

# Wallcreepers Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 - 30 October 2011

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Griffon Vulture



Lammergeier



Red Kite



Wallcreeper

Report and photos compiled by John Willsher



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Local Guide:	Javier Manas (Gallocanta)
Participants:	Chris Anderson Helen Anderson Sue Watson Stephen Wilson Gloria Wilson John Plested Paul Franklin Brenda Franklin David Chadbone Julie Chadbone

## Summary:

A very successful two centre trip, combining a visit to Alquezar in the Sierra de Guara, Aragon, to find Wallcreeper: with a stay at Laguna Gallocanta south of Zaragoza, to watch the southward migration of Cranes. With good weather at Alquezar three Wallcreepers were seen and at Santa Cilia extremely close views of approximately 250 feeding Griffon Vultures was an amazing experience. Additional species included amongst others, five Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Red Kite, Peregrine, Red-billed Chough, Crested Tit and Firecrest . The good weather and the autumn colours in the Sierra Guara highlighted the magnificent scenery of the area.

The weather at Gallocanta, with cloudy conditions, prevented much southward movement of Cranes. However the 5000 or so birds leaving their roost on the dry laguna before dawn calling evocatively, was well worth the early start to get in position. A good variety of other species included two Great Bustards, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Iberian Grey Shrike and large flocks of larks, finches and Tree Sparrows. The area was very good for birds of prey with more Griffon Vultures, many Marsh and Hen Harriers, plus several Merlin.

## Day 1

**Monday 24th October**

### Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived on time at Zaragozar after an early evening flight from Stansted and were soon on our way northwards towards Huesca. Roads were very quiet apart from two Foxes and a possible Badger disappearing up a bank so we made good, time arriving at Alquezar just after midnight. After meeting our host Gervasio, we were soon settled in our comfortable rooms.

## Day 2

Tuesday 25th October

### Alquezar

Meeting at first light on a mild morning we walked through the town to the promenade overlooking the Vero gorge. Several singing Black Redstarts on the house roofs were our first birds, followed by Spotless Starlings. In the bushes below the promenade Blackcaps and a Chiffchaff were busy and some genuine looking Rock Doves were on the cliff. In the sky beyond many Griffon Vultures were already on the wing. Moving on to the viewpoint beyond the Castillo y Colegiata we had a clear pre-dawn view down the mist shrouded Vero Valley. Birds here included Red-billed Choughs, a pair of Kestrels and passing overhead small groups of Linnets. Returning to our hotel via the first viewpoint, a couple of Alpine Swifts were overhead and then Gloria spotted our first Wallcreeper on the now sunlit gorge wall. We were all able to get good views as it moved around on the rock face. We then returned enthusiastically to the hotel to enjoy an excellent breakfast.

Breakfast finished, we headed to Adahuesca for picnic supplies, then on towards Colungo for an excursion following the Vero northwards. First stop was the impressive Romanesque Vero Bridge, with the riverside poplars a brilliant autumn yellow. Overhead were more soaring Griffon Vultures, and then a different lone bird gliding over the valley - a Golden Eagle! Continuing on past Colungo, where there were Buzzards and two Red Kites, our next stop was at the Puente de las Gargantas. A look over the parapet revealed a Wallcreeper just a few feet away, sadly it didn't stay and flew off under the bridge and down the gorge. But it soon returned and settled on the gorge wall below us, remaining long enough for us all to get good views before it flew under the bridge and away. Its winter plumage of pure white throat was very clear.

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. It was not occupied at this season of course but a few birds were gliding in and around the gorge along with some Crag Martins. Many groups of migrant Chaffinches passed over heading southwards from the direction of the high Pyrenees visible to the north. We had our picnic just north overlooking the gorge, musing over the creation of its pot marked walls.

Retracing our tracks towards Colungo we walked through pinewoods to have a look the cave paintings of Tozal dera Mallata. Firecrests and Crested Tits were seen in the woods and at the gorge many Griffon Vultures glided low over us. As we returned a Peregrine shot by and lots more Griffon Vultures were heading back towards their roosting ledges. Then our first Lammergeier overhead, later seen drifting across the sky against the backdrop of the snow covered mountains of the high Pyrenees.

Back in Alquezar we had a short walk around the town and a welcome drink overlooking the gorge. In the gorge more Red-billed Choughs were going to roost and many Crag Martins settling in the evening sunlight on the gorge wall. Later we walked the short distance to the Restaurant Gervasio for a typical delicious wholesome meal.

