

# Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 24 February 2013



Cranes at dawn Gallocanta



Spring flowers (Jonquils) in the Vero Gorge



Alquezar



Walking Secaiza to 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. A stop at a reservoir on the first day as we headed north to Alquezar produced our first Cranes already on their way north. With good weather at Alquezar a Wallcreeper was seen and at Sta Cilia very close views of approximately 200 feeding Griffon Vultures was superb. Additional species included up to a possible four Lammergeier, four Golden Eagles, numerous Red Kites, plus Marsh and Hen Harrier and Red-billed Choughs. Interesting stopover points on our journey south to Gallocanta included a canyon and a freshwater lagoon, through the vast plains of Los Monegros and a around the unique landscape of El Planeron near Belchite. At Gallocanta thousands of Cranes leaving the laguna at sunrise provided atmospheric sights and sounds. Some snow near the end of our stay provided a change of scene, the Cranes departure was held up but not ours!

## Day 1

**Monday 18th February**

### Stansted-Zaragoza-Alquezar

We arrived in good time at Zaragoza after a late morning flight from Stansted and were soon on our way northwards towards Huesca. Our first birds were large numbers of Cattle Egrets roosting in a field near the airport, then Magpies and Starlings but not too much else until we diverted across country towards Embalse de Sotonera where we soon began seeing Buzzards, Harriers and flocks of finches which included many Bramblings. We stopped to scan a large irrigated field which must have been rich with small mammals and/or amphibians as there were 50 Grey Herons spread out hunting across it, plus a few White Storks. Red Kites were hunting over it, and at the edge of a nearby canal were 20 roosting Great White Egrets. At the reservoir, which was very full, our first sightings of Cranes as two skeins glided in from the southeast towards a roosting field on the far side, their evocative calls clearly audible across the water. Travelling on north through large areas of unpopulated farmland we encountered flocks of Linnets and Goldfinches, Crested Larks, and a flock of Fieldfares. Arriving in Alquezar as it was getting dark we soon settled in to our comfortable hotel. We finished the day with an excellent typically Spanish meal at a local restaurant.

## Day 2

**Tuesday 19th February**

### Alquezar

Meeting just before dawn on a cool 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 pair of Ravens flew over, more Blackcaps were feeding in the blooming Almond trees and extensive cliff climbing Ivy. We scanned the cliffs but no movement so we headed along to the eastern viewpoint. High up the bank to the fortress wall a Sardinian Warbler rattled its

call but except a Serin and a Song Thrush all was quiet, so we headed back for another scan of the first gorge wall. No Wallcreeper yet but overhead were Red-billed Choughs, a couple of Red Kites and distant Griffon Vultures. A brief walk down and past the old town spring produced a Wren and four Hawfinches, then it was time to return to our hotel for a delicious breakfast.

Leaving the town after breakfast we detoured up the hill above the town to get a better view of a male Hen Harrier and to admire the view over the town. We then headed first to Adahuesca for picnic supplies, then on towards Colungo for an excursion following the Vero northwards. First stop was the old Vero Bridge, where we searched the river for Dipper but nothing doing so we moved on. Through Colungo, our next stop was at Puente las Gargantas, to a bridge high above a gorge mostly comprised of conglomerate type material - another Wallcreeper hotspot. We searched the holes and crevices but today all still...

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. Several Griffon Vultures were active in the sky above the gorge, and around the car park many spikes of a Crocus were not quite in bloom. Down the road at a convenient picnic table we enjoyed our lunch in sunshine.

We retraced our tracks towards Colungo first walking through pinewoods to have a look at the cave paintings of Tozal dera Mallata. Watched in the pines were a Crested Tit, and Firecrest, and in the Juniper scrub a Sardinian Warbler. Nearer the caves a Dartford Warbler sang for us, and several clumps of Rush-leaved Jonquils were admired.

Returning to the van our next stop was another look from the Puente las Gargantas this time success, a Wallcreeper appeared on the gorge wall below the bridge flicking its wings for all of us to see before flying below us under the bridge and out of sight. At the other end of the bridge we had a good view looking down on a Firecrest in a tree top.

Once in back in Alquezar we enjoyed a drink at a roadside table on the main street, watching Blackcaps Chaffinches and Redwings feeding in the fruit trees below us and Red-billed Choughs on the distant Citadel walls. Later after discussing our day's sightings in the hotel bar over a delicious local Somantano wine we walked the short distance to the Restaurant Gervasio for another typical delicious wholesome meal.

## Day 3

Wednesday 20th February

### Alquezar

After an early breakfast and quick picnic supplies stop in Adahuesca, we were heading west towards Santa Cilia. Here we met our guides Theresa 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 200 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. Theresa 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. Driving a short way back up the hill to an area with a distant view of the feeding area we enjoyed our picnic in the sunshine whilst at least two Lammergeiers circled above the area one coming down to feed. Later two more, possibly different birds were seen flying eastwards and four Golden Eagles, two overhead displaying.

