

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

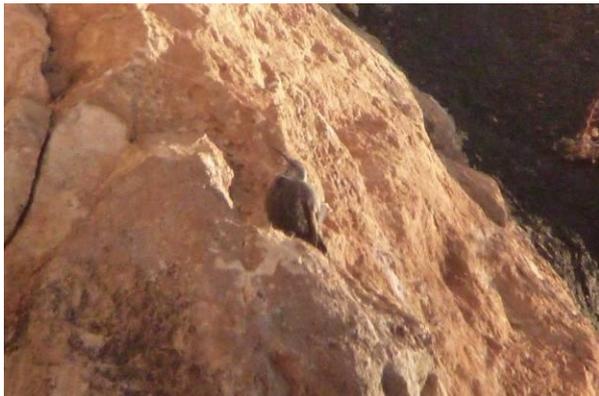
15 - 21 February 2010



Alto Aragon



Common Cranes



Wallcreeper



European Otter

Report and images compiled by Byron Palacios



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Day 1

Monday 15th February

Stansted – Zaragoza – Gallocanta

We arrived to Zaragoza on time in spite of a delayed departure from Stansted airport. The surroundings of the upper Rio Ebro basin looked quite dry with some remains of the last snow falls across the plains. We got luggage into our minivan and after a break and lunch at the airport - while sorting out our vehicles - we immediately hit the road heading southwest. The landscape showed off quite well and we already saw our first Common Kestrels, Griffon Vultures, Lapwings and even a single Red Kite soaring above.

We entered into the ancient village of Daroca, from where we made our way up to the beautiful Gallocanta Lake. We had some snow falling on the way, not heavy enough to stop us seeing some Rock Sparrows, Corn Buntings, Spotless Starlings and a single Great Spotted Woodpecker. After arriving at our well-located hotel, we checked-in, and had some tea while overlooking the grounds. We took a short walk around the hotel finding some Long-tailed Tits, Chaffinch and a very elusive Southern Grey Shrike. We relaxed for the evening having a delicious dinner and a well-deserved rest.

Day 2

Tuesday 16th February

Gallocanta area

Our early morning start was spoilt by a heavy overnight snow fall which got worse throughout the morning, making the dirt roads unsafe for driving round the lake. In spite of that, a pre-breakfast birding walk was done, producing good sightings of a male Hen Harrier and of a very early Hoopoe around the village of Berrueco.

After breakfast, we met up with Javier, our local guide from Gallocanta. Our plan B was taken as we walked part of the northern corner of the lake - through La Ermita Virgen del Buen Acuerdo - instead of driving because of the 3-inch snowy roads. Our first big flocks of Common Cranes were seen on the adjacent fields by the lake, plus other birds such as Corn Bunting, Linnet, Crested Lark, Lapwing, Common Buzzard, Marsh Harrier, Shelduck, Mallard; a small flock of Red Buntings, Goldfinch, a female Hen Harrier, and Black-bellied Sandgrouse, amongst more groups of Cranes.

After this walk, we came back to the hotel to get changed and after a quick drink we went to Gallocanta village to have our picnic, in the minivan, as the weather wasn't that good. After lunch, Javier took us to the southern side of the lake.

We made several stops before getting to the Observatorio del Canizar (visitors & interpretation centre) which produced much closer views of the Cranes, Calandra and Crested Larks, Hen Harrier, Linnets, Raven and Corn Buntings. A single Curlew was seen at the visitors centre too, plus other fantastic much closer view of Cranes and Crested Larks. We continued driving completing the loop around the lake passing through the village of Bello, where a single Little Owl was seen perched on one of the old barns roofs. A male Hen Harrier, Kestrel and more Cranes ready to roost were seen on the way back to our hotel. We arrived in the early evening to relax enjoying some drinks and nibbles, followed by a delicious supper.

Day 3

Wednesday 17th February

Gallocanta – Belchite area

We started this morning early and drove to the area of Belchite. The weather was not the best but we will saw a few species such as Crested, Lesser Short-toed and Calandra Larks, Marsh Harrier, Buzzard, Hen Harrier, Southern Grey Shrike, Teal, Mallard, and Wigeon, Snipe, amongst others. The clay-muddy road didn't allow us to go further but we were still able to scan for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse - a pair was seen by me and by one of the participants of the group - and maybe Stone Curlew. Heavy rain ruined our birding plans and our vehicle struggled to leave the thick clay area. After this, the weather improved but we were suddenly faced with a flat tyre in the El Planeron area. We munched on some lunch-snacks while we were waiting for assistance to come and help out with the flat tyre. Once we sorted out this problem, we went for some refreshments in the neighbouring village of Codo and then we drove back to our hotel in Gallocanta and finished the day there.

Day 4

Thursday 18th February

Gallocanta - Alquezar

Today we had the chance to explore a bit of the ancient town of Daroca, on our way to Calatayud, where our vehicle was being sorted. Once there, we had a good look at the town centre, including some 'town' species such as White Storks and Grey Wagtails. After lunch, we decided to carry on and drive about two hours straight to Alquezar, where we would spend the next three nights. Once in Alquezar and after check-in at our stunning hotel there, some of us went down to do some late afternoon birding at the monastery's walls, where Alpine Accentor, Spotless Starling, Blackcap, Blue and Great Tits, Blackbird, and more were seen. In the early evening we gathered altogether again for nibbles and drink, followed by a superb dinner at Casa Gervasio's restaurant.

Day 5

Friday 19th February

Sierra de Guara

We started very early this morning, walking through the narrow streets of Alquezar, heading for the gorge next to the monastery. A beautiful sunny morning was about to come, while the first Blue and Great Tits, Blackcaps, Robins, Spotless Starlings and Rock Doves were all over the cliffs and gardens. Our first surprise of the day was a very early Blue Rock-Thrush seen in the monastery's eastern gardens. The first Griffon Vultures were soaring above the village, when one of us spotted something moving up and down on the left-hand-side wall of the cliff. It was a beautiful male Wallcreeper feeding on some large moths, some weak survivors of the previous cold night, under the lights of the gardens.

