

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 21 February 2009



Alquezar



Cranes at dawn



Cranes heading north



Gallocanta at dawn

Report and photos compiled by John Willsher



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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 three days. Additional species included Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Red Kite, Peregrine, and Red-billed Chough many seen on several occasions.

At Gallocanta, Crane migration was spectacular with 35,000 using the lagoon on the day we watched. Many typically drier land species were seen such as Black-bellied Sandgrouse, five species of lark were seen and several Dupont's Larks were heard singing at a site near Gallocanta.. The area was good for birds of prey with more Griffon Vultures, Harriers, Merlin, Peregrine and Golden Eagles seen.

Day 1

Sunday 15th February

Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived on time at Zaragozar after an early flight from Stansted and once the minibuses were sorted we were on our way. Circumnavigating Zaragoza, we were soon onto the road north towards Huesca. At San Jorge we headed east taking the slower quieter route on the A1210 via Tardienta, Granen, Tramaced and Piraces. Commonest birds in the agricultural area were many Buzzards with a few Marsh Harriers, several Southern Grey Shrikes and some Red Kites. At Tardienta White Storks were active on the bell tower and a few flew down to the stubble fields around. We saw a few finch flocks of Linnets, Goldfinch and Corn Buntings but the highlight was a massive flock of House Sparrows of more than 2000 birds feeding in a field of millet between Tramaced and Piraces. Along the canal near Piraces several Crested Larks were seen and in the canyon at Piraces a very distant Black Wheatear was spotted. Arriving at Alquezar we settled into our luxurious hotel. Later an excellent meal was provided at the hotel's restaurant Casa Gervasio a short walk along one of the town's narrow streets.

Day 2

Monday 16th February

Alquezar

The day started early with a pre-breakfast walk around the town hoping for our first Wallcreeper. We began at the promenade overlooking the gorge with the castle high above us. We searched the cliff walls but nothing doing, but we did have good views of two Hawfinches in the trees below the promenade. Overhead and on the cliffs were Ravens, Red-billed Choughs and a Peregrine was perched on a distant vantage point. Blackcaps were numerous, a Blue Rock Thrush was on a rooftop and Spotless Starlings were on top of the church. The setting of the town was spectacular. We walked on past one of the old town's water sources, Fuente de Monchiriguel, disturbing many Song Thrush and a Redwing. Reaching another viewpoint we watched and waited, but today the Wallcreeper would have to wait as 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. We stopped first for a look from the bridge over the Vero. Below us in the riverside vegetation were a couple of Chiffchaffs and a superb male Firecrest. A Cirl Bunting was singing and a Grey Wagtail was seen. Downstream the fine elegant medieval bridge of Albarda was visible, considered by many one of the most beautiful in the Huesca region. We stopped at Colungo, stocking up with fresh bread. Beyond the town several large groups of Griffon Vultures were spiralling; and several Buzzards and Common Kestrels seen.

We stopped at Puente las Gargantas and yes there was our first Wallcreeper feeding on the gorge wall below the bridge. We watched it hunting along rock face for a long time, enjoying its wing flicking and its behaviour of hopping along the cliff. Further north we walked through pinewoods towards the edge of the gorge where walkways have been constructed allowing us to safely climb down to a ledge outside an open but grilled cave entrance, permitting us to view the many thousands of years old paintings on the cave roof. We looked at the gorge walls opposite with nesting Griffon Vultures. Amongst the scrubby bushes on the return were small clumps of delightful Rush-leaved Jonquils (*Narcissus assoanus*)

Carrying on we reached a viewpoint with a picnic table. To the north was a spectacular panoramic view of the high Pyrenees, brilliant white with fresh snow. We returned to Alquezar, in time for some to walk down into the gorge, where another Wallcreeper was seen, and for others to leisurely explore the town.

Day 3

Tuesday 17th February

Alquezar

A pre-breakfast walk again was fruitful with more Choughs, Hawfinches, a Peregrine and after much searching, a Wallcreeper was found feeding in the roof of one of the caves in the south facing gorge wall, opposite the promenade. Crag Martins were active and Blue Rock Thrush and a couple of Rock Sparrows were seen

Today our route took us west of Alquezar, first to Adahuesca to stock up on lunch supplies then on to Bierge where many Griffon Vultures were circling, we tried to get closer but the road out of town led the wrong way and by then most were drifting off. So back on the road, at a high point we stopped and were rewarded with our first Golden Eagle gliding above the wooded slopes and settling in a tree.