Returning to Alquezar we walked down into the gorge enjoying magnificent views of the gorge walls towering above us in the warm late afternoon sunshine. Following the river down on a raised walkway we passed the old hydroelectric plant and made our way back up to the bar for a welcome drink. Later our meal at the restaurant included excellent paella.

## Day 4

Thursday 21st February

### Alquezar-Belchite-Gallocanta

After an early breakfast we were soon on our way on a clear morning, with views of the snow-topped Guara and the distant high Pyrenees. We headed first towards Huesca then south through large areas of arable farmland to the Sierra de Tramaced a fascinating eroded escarpment. We passed a White Stork on its nest and found a Southern Great Grey or Iberian Shrike. We stopped at a canyon near Piraces, a spectacular landscape, seeing a Blue Rock Thrush, distant Ravens, a few Crag Martins and a fleeting, calling, Thekla Lark. We searched the numerous cliff holes for Eagle Owl which nest in good numbers in this area but none were showing themselves today.

Taking a short cut alongside the Monegros Canal for a few kilometres we turned towards Sarinena. Our next stop was beside some rice stubble fields, mostly dry so no water birds, but a large mixed finch flock with Tree Sparrows, Reed Buntings and Chaffinches. A ring-tailed Hen Harrier was hunting along the field edges and we had an excellent view as it flew into the wind, slowly quartering the land.

At Laguna de Sarinena we stopped and scanned around the lake which had mostly roosting Mallard and Shoveler. At the edges of the extensive reedbeds were several Grey Herons and a Marsh Harrier was watched hunting over them. Negotiating the narrow streets we finally found the café. Once refreshed we continued our journey southwards across the arable lands of Los Monegros.

Crossing the very full Rio Ebro we travelled through Quinto and on towards Belchite, stopping first at a viewpoint overlooking the dry steppe landscape of El Planeron to admire the view over this unique habitat. Later we enjoyed our picnic on the sunny sheltered side of a nearby barn before driving around the El Planeron

reserve area. A poor view of two Black-bellied Sandgrouse disappearing over the horizon was made up for a bit with a fine male Hen Harrier, and on the way out a Hoopoe.

Arriving in Gallacanta later in the afternoon we were welcomed by the sight of many Cranes standing in and around the shallow lake preparing to roost. As we checked in to our hotel with its view over the fields to the lake we looked forward to our dawn Crane watch.

## Day 5

Friday 22nd 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. Unfortunately weather had not been good through the night but at least the rain had now stopped. 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 overcast but 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 lightening sky and distant hills was amazing.

As it got a little lighter a Wild Boar was spotted trotting across the field not far away, heading for the lake edge. After an hour or so most Crane activity reduced to a trickle so it was back towards Gallocanta, on the way a Little Owl was spotted in a rock pile and Red-billed Choughs were investigating a deserted barn. Then it was back to Hotel Secaiza for a warm up and a welcome breakfast.

Setting off after breakfast we headed for the southeast end of the lake scanning the arable fields for those elusive Sandgrouse but no joy, only small flocks of Sky Larks, Linnets and Corn Buntings. We walked to a tower hide where sheltering from a cooling wind we identified ducks, a couple of Greylag Geese, Lapwings, Marsh Harrier and Curlew. Moving on round the lake we checked out the old interpretive centre, using the facilities and getting another view of the lake plus hundreds more Cranes and five Roe Deer, from the raised viewing platform.

Beyond the village of Bello we took to the dirt tracks across the arable farmland towards the lake. The highlights in this section were two Great Bustards looking stately as they slowly walked across a field and later a male Hen Harrier. We disturbed small flocks of larks including Calandra, many Linnets and near the tower hide Le Reguera on the lake's west side, Reed Buntings. From the tower many Shelducks could just be seen far out in the water and of course more Cranes. Due to the overnight rain the tracks were a bit sticky but we made it to our next stop the Ermita on top of the hill that provided us with the luxury of covered picnic tables sheltered from the wind. By the time we had finished we were noticing many groups of Cranes arriving high from the west and drifting down to settle amongst the resident roosting birds at the lake edge. The rest of the afternoon was spent enjoying a coffee stop at Hostel Allucant in Gallocanta and exploring the tracks on the east side of the lake.

## Day 6

Saturday 23rd February

### Gallocanta

A slight change of plan today, the early morning Dupont's Lark watch had to be cancelled as we awoke to a white world of snow. So after a leisurely breakfast we all wrapped up and set off on the footpath through the woods to Gallocanta. The morning was now bright and crisp and as we started a Cirl Bunting was singing! Then a Woodlark...and on the way we encountered small flocks of Chaffinch, Linnet and Corn Buntings. The last stretch was across an open field and the wind was blowing snow across the track so when we reached Allucant the coffee was very welcome.

Later after a visit to the new interpretive centre and another view of the thousands of Cranes held up by the weather we enjoyed our picnic and hot soup back in Hostel Allucant.

