

# Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 - 27 February 2011



Cranes leaving Laguna de Gallocanta at first light



Great Bustards at Gallocanta



Watching Griffon Vultures at Santa Cilia



Lammergeier

Report and photos compiled by John Willsher

Lammergeier photo courtesy of Dave Brown



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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.

Apart from some rain on our arrival weather was good, with fine sunny days particularly at Gallocanta. We had two sightings of Wallcreeper in the north, and at Santa Cilia, ideal conditions permitted exceedingly close and exciting views of at least 100 feeding Griffon Vultures. At least seven Lammergeiers were seen.

On our way north to Alquezar we had seen several large flocks of Cranes also heading north and we were a little concerned that by the time we arrived at Gallocanta numbers would have diminished. We need not have worried as on the evening of our arrival a phenomenal official count of 52,000 Cranes arriving had been made on top of the 63,000 that had been counted leaving that morning northwards. This total of 115,000 represents the highest ever recorded count at Gallocanta and a significant proportion of the Western Europe and even the world population of Common Crane.

An early morning hunt west of Gallocanta for Dupont's Lark produced, after much patient listening to several singing birds, amazing views of a bird on the ground and singing right over our heads.

A very interesting visit was made to a newly created wetland area to the south of Gallocanta where many species including Garganey and Red-crested Pochard were seen.

## Day 1

Monday 21st February

### Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived on time at Zaragoza after an early morning flight from Stansted and were soon on our way northwards towards Huesca. A large group of Cranes were spotted also heading north and several Red Kites were visible from the van. At Almudevar we diverted northwest to investigate Embalse de la Sotonera. We soon discovered this was where the Cranes were heading. It was starting a light rain and when we walked up to the dam we could see many groups of Cranes heading for a roosting area on the far side of the reservoir. Water levels were very high and it was quite windy so only a few Great Crested Grebes and Cormorants were spotted on the water. Around the parking area under pines several Chaffinch, Serins and a group of Long-tailed Tits were active. Roosting with the several thousand Cranes were some Great White Egrets.

Continuing our journey towards Huesca in several villages White Storks were visible, some already active on their nests. Heading eastwards we skirted around Huesca and northeast to our destination of Alquezar. Some of the group took the opportunity for a pre-dusk exploration of this very attractive restored town.

Later we met at the bar to do our checklist of the day whilst sipping delicious local Somantano wine. A short walk followed to the hotel's Restaurant Casa Gervasio for a delicious meal which included typical Spanish dish of Bacalao, lamb, local wines and various interesting liqueurs! After dinner we walked the short distance to the promenade where we could take in the dramatic view of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century Moorish citadel and Colegiata floodlight against the night sky.

## Day 2

Tuesday 22nd February

### Alquezar

We started the day on a fine morning with a pre-breakfast walk to the gorge viewpoint, a couple of Red-billed Choughs were active in the gorge and Spotless Starlings were singing from high up on the Colegiata tower. We scanned the gorge walls and cave roofs hoping to see our target bird but it was keeping us waiting so we moved to watch the sunrise from the eastern viewpoint. Crag Martins were flying along the cliff edge below, and a Rock Sparrow was performing a singing flight. In the bushes a Cirl Bunting, Chiffchaff and several Blackcaps were seen. A few Griffon Vultures were getting airborne and another pair of Red-billed Choughs was investigating the cliff holes. We returned to the viewpoint overlooking the first cliff and there was a shout from Jackie 'I've found one!' We soon were all focussed on the Wallcreeper which flew into the roof of one of the larger caves. It flew out round a corner out of sight but it was relocated and we watched it feeding and resting for some time. We eventually had to drag ourselves away to return to the hotel for an excellent breakfast of tortilla, bacon, croissants and good coffee.

After stopping at Adahuesca for picnic supplies we set out to explore the Vero Valley, first stopping at the old bridge over the river before Colungo. No sign of the Otter which we later heard had been seen here travelling up river a couple of days previously. Several more Long-tailed Tits were feeding in the riverside trees.

