

Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 - 26 February 2012



Cranes at Gallocanta



Lammergeier at Santa Cilia



Griffon Vulture watching at Santa Cilia



Sunset over Laguna de Gallocanta

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 northward migration of Cranes. With good weather at Alquezar three Wallcreepers were seen and at Sta Cilia very close views of approximately 300 feeding Griffon Vultures was superb. Additional species included four Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Red Kites, Marsh and Hen Harriers, Red-billed Chough and Alpine Accentor. On our journey south we visited an interesting canyon area finding Iberian Grey Shrikes, Thekla Lark, Black Wheatear plus Dartford and Sardinian Warblers.

At Gallocanta thousands of Cranes leaving the laguna during a brilliantly colourful sunrise provided atmospheric sights and sounds. Later the sight of thousands of Cranes heading north was unforgettable. A good variety of other species in the area included Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Dupont's Lark heard, and flocks of larks, finches and Tree Sparrows.

Day 1

Monday 20th February

Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived in good time at Zaragozar after a late morning flight from Stansted and were soon on our way northwards towards Huesca. Our first bird was Woodpigeon soon followed by a male Marsh Harrier, we diverted across country to Embalse de Sotонера and were soon seeing our first flock of Cranes soaring and gliding towards the reservoir. At the reservoir it was quite windy and a large number of resting Cranes could just be made out on the far shore.

Travelling on north through large areas of unpopulated farmland we encountered flocks of Crested and Calandra Larks, Goldfinch, Rock Sparrow and Corn Bunting. Several Red Kites, Buzzard and more Marsh Harriers were seen. Once settled in to hotel we had a quick walk around the town as the sun was setting to the gorge viewpoint. We finished the day with an excellent typically Spanish meal at Restarante Gervasio's.

Day 2

Tuesday 21st February

Alquezar

Meeting just before dawn on a cold morning we walked through the town to the promenade overlooking the Vero Gorge. Wintering Blackcaps were feeding on Ivy berries outside the hotel. At the promenade viewpoint Rock Sparrows were calling, a Raven flew up the gorge, numerous Song Thrushes were feeding in the bushes and a Spotless Starling was singing from high up on the church. We scanned the cliffs but no movement so we headed along to the eastern viewpoint to search for a bit of sun's warmth. In the sky Griffon Vultures were now starting to move. In the bushes more Blackcaps a Robin and high up the bank to the fortress wall a Sardinian Warbler rattled its call. A couple of Red-billed Choughs flew around calling and then settled above us on the wall. A few Crag Martins and a Red Kite were seen.

Moving back to the promenade there was soon a cry of 'Wallcreeper' and we then watched it feeding on the gorge wall a little distant but its flitting crimson wings visible in the 'scope. High up on crags to the west more Griffon Vultures perched waiting for the sun's warmth. So, very pleased to have seen the first of one of our targets, we returned to our hotel for a delicious breakfast.

Leaving the town after breakfast we stopped to admire the view over the town. By now many Griffon Vultures were circling over the nearby hill gaining height in the warming air. We made a small detour to Adahuesca for picnic supplies, then we headed towards Colungo for an excursion following the Vero northwards. First stop was the old Vero Bridge, water flow in the river was low, a result of the dry winter. A few Long-tailed Tits were active in the riverside trees and downstream a bird on a mid stream rock wasn't a Dipper but a Crested Lark having a bathe. At the road bridge a Firecrest was busy and upstream a Mistle Thrush was drinking.

Moving on through Colungo our next stop was at Puente las Gargantas a bridge high above a gorge mostly comprised of conglomerate type material another Wallcreeper hotspot. We searched the holes and crevices but today only a Robin was spotted. 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 some already occupied with a few birds on nests. Many Griffon Vultures were active in the sky above the gorge and our first Lammergeier was observed gliding away northwards towards the snow covered high Pyrenees clearly visible on the horizon. Down the road at a convenient picnic table we enjoyed our lunch in the warm sunshine.