By now the sun had mostly cleared the roads of snow so we had a little tour to the north for fuel and to investigate a couple of areas away from the lake, the first Laguna de Zaida a flat basin of arable fields sometimes flooded in winter which this year was dry but did produce a hunting male Hen Harrier. The snowy fields beside the road had numerous flocks of Skylarks and Linnets and when we returned on the main road the melted verge had numerous Linnets, Corn Buntings, Rock and Tree Sparrows.

## Day 7

Sunday 24th February

### Gallocanta - Zaragoza - London

A cold morning and still snow around and some snow in the forecast so a mid morning start for our drive to Zaragoza for the afternoon flight...we arrived at Zaragoza in with time to spare.

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## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		2				2	
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					2		
3	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				100+	100+		
4	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>					10		
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓		1	✓	✓	✓	
6	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				50+	✓		
7	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					✓		
8	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					✓		
9	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓						
10	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	6			10+			
11	Great white Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	20			1			
12	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	50			12			
13	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	50			12			
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1			10			
15	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	4	6	7	6+			
16	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>			2+				
17	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		50+	300+	50	5	1	
18	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1			6	1		
19	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1m		2	1m	2m	
20	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	6	2		6			
21	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			4				
22	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	6	2		3			
23	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>							1
24	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			2				
25	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>					2		
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1						
27	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	250			500+	4000+	15000+	1000s
28	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	30			20+	50+	1	
29	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					4		
30	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						1	
31	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>					34	✓	
32	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓			1			
33	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				2			
34	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
35	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		3	
36	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
37	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>					1		
38	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				1			
39	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>							1
40	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				1			
41	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			4				3
42	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓			✓	✓		
43	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		6	100		4		
44	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	4			10			
45	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓				✓	✓	
46	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	6	40	✓	✓	2	
47	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		1					
48	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓				
49	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓				



	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24
50	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>					✓	✓	
51	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				1			
53	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			H	1		2	
54	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓			4	30+	100+	
55	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		6	✓	6			
56	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		H					
57	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		20+	20+				
58	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		1	H				
59	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		6	H				
60	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		2	H				
61	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1					
62	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		1				2	
63	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓				
64	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		1	1
66	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	50+	100					50+
67	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		20					
68	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓		1	
69	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		1	2			1	
70	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2	1			1	
71	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		1					
72	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	2	1			1	
73	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2			
74	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				10	6	1	
76	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		H		50	1	20	✓
77	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				1			
78	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	2			1	3	2	
79	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				3	6		
80	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	100+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	100						
82	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1		1			
83	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>					1	1	
84	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	2	✓	✓	10	10	
85	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	200+			✓	✓	200	
86	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		4	4+				
87	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	H		2	✓	✓	100	✓
88	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>							1
89	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>						1	
90	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>				6	3	1	

## Mammals

1	Wild Boar						1m		
2	Roe Deer						5		

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24
3	Rabbit					1			

Other Taxa

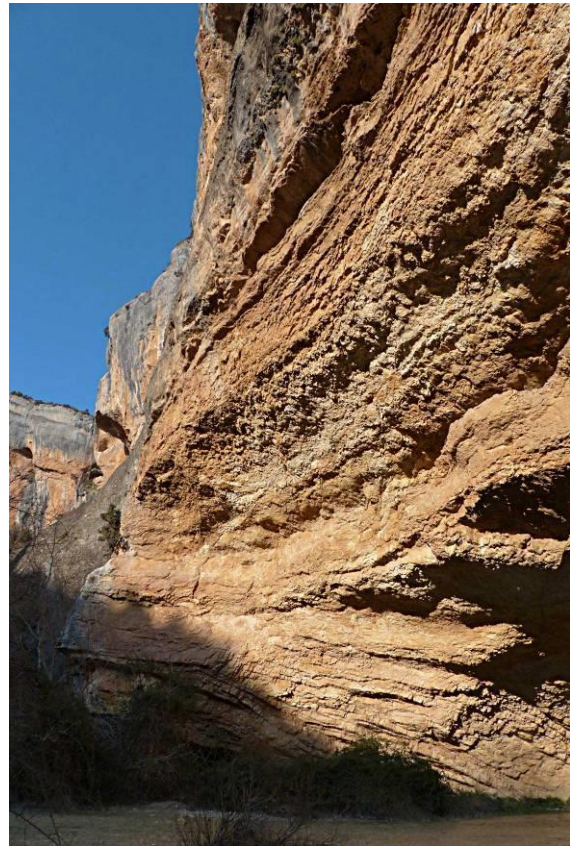
1	Grasshopper sp.			1					
2	Small White			1	1				

Plants

1	Rush-leaved Jonquil	<i>Narcissus assoanus</i>		✓					
2	Crocus	<i>Crocus nevadensis</i>		✓					
3	Shrubby Globularia	<i>Globularia alypum</i>		✓		✓			



Griffon Vulture



Vero Gorge at Alquezar