

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 - 25 October 2009



Common Cranes



Lammergeier



Mirador del Vero



Alquezar

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 southward migration of Cranes.

Despite some bad weather one Wallcreeper was seen at Alquezar, and at Sta Cilia some very close views of 200 feeding Griffon Vultures. Additional species included Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Red Kite, Peregrine, and Red-billed Chough.

At Gallocanta thousands of Cranes leaving the laguna at dawn provided atmospheric sights and sounds and later feeding Cranes bathed in superb autumn light were spectacular. A good variety of other species included Great Bustards, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, larks and finches. The area was very good for birds of prey with more Griffon Vultures, many Harriers, Merlin, and a rarity in the area, a Black-winged Kite.

Day 1

Monday 19th October

Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived on time at Zaragoza after an early evening flight from Stansted and were soon on our way northwards towards Huesca. Roads were quiet and we made good time arriving at Alquezar just after midnight.

Day 2

Tuesday 20th October

Alquezar

We started the day with an excellent breakfast. Today we had an appointment with vultures! Despite a bad weather forecast it was cloudy but not raining and after a quick picnic supplies stop, we were heading west towards Santa Cilia. Here we met our guides Laura Henderson an English speaker and Manuel Aguilera Sanz of the Asociación Amigos del Vulture Fund a dedicated raptor conservationist who has been operating a vulture feeding station at Sta Cilia for 30 years. Following them in their vehicle we made our way up the stony track, walking the last few hundred yards. We sat down at the edge of a bare rocky area and watched as Manuel distributed a wheelbarrow load of butcher's waste that he had collected. So accustomed are the vultures to this operation that almost immediately they were descending and landing on the bare rock not far from us and then jostling with each other for food. We had brilliant views of roughly 200 Griffon Vultures. They were joined by 2 Ravens and after a short while 2 Lammergeiers were flying overhead.

Later a bag of bones was distributed but the Lammergeiers refused to be tempted and remained in the air. Having our fill of vultures we set off downhill to our minibus spotting on the way a Golden Eagle soaring above the hillside. Returning to the village Laura showed us the Natural Park of Guara interpretation centre and answered questions. We were then shown a diorama presentation and video about vultures in the old converted church. Finally and luckily as it was starting to spit with rain, we were invited to have our picnic in the village social centre which was very welcome.

Picnic done we returned to Alquezar where we set off on foot to explore the town, the views of the gorge and citadel. Lured by the report of a Wallcreeper at the bottom of the gorge the previous day, we walked down into the Vero gorge to where an old hydroelectric plant was being restored. Following a metal walkway fixed to the gorge wall above the river we made our way upstream all the time scanning the gorge walls. Some of us investigated a large cave where the river had undercut the gorge wall but then it was time to make our climb back up to the town and back to our hotel. Several Black Redstarts, Blackcaps, Blue Rock Thrush and a flock of Red-billed Choughs were seen but no Wallcreepers today. We convened later in the bar for a drink and walked the short distance to the Restaurant Gervasio for a typical delicious wholesome meal.

Day 3

Wednesday 21st October

Alquezar

As it was pouring with rain first thing we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. When we had finished the rain had stopped so we set off for the promenade overlooking the gorge. Black Redstarts were singing from the buildings and in the bushes below, Blackcaps busily feeding along with a Chiffchaff. Song Thrushes were numerous and in the gorge Ravens, a Blue Rock Thrush and Red-billed Choughs were active. A flock of 25 or so Crag Martins were feeding overhead along with a Red Kite. As we walked eastwards past the Colegiata 2 Alpine Swifts were high above. Another fine male Black Redstart was singing from the rooftop and on a lagoon below a Little Grebe was diving. We watched more Crag Martins and scanned the cliff for our target species but no luck here. The weather was now brightening and views of the Vero Gorge and the landscape to the South were spectacular. Returning to the spot overlooking the cliff wall with a number of caves we spent more time scanning, and finally in the largest cave, where climbers had been active yesterday, we spotted a Wallcreeper. Rather distant but close enough to see through the 'scope the colour in the wings as it moved around in the cave roof.

After a quick visit to the bread shop and town shop for lunch supplies it was back to the hotel then into the minibus for an excursion following the Vero northwards. First stop was the Vero bridge before Colungo, the riverside poplars a brilliant autumn yellow. A grey Wagtail called and one or two Blackcaps were seen feeding in the riverside trees. In the now blue sky above a Buzzard soared and more Crag Martins were feeding. Moving on past Colungo our next stop was at Puente las Gargantas a bridge high above a gorge mostly comprised of conglomerate type material. We searched the holes and crevices but no success, just Robins calling from the roadside bushes. After a few more kilometres we reached Mirador del Vero a good viewpoint overlooking a part of the Vero Gorge with many Griffon Vulture ledges. Not occupied at this season of course but many birds were soaring and gliding in and around the gorge. Northwards through gaps in the cloud, we had occasional glimpses of the snow covered high Pyrenees.

