pass through the ancient walled town of Daroca before making the final climb over the Puerto de Santed down to Gallocanta and our hotel at Berrueco. There were flocks of Cranes visible on the Laguna so we were confident for the next morning.

Day 5

Thursday 28th February

Gallocanta

We started early at 7am so we can be in position looking over the NW end of the laguna at first light. We pickup Javier our guide at Gallocanta and he takes us to the Observatorio de la Ermita.

We can hear the Cranes and as it gets lighter we can see ranks of them spread across the lake and with them are 40 or so White Storks. 3 Hen Harriers including a superb male are hunting over the fields where Skylarks are singing and then a Black Kite flies over. We watched the Cranes for about an hour, trying to estimate the number but there are too many. Several groups fly around and some settle again on the lake and surrounding fields. We then headed back for breakfast spotting some Tree Sparrows on our way.

After breakfast we headed along the lake SE and down a track towards the lake where a group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse were trying to hide amongst the winter cereal crop and there were also several Calandra Larks. The sun was now emerging and things were hotting up at the north end so back to Gallocanta in time to watch a spectacular departure of 25,000 (official co-ordinated count) Cranes. Groups would take off and circle overhead gaining height to get over the pass to the north continually bugling to each other. Other birds seen included up to 40 Griffon V a Marsh Harrier and 2 Golden Eagles overhead (one was seen later by other Crane watchers capturing a Crane). After our fill of Cranes we headed back eastwards and found a picnic area, seeing the Black-bellied Sandgrouse for a second time.

After lunch we visited the interpretation centre for the Laguna, an excellent educational facility promoting the conservation value of Gallocanta as a staging post for the Cranes and the importance of the area for a wide range of species.

Later we continued around the laguna through Bello and along the SW edge back towards Gallocanta, there were now Cranes arriving from the SW and flocks were congregating at this end of the laguna. Little Owls were seen on old farm buildings and near an extensive area of reeds there were Reed Buntings feeding at the field edge, more Hen Harriers are seen and in a roadside line of trees a Green Woodpecker.

We then travelled about 20minutes west of the laguna for a dusk watch at a site where Javier had recently heard Dupont's Lark singing unfortunately none were heard or seen so we returned to our hotel.

Day 6

Friday 29th February

Gallocanta - Belchite

After an early breakfast we headed for Daroca where we made a quick stop for supplies before heading N to Carinena then E to Belchite and Codo. This cross country route, some through commercial vineyards produced further sightings of Marsh and Hen Harriers, more Cranes, Griffon V, Hoopoe and Southern Grey Shrike.

Arriving at a viewpoint overlooking the Spanish Ornithological Societies El Planeron reserve we disembarked and quickly found singing Lesser short-toed Larks and took in the spectacular scenery with the eroding colourful escarpments on the horizon. We walked on a circular path and observed more Lesser short toed, Crested and Calandra Larks.

Heading back towards Belchite we took a track into the main reserve which led to a small wet area where we had lunch. Here a flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse flew around us, a Golden Eagle was seen overhead and Moorhen and Fan-tailed Warbler briefly were heard. In the Tamarisk around the pool a few Chiffchaff were feeding and many flocks of Linnet were coming to drink at the water's edge.

Day 7

Saturday 1st March

Gallocanta – Zaragoza - London

Our flight today was early evening so we had time for more birding in the Gallocanta area. Some of us who perhaps did not have long journeys ahead when reaching Stansted left the hotel at 6.45am returning to the local Dupont's Lark site, arriving just at first light. As soon as we opened the vehicle windows several Dupont's larks were heard singing. At least 5 birds were heard and continued to sing for an hour or more. Unfortunately they appeared to be doing it from the ground in low but quite dense cover and disappointingly none were seen.

We headed back for breakfast happy that we had heard the distinctive song but frustrated at not seeing these elusive birds. On the way back we stopped for several flocks of Cranes in fields near the road and another Hoopoe.

Leaving the hotel at about 10am we had one last look for the Black-bellied Sandgrouse and today 17 were counted along with more Calandra Larks and good views of a Black Kite. We headed back to Gallocanta and had more spectacular views of Cranes leaving and on the lake 6 or 7 very distant Avocet were seen.

After a stop in Daroca for some food and a look at the town we travelled N on the old N330 to Carinena at one point keeping up with a large V skein of Cranes above us heading in the same direction. Then it was onto the Autovia Mudejar and Zaragoza and home.....

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	Feb/March						
			24	25	26	27	28	29	1
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				4			
2	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	4			2			
3	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				1			
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1			+			
5	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	50+			+	40	1	+
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					5		
7	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					20		
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				+	+	8	
9	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					+		
10	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				+	+		
11	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				+	+		
12	Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>					20		+
13	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	20	+	+	+	2	+	
14	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		2	2				
15	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		2		2			
16	Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>							
17	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		+	200	+	40	+	+
18	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	6			+	+	2	+
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1	1			+		+
20	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1	1			+
21	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>							
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	4		2	+	1	1	+
23	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		1					
24	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1Ad	2		2	2	
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	5	1	3	+	+	+	+
26	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1	2				
27	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>							
28	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	3		1	+	H	2	+
29	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>							
30	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>						H	
31	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>							
32	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	24			+	40K	+	+
33	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>							6
34	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				20	+		+
35	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					1		
36	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>					2		
37	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>				+	+		
38	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>					10		17
39	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>						27	
40	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
41	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
42	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	+		+	+	+	+	+
43	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			H				
44	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>					3		
45	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1			1		1	1
46	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>					H		
47	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1					1

	Common name	Scientific name	Feb/March						
			24	25	26	27	28	29	1
48	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		2	+	+			
49	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					+		+
50	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>						+	
51	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	20+		+		+	+	
52	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>					100	+	
53	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>							H6
54	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				1			
55	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogene rupestris</i>	6	6	50				+
56	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	10		3	1		2	
57	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	3	2	2		5	2	+
58	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1	1	1			1
59	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1	H				
60	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2	1				
61	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>		5					
62	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		2	2	+			
63	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	2			+	2	+	+
64	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		2	2	+			
65	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	+	+	+	+	+	2	+
66	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			200				
67	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelus</i>	+	+	+	+			
68	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			20			1	
69	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cettia</i>	H2			H	H		H
70	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>						2	
71	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	3	+	15	+			H
72	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		2	H	+		H	
73	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			2	1			
74	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		3	H	+		2	+
75	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		1	2				
76	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		2	3	+			+
77	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		+	+	+	+		
78	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		+	+	+			+
79	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		1	1	1			
80	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	1			1		2	1
81	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	+	50	+	+	+	+	+
82	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	+		2	+		+	+
83	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		130	50	+	H	H	
84	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	+						
85	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	+	50	20	+			
86	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	+			+	+	+	+
87	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					8		40+
88	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	+	+	+	+	+		+
89	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>							
90	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	+	+				+	+
91	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	3						
92	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
93	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	+	1	+	+			
94	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		1					
95	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				+			
96	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	+		+	+	+	+	+
97	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
98	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	+		+	+	+	+	+

	Common name	Scientific name	Feb/March						
			24	25	26	27	28	29	1
99	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1	+	+		H	+
100	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>					+		

Mammals

1	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>					1		
2	Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>					1		