Moving on northwards we checked more gorges finally reaching Mirador del Vero south of Lecina. Here Griffon Vultures were already sitting on their nests in caves in the cliff. Between nests another feeding Wallcreeper was spotted and we watched it, as Griffons flew in and out of their nests. To the north the high Pyrenees were visible, a fine backdrop to a high flying Peregrine Falcon.

Retracing our steps a little we walked through pine woods back towards the gorge visiting some protected caves with ancient cave paintings. As we turned to return a large bird appeared low overhead, an adult Lammergeier. We watched it as it glided down into the gorge. It was warm with some signs of spring, several groups of the miniature Grass-leaved Jonquil and the pale lilac *Crocus nevadensis* in flower. A couple of butterflies: Green Hairstreak and Speckled Wood, were seen. We had good views of a couple of Crested Tits and a Firecrest. On the return journey Jenny's bus had two more Lammergeiers soaring over a wooded hillside near Colungo.

We arrived back in Alquezar for an optional walk into the gorge below the 'Wallcreeper cliff face'. This has given us close views of Wallcreepers in the past but they did not appear today. But we had an interesting walk which took us down the steep steps to the bottom of the gorge, followed by an exciting walk around the gorge wall to the restored power station. The gentler walk back up to the town was through almond orchards where large clumps of violets were growing under the trees. We decided to have a cold beer on the promenade after our exertions but when the sun went in it was a very cold beer! Luckily we were only a short walk from the hotel and a hot shower. Dinner again was a delicious mix of local dishes.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 23rd February

### Alquezar

After another delicious breakfast we were soon heading west in bright sunshine 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 - a small but very good informative facility about this park which is the largest protected area in Aragon and a Special Protection Area for birds particularly the Lammergeier.

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. We all sat down on the bare rocky slope while Manuel wheeled his barrow of meat into position not far from us. Immediately Griffon Vultures descended out of the sky landing higher up the slope then hopping comically down the slope towards Manuel. Soon there were about 100 Vultures fighting over Manuel's tasty offerings sometimes taking items from his hand. They were very close and the whole event was very exciting to watch and many photos taken. An immature Lammergeier briefly made an appearance on our way up to the slope and an adult on our way back but neither bird came down.

In the converted bell tower of the church in the village we were shown a diorama presentation using excellent life size models, showing how important vultures are to the life of the park. We had our picnic back up the hill overlooking the feeding area still with many Griffon Vultures in the sky and at least two possibly three more Lammergeiers seen.

Returning in the afternoon back towards Alquezar we stopped for a walk at Huevo de Morrano - an interesting red sandstone and conglomerate cliff. Crag Martins were active in the warm sunshine and a few Griffon Vultures were overhead periodically gliding down onto their ledges.

## Day 4

Thursday 24th February

### Alquezar-Gallocanta

Today we transferred to Gallocanta. It was a fine day and after breakfast and our farewells to Gervasio, we set off southwards making our way towards Sarinena via Piraces. We stopped near Abiego amongst the vineyards to admire the view, Crested Larks, Corn Buntings, and a Woodlark, were singing. At the edge of the vines many Chaffinches were feeding with Serins and a couple of Greenfinch. Just before reaching the spectacular scenic sandstone cliffs of Serreta de Tramaced we stopped for a Southern Grey Shrike on a roadside bush.

On reaching the canyon we scanned for birds but today only Black Redstart and Blue Rock Thrush were visible. To the west a couple of large flocks of Cranes were heading north. On the church in the village at the bottom of the canyon a pair of White Storks were bill clapping. Back on the road to Sarinena, in irrigated areas, were flocks of Lapwings. We stopped at some rice fields but they were dry so little of interest. A roadside field of sheep were accompanied by many Cattle Egrets. At Laguna de Sarinena we enjoyed our picnic in the sunshine. On the lake were many ducks mostly Mallard and Teal, but some Shoveler and a Pochard. Over the reedbeds a Marsh Harrier was active and in fields in the industrial area before the lake many Griffon Vultures were on the ground.