Back in the minibuses we continued on to Santa Cilia where we were shown around an interpretative centre of the Guara Natural Park by an English speaking guide informing us of the importance of the park particularly for the larger raptors. Presentation over, the group walked a short distance uphill where picnic was served and on queue a Lammergeier appeared. Griffon Vultures then kept appearing all around and two Lammergeiers kept distracting us from lunch.

Heading back we stopped at El Huevo de Morrano. Some of us relaxed enjoying the view and some walked along the bottom of the escarpment heading for the rock stack at the eastern end. More Griffon Vultures, a Peregrine and a Sardinian Warbler were seen.

Day 4

Wednesday 18th February

Alquezar-Gallocanta

Pre-breakfast and excitement as our Hawfinch count reached 15 and then as a Wallcreeper was seen by one of the group flying over our heads into the town. We followed and searched but it was gone, so back for breakfast.

Later we made our farewells and left Alquezar to make our way south to Gallocanta. We took the cross-country route stopping at the river bridge over the Rio Alcanadre at Pertusa where a dark phase Booted Eagle drifted over. Several Red Kites were visible en route and some flocks of Lapwings. We stopped close to an area of wet rice growing fields where 3 Water Pipits were seen. Lunch stop was overlooking the lake at Sarinena with its reed beds and waterbirds. Here we added several wetland species to our list heard Cetti's Warbler and watched a 'flock' of Chiffchaffs feeding in and under a tree above a manure heap.

Our route then was southwest to Zaragoza on the A129 then south on the A23. On the way south a Goshawk flew across the road in front of us but it could not be pursued. Turning off the motorway we passed through the ancient walled town of Daroca before making the final climb over the Puerto de Santed down to Gallocanta and our hotel at Berruoco. There were flocks of Cranes visible on the far side of the Laguna so we were confident for the next morning.

Day 5

Thursday 19th February

Gallocanta

We started early at 7am so we were be in position looking from the SW side of the laguna at first light. Javier our guide suggested this to be the best spot overlooking the area of the lake he had watched the cranes roosting the previous night.

It was just getting light as we emerged from our minibuses and it was very cold and frosty as we stood listening to the Cranes constantly calling. As it got lighter we could see ranks of them spread along the lake just offshore. We watched the Cranes for about an hour, trying to estimate the number but there were too many. Several groups flew over some tucking their legs below their bodies rather than trailing them presumably because of the cold. We then headed back for breakfast and a warm up.

After breakfast we headed to the Gallocanta end of the lake. Soon many large groups of Cranes were flying and gaining height above us constantly calling to each other before heading north. When the display had reduced we travelled south-eastwards on tracks near the lake, spending some time in a tower hide and visiting the interpretation centre for the Laguna. This was 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.

We continued around the laguna through Bello and along the SW edge back towards Gallocanta, and ate our picnic in the shelter of an old farmstead. Birds seen on this side of the lake included Golden Eagle, Marsh and Hen Harriers, a Merlin, Red-crested Pochards, Calandra Larks, Reed and Corn Buntings, Tree and Rock Sparrows. At Laguna de la Zaida a large area of farmland that was flooded this year (not every year) there were many more Cranes and good numbers of ducks. Heading for home with a detour around the north end of the main lagoon we had good views of Little Owls and two Thekla Larks.

Day 6

Friday 20th February

Gallocanta - Belchite

Whilst still dark many of us set out for an area of 'paramo' steppe habitat about 20 minutes drive from our hotel, the objective being to see Dupont's Lark. Just as it was getting light we stopped on the side of the road in the area where the birds occur and wound down the windows; sure enough several birds could be heard singing their distinctive songs. We stopped at various points along the road, hearing some birds apparently quite close but sadly none of these very elusive birds would show themselves. Possibly the cold conditions (heavy frost) keeps the birds on the ground and fairly inactive. Unfortunately as it got lighter the singing stopped so it was time for breakfast.