## Day 3

Wednesday 26th October

### Alquezar

After an 8am breakfast and quick picnic supply stop in Adahuesca, 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 Santa Cilia for 30 years. We followed them in their vehicle up above the village, walking the last few hundred yards towards the feeding area. We sat down at the edge of a bare rocky area in warm sunshine with stunning distant views - ideal Vulture flying weather. Manuel, wearing his customary old red coat, then distributed a wheelbarrow load of butcher's waste that he had collected. Before he even opened the sacks, Griffon Vultures were landing all around him, so accustomed are they to this operation. We had brilliant close views of roughly 250 vultures scrambling with each other trying to get to the food and watched in amazement as these large birds, only a few metres from us, devoured the scraps, sometimes getting into the wheelbarrow. They seemed so at ease with Manuel as he talked to them and reprimanded them like children, and it felt a privilege to be with such a dedicated conservationist. Later we withdrew to 100m or so distant. An adult Lammergeier was soon flying overhead, followed later by another.

Reluctantly we left the vultures and set off downhill to our minibus to return to the village. We entered an old converted church and experienced an excellent diorama presentation, with very realistic life size models, about the role of vultures in the park. We went part way back up the hill to have our picnic in superb warm weather watching Lammergeiers, including a dark immature bird, still active around the feeding site.

The journey back was through the foothills of the Sierra Guara with its varied terrain of rocky hills, river valleys, farmland of freshly sown small fields and vineyards. Birds here included Common Buzzards, Red Kites, Grey Heron, Kingfisher, Iberian Grey Shrike, and many Black Redstarts.

Back in Alquezar we set off to walk down into the Vero Gorge - a route which provides a close view of geology and terrain at the bottom of the gorge and on the way out another Wallcreeper was spotted on the rock face across the gorge. We ended our walk with a drink on the promenade.

## Day 4

**Thursday 27th October**

### Alquezar-Gallocanta

Unfortunately today started wet but we were loaded up and our way by 9am. After leaving the Sierra Guara foothills we headed south through large areas of arable farmland passing through small towns of Berbegal and Peralta with their now unoccupied Storks nests on grain silos and churches. As the rain eased off we stopped at some rice fields just north of Sarinena. In the wet stubble many Water Pipits were active and other species in the surrounding area here included Green Sandpiper, Skylark, Crested Lark, Meadow Pipit and Cattle Egrets.

At Laguna de Sarinena many ducks were on the water, mostly Mallard but also Shoveler and groups of Teal. Several Grey Herons were at its edge and the large surrounding reedbed had hunting Marsh Harrier. On a walk we encountered large numbers of Goldfinches, Stonechats, singing Cetti's Warblers, Chiffchaffs and Serins.

After a coffee stop on the outskirts of Sarinena in the Malibu Bar we continued our journey south-eastwards through the extensive Los Monegros farmland areas. Irrigated areas of lucerne had many Buzzards and Marsh Harriers mostly perched on the irrigators waiting for the dull wet conditions to improve.

We stopped on a hill overlooking the Rio Cinca valley in the shelter of the Ermita of Santa Maria to have our picnic. Sadly conditions were not ideal for enjoying the view so we soon moved on heading through Ontinena and up onto a dry non irrigated part of the Los Monegros region. Soon many flying Sandgrouse were seen but as we slowed on this very quiet straight road who should appear but the Guardia Civil who moved us on. We parked where we could get off the road and walked back finding many, unfortunately by now, rather distant Pin-tailed Sandgrouse settled on the ploughed field.

As time was getting on we decided to take the speedier motorway route to Zaragoza and south towards Daroca. Interestingly as we approached Zaragoza outskirts several White Storks were seen standing on nests. We made good time south, weather had improved and scenery was beautiful in the late afternoon sunshine. We passed through the old walled town of Daroca and up and over the 1150m high Puerto de Santed Pass to Gallocanta and our hotel at Berrueco. The laguna looked dry but we could see many Cranes already gathering in the lake bed preparing to roost. Later we enjoyed a delicious meal.

