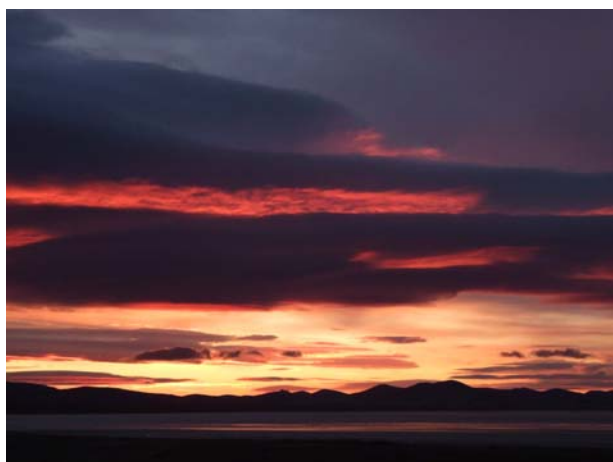


Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

26 October - 1 November 2008



Sunrise at Gallocanta



Santa Cilia



Bustard watch at Gallocanta



Lammergeier

Report & images compiled by John Willsher



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Summary

This was a very successful two-centre trip, combining a visit to Alquezar in the Sierra de Guara, Aragon to find Wallcreeper, with a stay at Laguna Gallocanta, south of Zaragoza to look for Cranes. In the north, two Wallcreepers were seen plus additional species including several sightings of Lammergeier, many Red Kites, Peregrine, Red-billed Chough, large numbers of Griffon Vultures, Hawfinch and Black Redstarts.

At Gallocanta wintering Crane numbers were increasing with an official reserve count on the 30th of over 4,000 birds. Good numbers of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Calandra Larks, Skylarks and about 50 Great Bustards were feeding in fields around the lake. Marsh and Hen Harriers, including several smart males, were common and many birds were coming in to roost near the lake. More Red Kites, Southern Grey Shrike, Woodlark, Rock Sparrow, Cirl Bunting and a Goshawk were also seen.

Day 1

Sunday 26th October

Stansted to Alquezar, via Zaragoza

We arrived on time in Zaragoza after an early flight from Stansted. Once the minibuses were sorted we were on our way in warm sunshine on the road north towards Huesca. We then turned off to take the slower quieter route east towards the low rocky hills of Serreta de Tramaced.

Numerous Common Buzzards, Red Kites and Marsh Harriers were perched on posts or hunting over the farmland, where we also saw Fan-tailed Warblers and Corn Buntings. Stopping at Tardienta to get a better view of two White Storks on the church, several butterflies and a Hummingbird Hawkmoth were also seen. Large numbers of Starlings (both Common and Spotless) were perched on the church and wires around the town.

The road then climbed the colourful eroded cliff escarpment here. Stopping at the valley of La Sarda near Piraces, the evening light enhanced the colours of the canyon walls. Northwards, as we approached Alquezar, the snow-covered mountains of the high Pyrenees were visible. The landscape here was more wooded and the fields smaller; the vines were now showing their colourful autumn tints along with the Almond trees and Olives. Entering Alquezar as dusk fell, we found our hotel and Gervasio, our host, soon had us settled into our new luxurious accommodation. Later we assembled in the bar with a complementary glass of excellent wine from the local Somontano region. A fine dinner was then provided at the hotel's restaurant Casa Gervasio, a short walk away along one of the town's narrow streets.

Day 2

Monday 27th October

Alquezar

The day started early with a pre-breakfast walk around the town, starting at the promenade overlooking the gorge with the citadel high above us. The morning was fine and the canyon walls caught the early morning sunlight. We searched the rock walls unsuccessfully for our first Wallcreeper – perhaps most were still high up in the relatively warm mountains? We did see Griffon Vultures, Peregrines, Ravens, and Red-billed Choughs, plus a couple of Swallows and Crag Martins; in orchard trees below the promenade there was a migrant Pied Flycatcher. Black Redstarts, Blue Rock Thrush, a Sub-alpine and Sardinian Warbler were also seen. We walked on past one of the old town's water sources – Fuente de Monchiriguel – to another viewpoint, before heading back to our hotel and an excellent breakfast.