We kept watching this Woodcreeper until a single Firecrest called our attention for a while. We then decided that it was good time for a cup of hot coffee and a delicious local breakfast at our hotel!

In the mid-morning, we headed northeast following the road to Arcusa. An odd noise suddenly made us stop when we just started our drive, while crossing a small bridge on the River Vero. A beautiful young Otter was feeding alongside the river and a female - presumably its mother - joined the youngster, showing off her fishing skills in front of us, what a treat!! We had great pleasure in seeing them synchronized swimming, moving from one side of the bridge to the other. A great wildlife experience for all of us, and undoubtedly one of the top moments of the trip!

We continued driving through Colungo as we were heading up to nearly 900 metres in altitude. At least 20 Red Kites and a few dozens of Griffon Vultures were soaring in the sky. One of the few stops we made produced wonderful views of a single Crested Tit, more Griffon Vultures and Red Kites, Common Buzzard and amongst them one agile Peregrine Falcon, spotted by one of us. Our next stop was made at the Gorge of Caprasio where we had Grey Heron, Griffon Vultures flying by their nests, and Raven amongst others, all this seen from the impressive view point of the gorge. After enjoying the landscape, including the very snowy tops of the Pyrenees in the distance, we drove down to the very small but picturesque village of Lecina, where we found some coffee, facilities and enjoyed our delicious picnic lunch on a wonderful sunny day.

After lunch we walked around the village but some dark clouds were coming from the south, so we decided to drive back to Alquezar doing some birding en route and spotting some Mistle and Song Thrushes, Corn Buntings, Griffon Vultures and about fifty Red-billed Choughs at our arrival in Alquezar. We spent the rest of the late afternoon exploring the village, followed by drinks, nibbles and the traditional delicious local supper!

Day 6

Saturday 20th February

Santa Cilia

After an early Spanish breakfast, we drove up and out of Alquezar, heading west towards Santa Cilia. A few birding stops were made and one of them produced great views of Rock Bunting and Rock Sparrow. We arrived at the village of Santa Cilia. Our host Manuel Aguilera was already waiting for us. Manuel is a main member of FAB (Fondo Amigos del Buitre - Friends of the Vulture Fund) a local organization, which actively promotes conservation work protecting every single species of vulture across Spain, especially in the Aragon area. After greeting us, he led us to the place he usually feeds the vultures. We walked about 200 metres to a limestone trail. We got to the spot and sat quietly waiting for this spectacular show, which in the end attracted more than 200 Griffon Vultures and three Bearded Vultures or Lammergeiers. In just 5 minutes, we had hundreds of Griffon Vultures picking the carcass a few metres away from us! While we were there, Manuel spotted a lovely male Lammergeier perched quietly in one of the clearings not far from us, checking curiously how things were going on at the feeding place with the other vultures. Although Lammergeiers did not come to the feeding spot this time, they were showing off soaring in front of us throughout the morning. After this fantastic moment, we went to the visitors centre where we learned about the area and how important is to carry on with this activity which benefits not just the vultures in general but many other species of wildlife. We had lunch at the viewpoint of the village, and managed to see a powerful Golden Eagle which was admired through the scopes by all the group members!

After this, we drove to the next village for refreshments, while enjoying the lush views of the Sierra de Guara snow-covered mountains! We went to check other birding spots managing to get a pair of Crested Tits again, but the wind was too strong for bird watching, so we decided to drive back to Alquezar to spend the last hour of light exploring more of this beautiful village. As usual, nibbles, drinks and a delicious paella were served at our hotel bar and restaurant respectively!

Day 7

Sunday 21st February

Alquezar – Zaragoza – London

We started early, and this time our final destination was the Zaragoza airport. We left Alquezar following cross-country roads trying to catch up with some places we meant to visit on Day 4. We drove through rice plantation areas by Berbegal, making a few stops in order to get some target species. Many birds were seen such as Sardinian Warbler, Crested Lark, Marsh Harrier, Sparrowhawk, Southern Grey Shrike, Corn Buntings, Little Grebe, Cattle Egrets, Red-billed Chough, Jackdaws, Red Kite, and Grey Heron, amongst others.

We made our arrival to the airport in time in order to catch our flight back to the UK. We had a great holiday, full of nice wildlife events, adventures and visiting the most wonderful places of the province of Zaragoza and Huesca, in a very ancient part of Spain, very rich in history, traditions, magnificent cuisine, stunning landscapes and scenery, combined with a great wildlife!

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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>							
2	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				✓			
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				✓	✓		
4	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>				✓			
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>							
6	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓		✓			
7	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			✓	✓			
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
9	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>							
10	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>							
11	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>							
12	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓				
13	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Aythya rufina</i>							
14	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>							
15	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>						✓	
17	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	500
18	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
20	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					✓	✓	
21	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>							
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
23	Booted Eagle	<i>Aquila pennata</i>							
24	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>						✓	
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
26	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					✓		
27	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>							
28	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓			✓	
29	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓				
30	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					H		
31	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	H	✓		✓			
32	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
33	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓					
34	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓				
35	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				✓			
36	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		✓					
37	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		✓					
37	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>			✓				
38	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
40	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
41	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		✓		✓			
42	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓	✓				
43	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓					
44	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>	✓	✓					
45	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>						✓	
46	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>							

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			15	16	17	18	19	20	21
96	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		✓	✓				
97	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
98	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>							
99	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>						✓	
100	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓				

Mammals recorded

European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>