We retraced our tracks towards Colungo first walking through pinewoods to have a look at the cave paintings of Tozal dera Mallata. Crested Tits, a Jay were seen in the pinewood and close views obtained of Griffon Vultures as they glided into the gorge below us. A delightful clump of a miniature Narcissus was admired and on our return a ring-tail Hen Harrier was seen near Colungo.

Once in back in Alquezar some of us walked down into the gorge below the town. A Dipper was seen and on our way up looking across to the town waste water lagoon a Lapwing, a Common Sandpiper and some Moorhens were busy feeding. Later in the bar we did our list pleased with the day's sightings but hopeful for better views tomorrow. We then walked the short distance to the Restaurant Gervasio for a typical delicious wholesome meal.

Day 3

Wednesday 22nd February

Alquezar

After an 8am breakfast and quick picnic supplies 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 Sta 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 and long distant views - ideal vulture-flying weather. Even before Manuel started distributing a wheelbarrow load of butcher's waste Griffon Vultures were landing all around him, so accustomed are they to this operation. We had brilliant close views of roughly 300 vultures scrambling with each other trying to get to the food and we watched in amazement as these large birds, only a few metres from us, devoured the scraps. Once the meal was finished and things quietened down, we withdrew to 100m or so distant. We waited patiently and after some time were rewarded when a single adult Lammergeier appeared and flew around the feeding area.

Eventually we set off downhill to our minibus returning to the village. Laura showed us the Natural Park of Guara Interpretation Centre - a very well designed facility with excellent photographic displays and information about the park which is the second largest natural park in Spain. We then 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. Leaving the village we headed west to Embalse de Guara where we checked the dam and cliffs for Wallcreeper, none today but as we finished our picnic an immature Golden Eagle flew over.

Returning to Alquezar we visited the old feeding station on top of the hill above the town where the view of the town was good plus a few Red Kites, Raven and a large flock of Red-billed Choughs were seen. Back in Alquezar we set off to walk around the town. Unfortunately Wallcreepers eluded us but we did all get a good view of a close Rock Sparrow a Buzzard being chased off by the resident Choughs and on the lagoon today a Green Sandpiper. Tonight's meal in Restaurante Gervasio included an excellent paella.

Day 4

Thursday 23rd February

Alquezar-Gallocanta

After a pre-breakfast walk and another two Wallcreepers we were soon on our way. We headed first towards Huesca then south through large areas of arable farmland to the Sierra de Tramaced a fascinating eroded escarpment. We had quick stops for a White Stork on its nest and a couple of Iberian Shrikes. We viewed a canyon near Piraces, finding a Blue Rock Thrush, and lower down three Black Wheatears a Sardinian and Dartford Warblers. On a rock above the road a Thekla Lark was singing and a distant Marsh Harrier was hunting over the olives in the valley bottom. Piraces had a nest on the church with two White Storks in attendance.

Heading back then towards Sarinena we saw a Few Lapwing in roadside fields and another Iberian Shrike.

At Laguna de Sarinena we ate our picnic in warm sunshine. On and around the lake were many Teal, and Mallard plus Black-headed Gulls. At the edges of the extensive reedbeds were several Grey Herons and a Marsh Harrier was watched hunting over them. In bushes nearby were a couple of Black Redstarts and a Stonechat. We continued on tracks around the south side of the lake stopping to watch a group of Serins and Tree Sparrows. We looked from a hide seeing some distant Pintail then continued our journey southwards. At some irrigated flooded fields Lapwing, Green Sandpipers, Snipe, several White Storks, a couple of Cattle Egrets, Great-white Egret and Little Egret were seen. Nearer Zaragoza a village grain store had numerous White Storks nests.

Arriving in Gallacanta later in the afternoon we were welcomed by the sight of many thousands of Cranes standing in and around the shallow lake. After settling in to our hotel some of us walked up the nearby hill to the old castle which provided an excellent view of the lake and surrounding farmland in the warm evening sunlight. A small flock of Crested Larks, two Woodlarks and Cirl Bunting were seen on the return, one Cirl Bunting was singing from its perch on the wires. Later we enjoyed a delicious meal.