We continued our journey south through Los Monegros across the Ebro 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 several Calandra Larks were very busy in the arable areas chasing off rivals and singing. Not long into the reserve some Black-bellied Sandgrouse were seen flying. We stopped and managed to get them in the 'scopes on the ground. A total of ten were seen. Driving along a track in the Dupont's Lark habitat a bird was heard singing but unfortunately none were seen. Carrying on past the wartime ruins of Belchite south to Daroca, we arrived at Gallocanta and our hotel at Berrueco by early evening. We were greeted warmly by Ana and soon settled into our rooms with their panoramic views of the lake.

## Day 5

Friday 25th February

### Gallocanta

We started at 6.40am, meeting our guide Javier and travelling to the west side of the lake. We were in position overlooking frosty fields running down to the water's edge just as the sky was getting light. We could just see and hear thousands of Cranes calling from the lake. As it got lighter we could see vast numbers them standing in the shallow water of the lake just offshore and also on the west bank southwards - numbers were immense. In addition a group 15 White Storks were spotted on the distant shore. After some minutes, the Cranes' calls increased and groups started taking off, flying away from the lake to neighbouring fields. Waves of them kept passing us - probably for an hour or more. The vast numbers crossing the sky lit by a colourful sunrise bugling loudly as they passed us was just amazing. As things quietened down and we grew hungrier we headed back to our hotel for a welcome breakfast.

At about 10.30 we set off again this time to the northern end of the lake at Gallocanta where we watched from a viewpoint overlooking the lake. The weather was fine and sunny and soon thousands of Cranes were airborne looking for thermals to gain height to take them over the hills to the north. We watched as wave after wave got higher and higher drifting to the north and disappearing from view over the ridge. Next stop France...over the Pyrenees perhaps....

We later set off in the vans along tracks around the lake in a clockwise direction first stopping at a tower hide overlooking the south end of the lake. Some Sandgrouse were spotted keeping a low profile out towards the lake, and heat haze prevented a good view but 14 Black-bellied were found in total. At the interpretive centre we had a look from the observation tower watching yet more Cranes, Marsh Harrier and Buzzard. Further round we enjoyed our picnic at convenient tables watching a Green Woodpecker fly out of nearby trees. Further on there were more Lapwings but the main excitement, as the next stop was for three Great Bustards a male and two females. We first watched from the vehicles then slowly got out and set up 'scopes. We were able to watch them for some time elegantly walking in a rough grass area near the lake edge.

At the next tower hide we had good views of numerous ducks including at least 200 Shelduck and hundreds of Teal, Shoveler and Mallard. There was the single Greater Flamingo seen earlier which had spent the winter at Gallocanta and also two Avocets.

We called in at Hostel Allucant in Gallocanta for a welcome drinks hearing again details of the previous day's record breaking count of Cranes 63,000 out in the morning to the north and 52,000 in later in the day from the south. Later a very happy group had another excellent meal with lots talk about the incredible sightings of the day.

## Day 6

Saturday 26th February

### Gallocanta

An early start again, but not quite such a cold 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 several birds were heard singing their distinctive songs, some not too far away from us. As it lightened we tried to pinpoint the birds but sadly without success. We spent a long time looking for birds amongst the low vegetation but unfortunately none were seen. Two young Red Deer stags feeding in the distance soon got wind of us and moved away. We had a walk but only Skylarks were visible. Just as we were about to get in the vans and leave, a singing Dupont's Lark was seen dropping rapidly out of the sky. We managed to locate it, but it was just showing its head now and then above a small scrubby bush. We all eventually managed to get a good view and then, incredibly, it took off flying above our heads singing for some minutes before plummeting down right towards us veering off at the last minute to land on the road verge. It soon ran into the vegetation but we did manage to get some more sightings before we reluctantly had to return for a delayed breakfast

After breakfast we had another look at the south end of the lake this time finding seven Black-bellied Sandgrouse and some more good views of Calandra Larks. We then set off for the new re-created wetland reserve of Laguna del Canizar about one hour south towards Teruel at Villarquemado.