Setting off at 10am, we first headed west to Adaheusca to stock up on picnic provisions, then on towards Santa Cilia, stopping on the way to admire 60 or 70 wheeling Griffon Vultures gaining height on a thermal. After a brief conversation with a couple harvesting their Almonds, we continued to Santa Cilia where we met Laura Henderson, who showed us round one of the three interpretation centres in the Sierra Guara Natural Park. She showed us how large and how important the National Park is for a wide range of flora and fauna, particularly the high density of Lammergeiers found here. Right on cue, as we walked up above the village, a Lammergeier was circling over the hillside opposite. Here we had our picnic, while watching the Lammergeier plus 50 or so Griffon Vultures overhead.

Our lunch over, we set off west again to visit the dam at Vadiello, another regular spot for wintering Wallcreeper. Along the way, our progress was enlivened by more Lammergeiers overhead, one carrying what appeared to be a bone, and a low-level hunting Goshawk which flashed across the road in front of us. Walking up to the reservoir, a Wallcreeper was seen flying onto the dam wall and we had good, though all too brief views as it soon flew off around the cliff wall out of sight. Further searching produced a Black Redstart and a couple of Cormorants, and as the light faded we made our way back to Alquezar.

Day 3

Tuesday 28th October

Alquezar

A pre-breakfast walk in the rain produced a few early birds: more Black Redstarts, Serins, Sardinian Warbler, Ravens and Red-billed Choughs.

After another good breakfast we set off in our minibuses to explore areas east and north of the town. First we stopped at a bridge over the Vero, where a Dipper was feeding in the river. Overhead, Crag Martins were feeding and a couple of Hawfinches were seen. Stopping on the outskirts of Colungo we walked across an orchard and admired a 1,000-year old Olive tree. In the small fields there were a few Woodlarks, while several Blackcaps were active in the farmyard bushes. Pressing on in the rain, we stopped at a couple of gorges and scanned the conglomerate walls and ledges. A Wallcreeper had been seen here last February, but today only rosettes of the local speciality plant *Saxifraga longifolia* and a few last violet flowers of *Ramonda myconi* were visible on the ledges.

Stopping further north at a viewpoint overlooking the impressive Vero gorge we could see that the Griffon Vultures were sitting out on the ledges today. A single Lammergeier was circling across the gorge and we also saw a Peregrine. Looking for a picnic spot we parked outside Lecina. The rain was easing off, and a walk in the village while the picnic was being prepared produced some Rock Sparrows.

Retracing our route back to the Vero gorge we walked through the pine woods, some of us climbing down walkways to admire a few of the ancient cave paintings for which this area is famous. In the woods a Crested Tit was seen and Martin and Doug (both with experience of the species) were lucky to see what they considered to be an Eleonora's Falcon racing past them. On the way back we stopped for another scan of the gorge before returning to our hotel to get ready for another delicious Spanish meal at Casa Gervasio.

Day 4

Wednesday 29th October

Alquezar to Gallocanta

During the last minute of our final pre-breakfast bird search, a Wallcreeper was spotted on the canyon wall visible from the promenade at Alquezar. We watched it for five to 10 minutes before returning for breakfast.

It was an overcast morning, but not raining, as we left Alquezar for Zaragoza and Gallocanta and we noticed fresh snow on the 2,000-metre peaks of the Sierra de Guara to the north. We headed south towards Sarinena and saw many Red Kites, Common Buzzards, a Hen Harrier and a Southern Grey Shrike; north of Sarinena there were flocks of Lapwings. We stopped near an irrigated rice-growing area and various larks and Meadow Pipits were visible but no waterbirds, so we carried on to the lake at Sarinena. The interpretation centre for the reserve here was open and we made good use of the facilities as the wind was now getting stronger. Several species of duck were identified, a Marsh Harrier and a Great White Heron.