Just down the road at a convenient picnic table we enjoyed our lunch in the autumn sunshine. Retracing our tracks we had a walk through pinewoods to have a look at more vultures and the cave paintings of Tozal dera Mallata. Crag Martins were active in the gorge and Wall and Clouded Yellow butterflies were active in the sunshine. Returning towards Alquezar we stopped and admired the old bridge over the Vero where a party of Long tailed Tits were busy in the riverside trees. Once in Alquezar the late afternoon sunshine provided photo opportunities for several of the group who returned to our hotel on foot. A last late afternoon search of the gorge walls produced more Red-billed Choughs and Crag Martins basking in the late sunshine but sadly no more Wallcreepers. The evening meal was again delicious with a large Paella, one of the several courses we enjoyed.

Day 4

Thursday 22nd October

Alquezar-Gallocanta

On transfer to Gallocanta day we again awoke to heavy rain, so after another leisurely breakfast we set off southwards making our way towards Sarinena via Berbegal. Hunting over the extensive arable farmland were many Red Kites, Marsh Harriers and a couple of Hen Harriers. As we approached the area north of Sarinena a flock of at least 24 White Storks in a field perhaps were waiting for the rain to stop. And at some rice paddies, we stopped to scan the flooded fields and bunds for birds. Several Water Pipits were in the wet areas and many Skylarks, Crested Larks and Corn Buntings on the dryer banks and tracks. A few Lapwings, Green Sandpipers, Black Headed Gulls, Cattle Egrets and Snipe were also present. A short distance further and we arrived at Laguna de Sarinena where we were lucky to find the normally closed interpretive centre facilities open for a school party. The 600ha Lagoon, managed as a wildfowl refuge since 1995, is an important breeding site for several species. Today in the wind and rain however all we could find were many Mallard, some Teal, 40+ Swallows and hunting Marsh Harriers over the surrounding reedbeds.

Continuing our journey south through Los Monegros the extensive arable farmland areas yielded many Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzards and some more Red Kites. Crossing the Ebro river we travelled west towards Zaragoza then southwest to Quinto and on towards the steppe lands of Belchite and the reserve of El Planeron. Here we drove into the reserve and as it was still raining ate our rather late picnic inside the van. As our meal progressed however the weather brightened up, bringing colour to the unique landscape. Many Skylarks, some Crested Larks and small flocks of Lesser short-toed Larks were seen and much unsuccessful searching was done for the elusive Dupont's Lark, for which the reserve is important. However we did have exciting views of a low level hunting Golden Eagle. On the way out of the reserve several Stone Curlews were seen. After a coffee stop in Carinena we passed through Daroca, made a stop at Gallocanta to see our first Cranes and arrived at our hotel at Berruoco.

Day 5

Friday 23rd October

Gallocanta

We started early, picking up our guide Javier at Gallocanta, so we were in position looking from the NW side of the laguna near the Los Ojos observation point at first light. We were in position overlooking the water just as the sky was getting light over the hills to the east. We could just see and definitely hear several thousand Cranes calling. As it got lighter we could see ranks of them spread along the lake in the shallow water just offshore.

After some minutes groups started taking off and many of them flew either side of us bugling loudly as they flew away from the lake to their feeding areas. From their roost in the reeds several Marsh and Hen Harriers appeared hunting along the lake edge. After an hour or so most Crane activity reduced to a trickle so it was back to Hotel Secaiza for a welcome breakfast.

Later at the SE end of the lake there were more Cranes feeding in the fields and from the tower hide of Canizar a small group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse were visible. Plus a Common Buzzard, several more Harriers, including hunting males of Hen and Marsh and flocks of Goldfinch and Linnet feeding in the weedy stubble. Stopping at the interpretation centre, unfortunately closed for maintenance, we scanned the fields and were lucky to see 3 very distant Great Bustards. After a visit to Bello for bread we set off around the lake's west side to try and get a closer view. We were lucky and managed to get some still distant but closer views of a total of 25 Great Bustards. In beautiful warm weather we enjoyed our picnic in the lee of a farmstead with views of the laguna. Around us were Black Redstarts, Rock and Tree Sparrows, Crested Larks, and Corn Buntings.