Here we met Nicolas Ferrer-Bergua Leese who showed us round this very new exciting project organised by the two local town councils re-flooding a previously drained old lake to create a 411 Hectare area of freshwater flood reserve. The area of flooded fields and old poplar plantations contained masses of duck including Garganey and Red-crested Pochard. We were taken to an observation hide on a mound which gave good views of open water and reedy areas. As well as several duck species there was a Black-winged Stilt and several thousand Cranes, Marsh Harriers and a Peregrine Falcon. There were many Coots, some Moorhens and a Water Rail was heard squealing. It was quite windy but Nicolas kindly guided us to sheltered area with picnic tables near the south end of the reserve where we lunched and walked, adding another species or two to our list.

We then headed back up the A23 to Calamocha and our hotel at Berrueco. Some of us continued to Gallocanta to tell Javier our guide from yesterday, and the one who organised our trip south, about our successful day especially the Dupont's Lark. Many Cranes were on the lake but just a mere few thousand unlike the last two days. Our timing had been spot on.

## Day 7

Sunday 27th February

### Gallocanta – Zaragoza - London

Before breakfast some of us walked up through Berrueco to the Castello for a last look at the lake.

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

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; K = thousand; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February							
			21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
1	Great-crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	3							
2	Little Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>							1	
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	4			1				
4	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				20				
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1						2	
6	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>	6							
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	6			1			1	
8	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus ruber</i>						1		
9	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	12			8	15			
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					1	1		
11	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					200+	✓		
12	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>					2	10		
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		2		✓	✓	✓		
14	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					100	✓		
15	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				✓	300	✓		
16	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓	✓	✓		
17	Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>				□	□	1		
18	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Aythya rufina</i>						1		
19	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				1				
20	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	20	3	3	4		6	3	
21	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		3	5					
22	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		50+	200+	50	50			
23	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1			2	6	6		
24	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				1	1	1		
25	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1					
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	5		1	2	1	3	✓	
27	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	1		1	4	3	6		
28	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1				1		
29	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2	2	4	1	4	✓	
30	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>							H	
31	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			1			1		
32	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>						100+		
33	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	4000			10K+	50K	10K	✓	
34	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>					1m 2m			
35	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>						1		
36	Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>					2			
37	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				200	200	100		
38	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>						1		
39	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>					✓	50		
40	W Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	100+				1			
41	L Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	10							
42	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				10	14	7		
43	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	4	✓	2	✓			
44	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	□	✓		



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			21	22	23	24	25	26	27
45	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	100+	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>					2	1	
47	G. Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>						2	
48	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>				30			
49	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				1	H	1	H
50	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					3	✓	
51	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	H		2	✓	✓		✓
52	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				20	✓	5	
53	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>				H		1(6H)	
54	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogene rupestris</i>		10	20	10			
55	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>						1	
56	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1			2	6	2	
57	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			2				
58	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>						1	
59	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	1		3	1		1	
60	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	6	1	3	1		1	
61	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>				2	5	4	
62	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			1	2			
63	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	20	✓	✓	1	1	
64	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		6	✓	✓			
65	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1	6				
66	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cettia</i>				1	H	H	
67	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	10	2			
68	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		H	1	H			
69	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1				2	
70	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		2					
71	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	5	6					
72	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			2				
73	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		2					
74	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		6	✓	H		H	
75	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		6	✓	✓			
76	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		2					
77	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				1			
78	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	6			10		✓	✓
80	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		4	H		H		
81	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓						
82	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4	3		H		2
83	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	2		5	10	✓	✓
84	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	4				✓	✓	
85	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		2		1	1		
87	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		1	
88	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	15	✓	4	6	1		
89	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				2			✓
90	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		6	12	✓	✓		✓
91	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>				10	✓	✓	
92	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		1	1	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1	2			1	1
94	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>					2	2	

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
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## Mammals

1	European Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus elaphus</i>							2	
2	Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis granatensis</i>						1		
3	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>							1	

## Butterflies

1	Green Hairstreak	<i>Callophrys rubi</i>		1						
2	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		1						
3	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>							1	
4	Small White sp					1				

## Flowers of note

1	Grassleaved Narcissus	<i>Narcissus assoanus</i>		✓						
2	Crocus	<i>Crocus nevedensis marcei</i>		✓						
3	Violet Limodore (new shoots)	<i>Limodorum abortivum</i>			✓					