After lunch we travelled on through more rice fields, some not yet harvested, to the south of the lake and in one stubble field a few Cattle Egrets were seen feeding with a flock of sheep. Stopping on the Puerto de Alcubierre, we walked to the Mirador de las Tres Huegas, where the view was good but the wind very cold. Bypassing Zaragoza on the new southern ring road we made good time to the ancient town of Daroca, reaching our hotel at Berrueco near Gallocanta just in time to see a few Cranes coming in to roost on the lake.

Day 5

Thursday 30th October

Gallocanta

We started early at 6.45am today. Picking up Javier (our guide at Gallocanta), we set off in time to be in position to look across the north-west end of the Laguna (the Observatorio de la Ermita) at first light.

In the soft dawn light, we could just see two groups of Cranes out in the shallow water. As it brightened they began calling, taking off and flying towards us into the quite strong wind which was now blowing from the north-west. Several groups passed close by with some overhead and we clearly heard their evocative 'bugling' calls. When they had gone we headed back to the minibuses and drove a few miles to an area where periodic controlled flooding and crop production, specifically to help the Cranes, occurs at Laguna de la Zaida. This year it was dry and we looked down on the strips of crops and grassland on which there were many hundreds of Cranes feeding below us. Having had our fill of Cranes, we returned to our hotel for breakfast.

Later we headed south-east. Another Red Kite was seen and down a track through arable farmland towards the lake, a group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse suddenly appeared from the stubble nearby. We spent a while driving slowly along tracks hoping to get a view of these birds on the ground – we saw a couple of groups, about 30 birds in total, and a Merlin. Nearer the lake, a tower hide gave views of small groups of Cranes and a Marsh Harrier hunting near the lake shore in the grassland areas.

Next we visited the interpretation centre for the Laguna – this is 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. Javier had spotted two Great Bustards here the previous day, so we scanned long and hard but to no avail.

We continued around the Laguna through Bello, where we stocked up on bread for lunch, and along the south-west of the lake. A Little Owl was seen sheltering from the wind on a pile of branches and twigs, and a flock of Calandra Larks flew up from a stubble field. Then ahead of us, nearer the lake shore, a group of Great Bustards were in flight; stopping, we could see there were more on the ground. Edging a little closer we counted 26 birds and a little later what appeared to be another group took flight so there may have been up to 50 birds in total. An excellent number given that Javier had hoped we might see two!

After stopping at a sheltered spot (a disused but roofed communal village washing area) for a picnic we pressed on round the lake, stopping at another tower hide. Numerous harriers, including up to five superb adult male Hen Harriers, were coming in to roost. Small flocks of ducks (mostly Mallard) were on the lake, as were scattered groups of Cranes. Today had been the reserve's weekly Crane count; this is carried out by the wardens and we heard that the total reached had been 4,700!

Day 6

Friday 31st October

Gallocanta to Daroca

Today the forecast was not good, with rain and wind promised. So after breakfast, while it was still bright, we first watched a Cirl Bunting and Woodlark then climbed the small hill near our hotel which gave us good views over the lagoon. A few Griffon Vultures were on a nearby hill and many Cranes were feeding near the water. Later we had another look at the Black-bellied Sandgrouse and a Merlin, then headed for Daroca, but soon it started raining. We decided to spend a couple of hours exploring the ancient walled town of Daroca and to have our lunch. Returning towards Gallocanta in the late afternoon we travelled further west and explored a hilltop habitat known to have several resident pairs of Dupont's Lark. A slow exploration by vehicle and on foot produced Southern Grey Shrikes and Skylark but not the elusive Dupont's. So, after seeing more Cranes from the road on our return journey, we headed back to our base.

