

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 21 February 2010



Alquezar



Eagle Owl watching



Gallocanta



Griffon Vulture

Report and photos compiled by John Willsher



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Summary

A successful two centre trip, combining a visit to Alquezar, an atmospheric and intriguing medieval town of arcaded lanes and a Moorish Citadel, 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.

Despite wet weather we had two sightings of Wallcreeper at Alquezar, and at Sta Cilia, despite the rain, some very close views of feeding Griffon Vultures. Additional species seen here included Golden Eagle, Black-winged Kite, Red Kite, Peregrine, Eagle Owl and Black Wheatear.

At Gallocanta at the start of our visit numbers of Cranes were about 7000 mostly made up of the wintering population. On the last evening and morning however numbers increased dramatically with an influx of 12-15000 new immigrants. A variety of other species included flocks of wintering larks, finches and sparrows. The area was good for birds of prey with more Griffon Vultures, both Hen and Marsh Harriers, Merlin, and Golden Eagles

Day 1

Monday 15th February

Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived on time at Zaragozar after an early morning flight from Stansted and were soon on our way northwards towards Huesca. At Almudevar we diverted northwest to investigate Embalse de la Sotonera. Water levels were high but few ducks were visible, there were however many Great Crested Grebes a small flock of Serins, a Dartford Warbler and our first sightings of Cranes with several hundred birds, some on the ground and two large skeins in the sky. Cattle Egrets, a Great White Egret and many Red Kites were seen and a little further north a magnificent Black-winged Kite was hovering not far from the road. It was then seen trying to drive off a perched Buzzard before perching itself on a post. Around the villages several White Storks were visible some already active on their nests. Heading eastwards we skirted around Huesca and headed northeast to our destination of Alquezar.

After finding our rooms we had a short walk around the town to the gorge viewpoint. This dramatic gorge looks down to the Rio Vero with impressive views of the high walls of the citadel. It was getting dusk but we could still appreciate the magnificent gorge scenery and the potential for our morning target. Later we met in the hotel bar for a welcome drink and started our checklist which included a good number of species for our first afternoon. A short walk followed to the hotel's Restaurant Gervasio for a typical delicious wholesome meal, which included local Somontano wines and salted almonds.

Day 2

Tuesday 16th February

Alquezar

We started the day with a pre-breakfast walk to the gorge viewpoint but cloud and drizzle was against us and only Ravens and Red-billed Choughs were active in the gorge. Below us in the Almond orchard and in the Ivy clad trees and walls around many Blackcaps were active, with Song Thrushes and Blackbirds also numerous.

After an excellent breakfast we set out to explore the Vero valley, first stopping at the bridge over the river before Colungo. A wren was feeding near the water's edge but there was little else to see so we moved on. In the orchards and fields around Colungo several Red Kites were active. Ringing recoveries have shown that many of these birds are wintering northern European birds. Next stop was a steep sided gorge of eroded conglomerate rock where we searched for Wallcreeper amongst the rosettes of Pyrenean Saxifrage on the gorge walls and under the high bridge. This has been favourite place on some previous Naturetrek trips, but all quiet today. Moving further north we stopped at a gorge viewpoint where despite the dismal weather we could see several Griffon Vultures were on their nests some apparently already sitting on eggs. A Peregrine flew rapidly past us across the gorge and Ravens were active.

Moving on we headed to Ainsa for picnic supplies and a coffee stop, pausing just before the town to look at a large number of Red-billed Choughs feeding in a cattle field. On the river in town a Dipper was spotted and White Wagtails were active in the car park.

After a picnic stop we headed back to Alquezar for another search of the canyon walls - this time success! A Wallcreeper was spotted flicking its way around on the rock face feeding. We watched it grappling with a large winged insect, perhaps a butterfly or moth. Everyone was able to get good views as the bird continued feeding for 20-30 minutes. A very happy group then returned to our hotel and spent another enjoyable evening together.