Today we headed for Daroca first stopping to watch large flocks of Greenfinch, Linnet and Goldfinch feeding in unharvested Sunflower fields then at a high point to watch a Rock Bunting and another Golden Eagle. Quickly stopping in the town for supplies we headed N to Carinena then E to Belchite and Codo. Arriving at a viewpoint overlooking the Spanish Ornithological Society's El Planeron Reserve we viewed the spectacular scenery with the eroding colourful escarpments on the horizon.

Heading back towards Belchite we took a track into the main reserve having our picnic close to one of the strongholds of Dupont's Lark. No Dupont's but several Lesser Short-toed Larks were singing and performing their display flight. After lunch we searched other areas of the reserve particularly for Sandgrouse this area being particularly important for both Black-bellied and Pin-tailed. Today, unfortunately we were unlucky and none were visible, just larks, Calandra, Thekla and Crested and some Teal and Pintail on a small reservoir wetland area.

Day 7

Saturday 21st February

Gallocanta – Zaragoza - London

Today some of us left the hotel early returning to the local Dupont's Lark site, for one last look, arriving just at first light.

At least five birds were heard and we tried various strategies to try and see the birds, all unfortunately unsuccessful. The birds were singing from the ground but we were unable to spot their position amongst the low vegetation. 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.

After breakfast we had one last look for the Black-bellied Sandgrouse and today we were lucky with eleven counted in an arable field near the lake along with more Calandra Larks.

At about midday we departed our hotel and after a stop in Daroca for some food and a look at the town we travelled N on the old N330 towards Carinena, a picnic stop then it was onto the Autovia Mudejar and Zaragoza and home.....

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February							
			15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
1	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		7			16	1	1	
2	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	4			✓				
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	3			30+	1			
4	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	10+			✓				
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					3	1		
6	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					3	25	1	
7	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>						6		
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				✓	✓	✓		
9	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>						3		
10	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>						✓	5	
11	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				✓	✓			
12	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓	✓		20	
13	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Aythya rufina</i>						17		
14	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>						✓		
15	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	10+	3	2	✓	2	10	✓	
16	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>			3					
17	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	30+	150+	500	✓	100	30	✓	
18	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	5			✓	2	2	1	
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					3			
20	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		2	1				1	
21	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>				1				
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	20+	5	3	✓	1	1	1	
23	Booted Eagle	<i>Aquila pennata</i>				1				
24	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			1		1	2		
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		2	2					1
27	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1	1	1		
28	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	10	2	2	3	2	4	2	
29	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		1				3		
30	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					✓	✓		
31	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>				✓	37k	✓	✓	
32	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	100			200+	✓			
33	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				6				
34	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				1				
35	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>				✓	✓			
36	Western Yellow-l. Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	1			3	✓			
37	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>								11
38	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
39	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
40	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	
41	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H		H					
42	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	H			1	1	1		
43	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>					2			
44	Great S. Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		H						1
45	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				2	1	✓		
46	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				1	✓	✓		
47	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	10			✓	✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			15	16	17	18	19	20	21
48	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>					2	2	
49	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>						✓	
50	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>					20+	✓	✓
51	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>						H5	H
52	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>					1		
53	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogene rupestris</i>		15	15	✓			
54	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>				3			
55	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>						✓	
56	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>	2						
57	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	1	2	✓	10+	✓	
58	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		1					
59	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	1	1			
60	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		1		2			
61	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
62	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	1	✓	1
63	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	✓	1				✓	✓
64	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>	1						
65	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		1	2	1			
66	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
68	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		1					
69	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		5					
70	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			8	1			
71	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cettia</i>				H			
72	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓			
73	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>			1				
74	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1	5	1	6			
75	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignacapilla</i>		1					
76	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		2					
77	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
78	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
79	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		2	1	1			
80	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	5			1		2	✓
81	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓					
82	Spotless Starling	<i>Sumus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		H	1				
84	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
85	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	✓	110	100+	✓	2		
86	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	4	✓	1	✓	✓
87	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					20+		✓
89	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	2000	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
90	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>			2	2	✓	✓	✓
91	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		H	6+	5			
93	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				✓		✓	
94	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓			6		✓	✓
95	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		2	6	15			
96	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	✓			1	✓	✓	✓
97	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
98	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1	✓	1	3	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February							
			15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
99	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>							2	
100	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	1					5		

Other taxa recorded

Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
Rush-leaved Jonquil	<i>Narcissus assoanus</i>
Coltsfoot	<i>Tussilago farfara</i>