Day 5

Friday 24th February

Gallocanta

We started early, picking up our guide Javier at Gallocanta, so we would get into position looking from the NW side of the laguna near the Los Ojos observation point at first light. On the way through the fields the headlights picked out a Rabbit and an Iberian Hare. We were soon in position overlooking the lake from our viewpoint just as the sky was getting light over the hills to the east. It was very cold and clear and 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 bugling loudly as they flew away from the lake to their feeding areas. The silhouette of large groups against the stunningly colourful sunrise and distant hills was just amazing. After an hour or so most Crane activity reduced to a trickle and the cold was having an effect on our observations. So it was back to Hotel Secaiza for a warm up and a welcome breakfast.

We headed back to Gallocanta after breakfast to see if Cranes would be leaving today as the air warmed enough to give lift. Flocks of small birds on the way included Tree Sparrow, Chaffinch Skylark and Corn Bunting. Thousands of Cranes did fly high around eleven but many seemed to return perhaps conditions were not quite right for onward travel. We saw the group of 75 or so White Storks that had been roosting in the lake leave and head northwards. We watched a fox wandering around way out on the mud of the lake looking perhaps for an overnight casualty.

Later at the southeast end of the lake more Cranes were feeding and loafing in the fields. A ring-tail Hen Harrier and a few Marsh Harriers hunted over the fields and a total of 12 Black-bellied Sandgrouse were spotted. A few Griffon Vultures and an immature Golden Eagle were spotted above. We had a picnic near Bello then continued making our way around the lake seeing Buzzard, distant Griffon Vultures, Red Kite, more Skylarks, a couple of Little Owls and flocks of Linnets. At the tower hide Le Reguera on the lake's west side many thousands of Cranes were arriving from the west and slowly descending down to settle on the lake margin. Many Shelducks, Pintail and Teal were on the shallow water and a male Sparrowhawk was on the ground eating its captured small bird. In the reeds near the hide male Reed Buntings were looking smart in their black headed breeding plumage.

Further around more flocks of Linnet, Corn Bunting and Tree Sparrow were busy in the arable fields, field edges and trackside bushes. Finally before returning to our hotel we enjoyed a welcome drink at Albergue Allucant saying goodbye to our guide Javier.

Day 6

Saturday 25th February

Gallocanta & Lagunar de Canizar

An early start with Mars shining brightly and a temperature of -5 degrees we set off for the 20 minute drive to an area of hilltop to listen for the predawn song of Dupont's Larks. As soon as we arrived and switched off the engine birds could be heard around us in the darkness. Several birds were heard but as it got lighter the song diminished. We spent some time walking and sitting observing from the vehicle, hearing the birds but unfortunately not seeing this elusive species on this occasion. We headed back to the hotel for a warm up and breakfast, stopping on the way to look at many Cranes that had moved from the lake to the surrounding fields.

Today we headed south to explore the new re-created freshwater wetland of Laguna de Canizar near Villarquemade in the Jiloca Valley. We visited the main reed bed reserve area, but unfortunately water levels were low and wildfowl difficult to see, we did however see lots of Cranes, Coots, Marsh Harrier, Little Owl and Green Woodpecker. Later after our picnic lunch in now increasingly windy conditions we did manage to get a bit closer to an area that had some good numbers of duck. Mainly Mallard and Teal but Gadwall were also seen.

We then returned north to our hotel and set off for another exploration around the lake. Red-legged Partridge, a beautiful male Hen Harrier and thousands of Cranes were seen. From the tower hide on the west side less heat haze than yesterday permitted us to get our telescopes onto the ducks with Pintail, Mallard, numerous Teal and Shelduck visible in the lake. Later we watched a ring-tailed Hen Harrier that was perched on a rock and on our return numerous flocks of Corn Buntings, Tree Sparrows, Linnets and Calandra Larks. A few more Reed Buntings were also seen. Back at our hotel the sunset across the lake was spectacularly colourful. We finished the day with another superb meal.