## Day 5

Friday 28th October

### Gallocanta

We started early to pick up our guide Javier at Gallocanta. He advised us where the Cranes were roosting so we headed for Bella on the far side of the lake getting into position looking from the southwest side of the laguna at first light. We could just see and definitely hear many Cranes calling. As it got lighter we could see ranks of them spread along the lake bed. After some minutes groups started taking off and many of them flew either side of us bugling loudly as they headed away from the lake to their feeding areas. Later when most of the Cranes had left, one then a second Great Bustard were seen walking near the dried up lake edge. We all had good views before they took off and flew towards the north end of the lake. It was time to head back round the laguna via Bello for breakfast. Along the way several Marsh Harriers were hunting over the fields and many groups of Skylarks, Corn Buntings and Tree Sparrows were seen.

Later at the southeast end of the lake more Cranes were feeding in the fields and as we watched from the tower hide of Canizar, several more Harriers were spotted. Moving round to the southern end, unfortunately the Centro de Interpretacion was closed but we were able to watch from the raised platform giving us a good view of this end of the laguna. Several groups of Cranes were flying from one feeding field to others and Common Buzzards and a Hen Harrier were watched. Driving back towards Gallocanta along the narrow tracks through the arable fields we searched for signs of Black-bellied Sandgrouse but this time it was just more harriers, larks and finches.

As it was a cool dull day we took our picnic to the Hostal Allucant in Gallocanta, part owned by Xavier, where we could enjoy coffee and drinks and make use of the facilities. There was also a good selection of postcards of cranes for sale. After lunch we watched many Cranes on the lake bed from the Gallocanta viewpoint. In the dry grass at our feet were some Saffron Crocus (*C. sativus*) - this was once a significant crop in the area and Xavier told us how he would collect it as a child. Later we explored the lake environs around the north and west sides. Two more Great Bustards, probably the same birds as seen earlier, were strolling across the dried lake.

At the tower hide of Le Reguera overlooking the northeast end of the lake a few Mallard were congregating at a very small wet patch at the edge of the lake area and a Reed Bunting was heard.

Nearby two Black-bellied Sandgrouse were disturbed as we passed and there were many Tree Sparrows, Corn Buntings and a flock of approximately 1,000 Calandra Larks. Other species included Northern Wheatear, White Wagtails, many Skylarks, Merlin and more Harriers. Continuing our way back around the lake we made our way back to Berrueco and our hotel.

## Day 6

Saturday 29th October

### Gallocanta – Zaida – Cimballa – L. Guialguerrero

In the darkness before dawn we arrived at a hilltop several kilometres west of Gallocanta in search of Dupont's Larks. It was overcast and cool but not cold. We stopped the vehicles and listened not sure what to expect at this season, but in a short time a bird was heard singing its strange song, then more were heard, probably four or five in total. However as soon as it started getting light all sound stopped. We walked, watched and listened for some time but no more song except the call of Skylark. A fleeting view of a bird as it hopped above the low vegetation but then it was gone could well have been a Dupont's but it was all too brief. Satisfied that at least we had heard the birds we returned for breakfast.

The weather was getting a little brighter as we set off to explore the country to the northwest of the lake. First stop was at the area of Laguna de Zaida an arable farming area occasionally managed by winter flooding in order to improve soil fertility. This winter was obviously not going to be one of those as winter wheat was busily being drilled. We walked along the edge of a rocky escarpment enjoying the identification challenge of Thekla and Crested Larks, both of which occurred here.

We continued over the rolling farmland, stopping for a field of larks which included Calandra and Skylark, until we reached the Piedra valley where we stopped near a fish farm. In bushes and trees at the river's edge numerous Chiffchaffs were feeding and a snatch of song suggested at least one was an Iberian Chiffchaff. Several Grey Herons, Cetti's Warblers, a female Blackcap and a Water Pipit were also seen. Further down the valley were orchards with Great spotted Woodpecker and tit species. Picnic lunch was at a spot overlooking the valley of the Rio Ortiz with its poplar plantations, maize fields and vegetable growing areas. A look at the freshwater spring fed Laguna de Guialguerrero added Coot, Great-crested and Little Grebe to the list. The lake looked like it provided drinking water for a large resident flock of sheep and flocks of Linnet and Goldfinch were coming to drink at the muddy margins.

Returning to Gallocanta we stopped to look at masses of birds on the wires on the outskirts of the village these were all Rock Sparrows. We had a welcome drink at Hostal Allucant before heading around the northwest side of the laguna for a last evening look at the Cranes which were estimated to total about 5000. More sightings of a handsome male Hen Harrier and Merlin, then we returned to our hotel via the near lakeside tracks hoping for more Black-bellied Sandgrouse but sadly none were seen.