Day 3

Wednesday 17th February

Alquezar

Unfortunately we awoke again to rain. Despite this, after another delicious breakfast we were soon heading west towards Santa Cilia. Here we met our guides Laura Henderson, who spoke excellent English, and Manuel Aguilera Sanz of the Asociación Amigos del Vulture Fund a dedicated raptor conservationist who has been operating a vulture feeding station at Santa Cilia for 30 years. Laura showed us the Natural Park of Guara interpretation centre and answered questions.

We were then shown a diorama presentation and video about vultures, which took place in the converted belltower of the church. The videos had been made by Manuel and included some amusing scenes of Egyptian Vultures using rocks to smash Ostrich eggs which had been put out for them – one vulture almost having its head smashed in the process!

Back in our vehicles we then followed Laura and Manuel in their vehicle up the stony track beyond the village, walking the last few hundred yards to a spot on the hillside. Luckily the rain had eased off a bit, as we sat down at the edge of a bare rocky area and watched as Manuel distributed a wheelbarrow load of butchers waste that he had collected. Conditions were far from ideal with cloud and rain and we waited for a while but no response. Because of the rain Manuel was not wearing his normal red coat to which over the years the vultures have become accustomed. So Mary's red umbrella was commandeered by Manuel! He waved it around as he re-distributed the bones. It did the trick, so accustomed are the Griffon Vultures to him in his red coat that soon a few had spotted the meal (from where?) and were descending and landing on the bare rock not far from us and then jostling with each other for food.

On returning to the village, as it was still raining, we were invited to have our picnic in the village social centre which was very welcome. Picnic done we returned to Alquezar where we again set off on foot to explore the town, the views of the gorge and citadel. At the viewpoint we again searched the large areas of cliff face for that crimson flicking jewel. After some time Audrey shouted that she had it, and was thrilled to have found her own Wallcreeper! After many descriptions of which rock lump left of which cave we all again had good views for a long time of the Wallcreeper moving around the rock face showing its crimson wing colour as it peered and probed the numerous holes and cracks for food.

Our last meal in Alquezar started with a huge and delicious paella, one of the several courses we enjoyed.

Day 4

Thursday 18th February

Alquezar-Gallocanta

Today we transferred to Gallocanta. We awoke to a clear blue sky and sunshine and after breakfast and our farewells to Gervasio, we set off southwards making our way towards Sarinena via Piraces. The mountains of the Guara were covered in fresh snow and looked spectacular. We stopped near Abiego amongst the vineyards to admire the view, Crested Larks and Woodlarks were singing and a Peregrine flew overhead. Reaching the spectacular scenic sandstone cliffs of Serreta de Tramaced we stopped at Piraces overlooking a deep canyon. A Blue Rock Thrush and a Black Wheatear were seen in the valley bottom and a Sardinian Warbler heard calling. On the church in the village a pair of White Storks were bill clapping and mating.

Driving to the top of the canyon a Dartford Warbler and a Chiffchaff were seen beside the road. Stopping at the top we walked to the edge of the canyon and looking down managed to spot another Black Wheatear. It disappeared and as we were trying to relocate it a large bird was seen to fly under a rock overhang. Getting the 'scopes focused, the bird was confirmed as an Eagle Owl, sitting on a rock at the edge of a small cave. So our departure was delayed a little so that we all get a good view of this magnificent bird! The area is an important stronghold of the species.

Moving on back to the road to Sarinena a Southern Grey Shrike on a roadside wire was admired. Nearer Sarinena Lapwings, Red Kites and more White Storks were seen and we stopped at some flooded fields but only a Snipe and a Meadow Pipit were seen here. At Laguna de Sarinena we enjoyed our picnic in the sunshine. On the lake were many ducks mostly Mallard and Teal but some Shoveler, Wigeon and Pintail. A large skein of Cranes were flying northwards and smart male Black Redstart was feeding around our picnic table.