Travelling on we stopped at another tower hide La Reguere where views over the lake produced many duck mostly Mallard, Shoveler, Teal and 40 Shelduck. After lunch we continued northwards, finding much of interest in the arable fields around the lake. There were more Skylarks, Calandra Larks, large flocks of finches, Rock and Tree Sparrows some Northern Wheatears, more Harriers, including beautiful male Hen, Common Buzzards and a Merlin. In more rocky terrain to the north we found Little Owls gazing at us from their rock piles.

Returning to our hotel we had time to enjoy the view from our rooms of the sunset across the lake or relax in the library before meeting up in the bar and discussing the highlights of the day. This was followed by another excellent meal.

Day 6

Saturday 24th October

Gallocanta

Overnight weather had been cloudy but as some of us walked, pre-breakfast, up the hill to El Castellar behind the hotel, clouds were breaking. As the sun rose a pinkish light produced stunning views across the lake and we could hear and see distant Cranes moving to their feeding areas. Nearby a Woodlark was singing and Black Redstarts busy on the rooftops of the village. After breakfast, outside the hotel good views were had of Cirl Buntings, Woodlarks and several Rock Sparrows.

Today we again explored the surroundings of the lake, weather was fantastic with temperatures up to 24 C. We started again with a successful search for the Black-bellied Sandgrouse from the tower hide of Canizar then travelled on the tracks up the East side of the Laguna to Gallocanta where we had coffee at the Albergue. Picnic was set up at the Observatorio de Los Ojos where we enjoyed the warm weather watching many Cranes and Harriers. Heading further round the west side we found some Great Bustards again and managed to get better views than yesterday. Returning we spent some time checking out the finch flocks in the sunflower fields finding Tree Sparrows and Serins amongst the numerous Goldfinches. We also checked out the many trees in this area for raptors and in almost the last one we discovered a Black-winged Kite, a rarity to the area from southwest Spain. Backtracking we watched it fly and descend on prey with its characteristic upheld wings and then interact with a Kestrel which gave us a good idea of its small size.

Returning towards Gallocanta we stopped for some fantastic views of 1000's of Cranes on the ground and in the air, lit by a brilliant late afternoon sunshine, with a backdrop of fields and hillsides full of autumn colours. So it was a magnificent finale to an excellent day and we returned to our hotel very happy.

Day 7

Sunday 25th October

Gallocanta – Zaragoza - London

Due to our lunchtime flight not a lot of time today for observation although 2 more species added to the list at the hotel just after breakfast: a Sardinian Warbler just outside the window and a couple of Jays flying over the garden. On the road traffic was light and we made good time to Zaragoza for our flight home

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	October						
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1	Little Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			1				
2	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					1		
3	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				100+			
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		1		3			
5	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>				24			
6	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					40	40	
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				200	✓	✓	
8	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				100	✓	✓	
9	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				20	✓		
10	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		2	3	5+	4	4	
11	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		3					
12	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		300	200	20	40	20	
13	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				15	8	6	
14	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				2	12	10	
15	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1			2	
16	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1		10	5	2	
17	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1		1			
18	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		5		2	6	12	1
19	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1					
20	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					1	1	1
21	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>							2
22	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				1			
23	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>				1000+	✓	3000+	✓
24	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>					25	8	
25	Stone Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>			5				
26	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				10	50	10	
27	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				6			
28	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			6				
29	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			2				
30	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>			5	10			
31	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				9	8		
32	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		1	2				
33	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓		✓		2	✓
35	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>					3		
36	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>			2				
37	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>					1	1	
38	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		2		3		5	✓
39	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			6	30+	200	✓	
40	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>				20	20	✓	
41	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>				20			
42	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>					40	20	
43	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				40+			
44	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogene rupestris</i>		20+	✓				
45	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>				6			
46	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>					10	1	
47	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		2	1	1	3	1	

	Common name	Scientific name	October						
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25
48	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			H		2		
49	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			H				
50	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			1			1	
51	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓			H	✓
52	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		6	✓	1	6	6	✓
53	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>			1	3	6	6	✓
54	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					5		
55	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		2	2				
56	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓			1	✓
57	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelus</i>		2	10				
58	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		5	10+				
59	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>							1
60	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1	1				
61	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			6				
62	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		1			
63	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		H	3	1			
64	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>			1				
65	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>							2
67	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>				40			✓
68	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		50	6		4		
69	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>				20			
70	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		2	4	1			
71	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		H		5	20	✓	✓
72	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					✓	✓	
73	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>						30	✓
75	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	6	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		10			✓	5	
78	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>					6		
79	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				✓	✓	✓	
80	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>				✓	✓	✓	
81	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			4			6	✓

Other taxa recorded

	Clouded Yellow				1		2	1	
	Wall				1		1		
	Speckled Wood				1				
	Small White						1		
	Darter sp.						1	1	