Day 7

Saturday 1st November

Gallocanta to London

Our flight home was scheduled for early evening and, as the weather today was better, we had time for a detour via Belchite on our way north to Zaragoza. En route, Buzzards and Red Kites were again in evidence. Stopping in Belchite we had lunch in a cafe then took a very quick look at the wartime memorial ruins before heading north to the Belchite steppe reserve of La Lomaza, where we spent some time walking along a path through the area and looking into a Gypsum quarry for Rock Sparrow, Black Redstart and Red-legged Partridge. Walking in the steppe areas produced Skylarks and, for one of the party, a close encounter with a Ladder Snake (*Rhinechis scalaris*)! From there we went on to Zaragoza airport and home.

The trip had given us excellent views of some of our target species: Wallcreeper, Crane and Lammergeier, plus Great Bustards, Harriers and many others.

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Species Lists

Birds

Key: H= heard only ()= seen by 2 group members += seen but not counted

	Common name	Scientific name	October/November						
			26	27	28	29	30	31	1
1	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		3		4			
2	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				2			
3	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	4						1
4	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>				1			
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	20		1	2	1	1	
6	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	2						
7	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>				1			
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2			+	+	+	+
9	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	2			+	+		
10	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				+			
11	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	+	+		+	3	10	
12	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		6	1				
13	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	+	100	100	30+	8	23	+
14	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	6	3		10	+		
15	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1			1	20+	4	
16	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1	1		1	
17	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		1					
18	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	+	+	5	+	2	1	+
19	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
20	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		3	1		1		
21	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					1	1	
22	Eleonora's Falcon	<i>Falco eleonora</i>			(1)				
23	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	+	+		15		4	+
24	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			1				
25	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>				50+	4000	1000	
26	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					5		
27	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				200+			
28	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>				1	1	3	
29	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>				2	2	1	
30	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	+						
31	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>					29	30	
32	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	+	+	+		+		
33	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		+	+	+	+	+	+
34	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	200+		+	+	+	+	+
35	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			H				
36	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>					1		
37	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>					1		
38	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>			1				
39	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		5	5			3	+
40	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					50+	+	+
41	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	+	+	1	+	+	+	+
42	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>						1	
43	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				1	50+		
44	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		2		1			

	Common name	Scientific name	October/November						
			26	27	28	29	30	31	1
45	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogene rupestris</i>		3	25	2			
46	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	+	+		+	+	+	
47	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	
48	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			1				
49	Dipper (Black-bellied)	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			1				
50	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H					
51	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1	3	+		1	
52	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
53	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	+		1		1	1	
54	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		4	1				
55	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	+	+	+	1	1	1	+
56	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelus</i>			+		1	8	
57	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		3		1		1	
58	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cettia</i>	H						
59	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	+						
60	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		+	+	2			
61	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		1	1			2	
62	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>		1					
63	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			1	2		1	
64	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		1					
65	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		+	+	+			
66	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			1				
67	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		+	+	+		1	
68	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		+	+				
69	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		1		1			
70	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			1	1		3	1
71	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	+	+		+	+	+	+
72	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	+	+	+	+		+	
73	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			2	1			
74	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	+			2		3	
75	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	+	+	2	2		H	
76	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>			1				
77	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	+	+	3	2	+	+	+
78	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	+	+	1	+	+	+	+
79	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					50		
80	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
81	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>			4		40	+	+
82	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	+	+	+	+	100	+	+
83	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		5	+	+			
84	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	+						
85	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	+	+	+			+	+
86	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	+						+
87	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			2				
88	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	+			10	10	+	+
89	Clirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirius</i>				1		2	+
90	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>					+	+	

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Mammals

	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>							3	
	Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>				4				
	Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>							1	

Insects

	Clouded Yellow		1	+						
	Green-veined White		1							
	Wall		1							
	Small Copper		1							
	Spanish Festoon			1						
	Red Admiral			1	1					
	Hummingbird Hawk Moth		1							