Continuing our journey south through Los Monegros the extensive arable farmland areas yielded more Marsh Harriers, Common Buzzards and three Golden Eagles one sitting on a post on the a hilltop. Crossing the Ebro river where some Little Egrets could be seen from the bridge we travelled west towards Zaragoza then southwest to Quinto and on towards the steppe lands of Belchite and the reserve of El Planeron. We stopped to admire the panorama of the steppe lands bounded by distant rich coloured eroded escarpments. We drove into the reserve where as well as the Skylarks and Crested Larks we heard one singing Dupont's Lark, for which the reserve is an important stronghold.

Carrying on past the wartime ruins of Belchite south to Daroca, we arrived at Gallocanta and our hotel at Berruenco by early evening. We were greeted warmly by Anna and soon settled into our rooms with their panoramic views of the lake.

Day 5

Friday 19th February

Gallocanta

We started at 7am, meeting our guide Javier and travelling to the southeast end of the lake. This area was where Javier had noted the previous evening that the Cranes had come in to roost. We were in position overlooking fields running down to the water's edge just as the sky was getting light. We could just see and hear several thousand Cranes calling. As it got lighter we could see them standing in the shallow water of the lake just offshore and after some minutes, groups started taking off and flew away from the lake to their feeding areas in the neighbouring fields around the interpretive centre viewpoint from where we were also watching Rock Sparrows, Corn Buntings and Crested Larks. As the Crane activity lessened we returned to our vehicles and continued around the lake. A Peregrine Falcon was perched on a tower near Bello and several groups of Cranes were watched as they fed in the arable fields around the lake. At a garage stop for fuel some Tree Sparrows and a Sparrowhawk were seen. Then it was back to Hotel Secaiza for a welcome breakfast.

Breakfast done we set off again around the lake. We had good views of a Thekla Lark on a rock beside the road and a smart male Merlin was admired as it perched on a rock pile. Continuing down lakeside tracks muddy from recent rain and frost we watched some Calandra Larks, headed for an observation tower from where despite the by now quite strong cold wind we could see groups of ducks on the water, these also included a few White-fronted Geese and one Greylag. A Curlew and a fox were seen and numerous groups of Cranes were feeding particularly in recently cultivated fields. At the interpretive centre we had another look from the observation tower finding a few Lapwings, watching another Hen Harrier and yet more Cranes. As it was dull and cold we headed for Gallocanta where we gratefully ate our picnic in the warmth of Albergue Allocant supplementing it with welcome hot drinks.

We took a track from the village to La Ermita, on the north-west end of the lake, which proved quiet on the bird front apart from a Green Woodpecker more Calandra Larks and the many groups of Cranes, calling and shifting all around us. At the new Tower Hide (Observatorio de la Reguera) we heard Water Rail and saw 100 Shelduck, Mallard, another Merlin, Goldfinch, some distant Griffon Vultures and a female Hen Harrier. We continued anti-clockwise in our hunt for Sand Grouse but were not in luck. We noticed how feeding Cranes had methodically worked along the whole row across a field of freshly sown peas! Luckily farmers here are compensated for Crane damage. The biting wind saw us on our way back to the hotel where some of us took a local walk through the village of Berrueco and up to the ruined castle tower where we had good view across the lake, despite some swirling snow!

Day 6

Saturday 20th February

Gallocanta

Another 7am start this frosty morning. We had a 20 minute drive west of Gallocanta to a patch of 'paramo' habitat to listen for Dupont's Lark. We arrived whilst it was still dark, stopped and listened and two birds were heard singing their distinctive songs, with one not too far away from us. As it lightened we tried to pinpoint the bird but sadly without success, conditions were very cold and the bird soon stopped singing. We then tried driving slowly looking for birds amongst the low vegetation but unfortunately none were seen. A little cold, we returned for breakfast, spotting a Cirl Bunting on a bush beside the hotel.

Before setting out after breakfast we had a good look at two singing Woodlarks on the wires. We then spent some time in the arable fields near the lake where Black-bellied Sandgrouse are sometimes seen. Today we had to be content with some good views of more Calandra and Crested Larks, Marsh and Hen Harriers - the latter a fine adult male.