Day 7

Sunday 26th February

Gallocanta - Belchite - Zaragoza - London

Today was going to be a long one so we began with a leisurely breakfast then set off for a good walk; through Berruenco and up the valley leading to the far side of the hills overlooking the hotel. Woodlarks were singing, Rock Sparrow and Mistle Thrush were in the Almond Orchards. Higher up Rock and Cirl Buntings were in evidence and a Yellowhammer was spotted. Along the track on the east facing woodland snow was still lying making the track muddy and sticky. In the woods a Crossbill was heard.

During late morning we became aware, in the sky to the north, large numbers of Cranes leaving and disappearing northwards in large V formations. As it was time to turn and retrace our steps, two Golden Eagles were spotted sitting high on one of the crags above.

Lunch was a paella at the hotel after which we bade farewell to our host Ana and set off for Belchite and El Planeron Reserve. We travelled through rain showers but it was dry and sunny at the reserve when we disembarked to admire the view of the plain and distant colourful escarpments. Driving on the tracks around the reserve many Calandra Larks were displaying and Lesser Short-toed Larks singing. We checked suitable habitat for the Dupont's Lark but they were keeping a low profile. We stopped for a snake on the track which bore a resemblance to an Adder but looking at the photographs later showed it to be a Southern Smooth Snake.

Finally we made our way back to the road and completed our journey to the airport for our late evening flight home.

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Alquezar

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			20	21	22	23	24	25	26
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			3	H		2	1
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					100+	✓	
3	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>						✓	
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	30		4	✓	✓	✓	
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				✓			
6	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				✓	✓	✓	
7	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓	✓	✓	
8	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	1			1			
9	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	6			50	75	1	
10	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				2			
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	15			✓	1	9	
12	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				2			
13	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				1			
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	20			2			
15	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	6	10	6	20	6	6	2
16	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		1	3				
17	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		300	4-500	✓	10	6	6
18	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3			10	10	2	3
19	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1			1	2	1
20	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					1	1	
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	3	3	5	✓	10	6	
22	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			1		1		2
23	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	6	3	2	3	4	6	1
24	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		3					
25	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				20		50	
26	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	200+			1000s	1000s	20000+	10000+
27	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	1	1	1	10		1	
28	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>		1					
29	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				1		2	
30	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			1	3		2	
31	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1					
32	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				100		✓	
33	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓			✓			
34	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>					12		4sp?
35	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
36	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	6	✓	2	✓	✓	✓
37	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	2	3	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>					2	1	
39	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		2			H		
40	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>					H	1	
41	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				5	1		
42	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1					1
43	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	15		1	4		✓	✓
44	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		6	120	✓			
45	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>						H	

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			20	21	22	23	24	25	26
46	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	4	2	6	✓	✓	✓	
47	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	3	6		H	2	
48	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		H					
49	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		2					
50	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	1	✓	✓
51	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓		H	✓
52	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	200+				✓	✓	✓
53	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>							30
54	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>						5H	
55	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	50+	1		✓	✓	2	✓
56	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				1			
57	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				2			6
58	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					✓	✓	✓
59	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		20	20+	1			
60	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		8					
61	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	2	20	20+	5			
62	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>				3			
63	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		2		1			
64	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		1					
65	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1					
66	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		1		2			
67	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	6	100+	✓	✓			
70	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		1					
71	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		2	6	2		3	1
72	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	2	6	6	6			
73	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				2			1
74	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	1			1	1	1	1
75	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>				2			
76	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2			
77	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		1					
78	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>						1	
79	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
81	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	30+	H	1	100+			✓
82	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	2	2	1	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>							3
84	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				10	10		
86	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>				6	1		
87	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	50+	2		✓	✓	✓	
88	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	30			✓	100s	✓	✓
89	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	100	3	200+	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>							2
91	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>							3
92	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				6		H	✓
93	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>					10	✓	

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Mammals

1	Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			1		3		1
2	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				1	1		
3	Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis granatensis</i>					1		
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>					6		

Reptiles

1	Southern Smooth Snake	<i>Coronella girondica</i>							1
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Plants

1	Narcissus	<i>Narcissus assoanus</i>	✓						
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Cranes at Gallocanta