## Day 7

Sunday 30th October

### Berrueco - Belchite - El Planeron - Zaragoza - London

After a leisurely breakfast, unfortunately on rather dull and misty morning, we had a walk, accompanied by Gonzo the dog, through and beyond Berrueco on the hill track towards Castejon.

Some ripe seedpods of Squirting Cucumber (*Echballium elaterium*) proved irresistible as they never fail to make you jump when touched! Black Redstarts along with Spotless Starlings were in the village and Cirl Buntings, Serin plus Chaffinch in the fields and woods beyond. Retracing our steps to the hotel we then made our way along to Gallocanta and visited the new Interpretation Centre, this gives a very good exhibition of the landscape use and wildlife of the area. Another Iberian Grey Shrike was out in front and many Cranes again loafing around on the dry lake.

We had a delicious lunch at the hotel then set off for our late evening flight from Zaragoza via the special dry steppe land near Belchite. The weather was now improving as we made our way via Daroca north to Carinena where we turned eastwards through the colourful vineyards to Belchite. The late afternoon light and still warm conditions at El Planeron made for a spectacular view as we scanned the steppeland towards the distant escarpments. As we drove into the reserve a small group of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were seen, then stopping, we walked along a track noted as a stronghold of Dupont's Lark. None seen but we did hear a snatch of song. Numerous Lesser-short-toed Larks were in the area flying over calling. Exploring further into the reserve yielded Crested and Sky Lark plus another fleeting glimpse of a lark in the trackside vegetation maybe a Dupont's? It was now time to make our way to Zaragoza and our flight home.

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Lammergeier

## Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only ✓ = Recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	October						
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			5	10	5		
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			1	✓	✓	✓	
3	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>					✓		
4	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					✓		
5	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>						4	
6	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>						7	
7	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>				5			
8	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				50+			
9	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			4	4	1	5	
10	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				2			
11	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		6	4	10	1		✓
12	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		1	4				
13	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	250	250			4	8	
14	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				20	✓	4	
15	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					10	5	
16	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1	1	1	2	3	
17	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		3	3	50+	6	1	✓
18	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1					
19	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		6	4	3	10	5	✓
20	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1	4	1	
21	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1	H				
22	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>					2		
23	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			4			3	
24	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>						4	
25	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>				✓	5000	5000	
26	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				20	12	12	
27	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				3			
28	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				4			
29	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>				✓			
30	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>					2		
31	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>				50+			✓
32	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓				
33	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		3		3	1	1	✓
34	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		2		✓	✓	✓	
35	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H	H				
36	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				1		3	
37	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>		2					
38	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1				
39	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1		2	
40	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>						H	
41	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			1		4		1
42	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		3	2		1	1	✓
43	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>				✓		5	✓
44	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		25	✓	H		2	✓
45	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		3		✓	✓	✓	
46	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		10	6	2			
47	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		1					
48	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		3					



	Common name	Scientific name	October							
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	
49	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		5	1			1	✓	
50	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		5	✓				✓	
51	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>				✓	1000+		✓	
52	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>								✓
53	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>							4-5 H	H
54	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			1	6	✓		✓	✓
55	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>							3	
56	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		1	1			1		
57	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				✓	200+		✓	✓
58	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		50	50+	✓			✓	
59	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				3H			2	
60	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		6					H	
61	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		4			3		10+	✓
62	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		6	6				1	
63	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		H	4	1				
64	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		2						
65	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1	✓			1		
66	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		2	1					
67	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
69	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		20	✓	✓			2	
70	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			2					
71	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		4	10	✓	✓		1	✓
72	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		10	30-40	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>				3	3		✓	✓
74	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					3	10		✓
75	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		1						
76	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			H					
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					500+		✓	
79	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		12			50+	200-300		
80	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			4					
81	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		1	10	4	✓		✓	✓
82	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>				10			1	□
83	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
84	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
85	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				2	2		5	H
86	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		H		✓	✓			
87	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		30	✓	200+	✓		✓	
88	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		✓	H	✓	✓		✓	✓
89	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>				✓	✓		✓	✓
90	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			H	2H	1		H	3
91	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>						H		

## Others:

Red Fox

Hawker sp.

Clouded Yellow

Red Admiral

Wall

Small White

Large White

Speckled Wood