We made a coffee stop at Gallocanta. Then just after setting off, not far outside Gallocanta we stopped for good views of a pair of Golden Eagles circling above us. Continuing north westwards we crossed extensive cultivated farmland until we reached the more rugged terrain of the Rio de Piedra valley. The rich and varied habitat of the Piedra valley, with its sheltered gardens and orchards, produced a selection of common species such as Rock and Tree Sparrows, Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Mistle Thrushes, various finch flocks and Cormorants perched near a fish farm! Carrying on we reached a rocky gorge where we had good views of many Griffon Vultures on their nesting ledges. Returning to our hotel in time to watch the sunset across the lake we could see that 1000s more Cranes had arrived during the day and were roosting on the far side of the lake.

Day 7

Sunday 21st February

Gallocanta – Zaragoza - London

To get one last view of the Cranes some of us travelled before dawn to Gallocanta and watched the massed flocks of Cranes roosting in the lake disperse to the surrounding fields - numbers were probably 12 to 15 thousand birds. The wind blew their bugling massed calls across the lake to where we were standing a very atmospheric finale for our last view of the lake and its incredible numbers of Cranes.

After breakfast we made our way north to Zaragoza for our lunchtime flight home.

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February							
			15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
1	Great-crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	30-40							
2	Little Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				1				
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2	1		✓		15		
4	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓			10				
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				4	1			
6	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	1			1				
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	1		5				
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	5			15				
9	White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>					4			
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					1			
11	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					100			
12	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>				✓				
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2	6		✓	✓	✓		
14	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				2	✓			
15	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				✓	✓			
16	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓	✓			
17	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	50+	5		6	1	4		✓
18	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	1							
19	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	4	30+	15	✓	✓	60		
20	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				✓	✓			✓
21	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				2	3	2M 1F		
22	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1	3	2	1		
23	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	20	✓	✓	✓	1	1		✓
24	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				3		2		
25	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	10	3	✓	✓	✓	2		✓
26	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1		1	1			
27	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>					3			
28	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	1	2	4	✓	✓	✓		✓
29	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					H			
30	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1			4	2	1		
31	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				1				
32	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	500			300	7000	12-15k		12-15k
33	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓			✓	3	1		
34	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					1			
35	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				1				
36	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>				✓				
37	W Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		1		1				
38	L Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓							
39	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
40	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
41	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
42	Eagle Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>				1				
43	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	2			1	1			
44	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>					1			
45	G. Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>			1			3		

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			15	16	17	18	19	20	21
46	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				H		2	
47	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	
48	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	10			✓	✓	✓	
49	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				H	1		
50	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				7	2	6	
51	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>				H		2H	
52	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				1			
53	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	1	✓	✓		✓	
54	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1		1				
55	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		1					
56	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1					
57	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		1					
58	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1	✓	✓	✓			
59	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	2	✓	3		1	
60	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	1			✓	1		
61	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>				2			
62	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		2	1	2			
63	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	✓	
64	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
65	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		1					
66	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		2	2			6	
67	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓						
68	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		20+	1	✓			
69	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>				H			
70	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	1			1			
71	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>				1			
72	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		6					
73	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>				1			
74	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓		1	
75	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓		2	
76	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		1	1				
77	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				3		1	
78	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		2		1			
80	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓			✓		1	
81	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		250	50	✓			
82	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓			✓			
83	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		6	✓	✓		1	✓
84	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	1		✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>						30	✓
86	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
87	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>					6	40	
88	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
89	Serín	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	20	✓		✓			
90	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓		1		1	2	
91	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		1					
92	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓		2	✓	20	✓	
93	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	✓		✓	✓	40	✓	
94	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	
95	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>							
96	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>						1	

Other taxa recorded

	Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	1				2	1	
	Roe Deer	<i>Capriolus capriolus</i>	2						