

# Wallcreepers & Cranes in Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 7 March 2018



Alpine Accentor at Alquezar



Bearded Vulture at Santa Cilia



Hawfinch at Alquezar



Dupont's Lark

Report compiled by Niki Williamson  
Images courtesy of John Willsher



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Tour participants: John Willsher & Niki Williamson (leaders) with a group of ten Naturetrek clients

## Summary

This tour started in the open expanses of the plains of Gallocanta, timed to enjoy superb sightings of Hen and Marsh Harriers, Merlin and Red Kite, as well as farmland birds such as Calandra Lark, Corn and Cirl Buntings and Black-bellied Sandgrouse. This was set against a constant background of the bubbling calls of tens of thousands of wintering Common Cranes, which we enjoyed roosting right outside our hotel!

The vast landscapes of El Planeròn nature reserve gave a majestic background to incredible views of Dupont's Lark, singing its strange creaky song from atop a grassy tussock, amongst a cacophony of lark song from Eurasian Skylark, Calandra Lark and Lesser Short-toed Lark.

Our Pyrenees stay was based at the breath-takingly located Moorish village of Alquèzar, perched precariously on the edge of the Vero Gorge. We did the 'Pyrenean double', seeing Wallcreeper and Lammergeier in stunning mountain settings each day of our stay. It was a trip to remember for all concerned!

## Day 1

## Thursday 1st March

John and Niki connected with most of the group at Stansted airport, and we were soon boarding our flight. Thanks to delays caused by Storm Emma, we had plenty of time to get to know each other on the plane! We eventually arrived safely at Zaragoza airport and thanks to the airport's small size, we were soon loaded into our vehicles for the onward journey.

We made the ninety-minute drive to our accommodation in Gallocanta mostly in the dark, and arrived to the gentle bugling calls of roosting Common Cranes.

Our hosts Javier and Litsan welcomed us to Allucant, a delightful, quirky, bird-themed hotel on the shores of Laguna de Gallocanta. We relaxed with a well-earned beverage and delicious Spanish-Cuban themed food, featuring such delights as tropical soup, pork steak in sauce, and a phenomenal homemade guava cake.

## Day 2

## Friday 2nd March

Well-rested, this morning we gathered excitedly to go and witness Gallocanta's famous spectacle – thousands upon thousands of wintering cranes gathered on the lake. We made an early start, walking down through the morning twilight, accompanied by Crested Lark song.

As we arrived at the lake shores, the sun was rising over the amassed Common Cranes, calling softly to one another. As the morning brightened, they departed in large groups to feed on the surrounding farmland and we watched, thrilled, as they filled the sky all around us!

Many remained for further admiration, and we also enjoyed watching Western Marsh Harrier, Corn Bunting, Tree Sparrow, Meadow Pipit, Common Linnet and Common Skylark going about their day. Strangely, we also clearly heard a Common Quail singing – quite an early arrival! A glimpsed white-spotted Bluethroat was sadly

not found again.

On our stroll back to the hotel we enjoyed pre-breakfast encounters with Spotless Starling, European Serin, Tree Sparrow, Common Chaffinch, European Greenfinch, European Goldfinch, a single male Brambling, and several handsome Rock Sparrows showing well in the tops of trees and buildings. Two Iberian Hares also raced across our field of view.

On the remaining waters of the lake were Common Shelduck, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teal, Mallard, Eurasian Curlew, a White Stork, Northern Lapwing, and a strange-looking Ruff.

After an invigorating late breakfast, we spent the rest of the day exploring the fields, plains and heaths around the shores of the lake, with local guide Javier. It was a fantastic raptor day, graced by no less than four Golden Eagle sightings! We also enjoyed wintering Red Kites and a newly arrived Black Kite, as well as Little Owl, Common Kestrel, Merlin and cracking views of male and ring-tailed Hen Harriers. The fields were positively teeming with larks. Eurasian Skylark, Crested Lark and Thekla Lark were all observed, but the numbers of huge Calandra Larks were simply mind-boggling!

## Day 3

## Saturday 3rd March

We had another pre-dawn start to a beautiful desolate heathland a short drive away from our hotel. Any remaining thoughts of bed were soon swept away as, in the dark, we could hear the strange, mournful song of a Dupont's Lark! As the sun rose over this stunning landscape we picked out the songs of at least three, but there may have been as many as five different individuals of this most elusive of lark species.

After breakfast we birded around the village and the lake shores, encountering a lovely variety of species as well as adding Barn Swallow to the list, getting some lovely views of Griffon Vultures, and again spotting two Golden Eagles.

We spent the afternoon revisiting various areas of the local plains and farmland, as well as viewing across the area from several of the specially constructed hides. We again saw Golden Eagles, and today brought a group of four Black Kites, presumably passing through on migration. We saw Roe Deer on the arable land. But perhaps the star sighting was the prolonged view of a single male Merlin, devouring a prey item in a nearby field.

Throughout the day there was seldom a moment when we couldn't see or hear many dozens of Common Cranes, grazing, roosting or moving through the air in family groups. Alongside the Calandra Larks, they seemed to fill the landscape and provided us with an extremely uplifting soundtrack to our stay!

## Day 4

## Sunday 4th March

Today we made our way north to our second base in the Pyrenees, but not without some fabulous birding en route. Not long into our journey, a brief stop on a hillside yielded great views of skirmishing Cirl Buntings, as well as Thekla Lark, singing Woodlark and an Iberian Grey Shrike.

Before our mid-morning coffee stop we visited the ruins of the town of Belchite. Destroyed during the Spanish

Civil War, the crippled buildings provided a haunting post-apocalyptic background to views of two stunning Black Wheatears, as well as Blue Rock Thrush and Black Redstart.

We continued to the sweeping plains of El Planeron nature reserve, enjoying superb views of several Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Red-billed Chough, and a lone Stone-curlew surveying the landscape from a rocky outcrop.

We picnicked out on the heath, serenaded by countless crunchy Calandra and buzzing Lesser Short-toed Larks. As we listened, we became aware that somewhere amongst them a Dupont's Lark was singing! We scanned the heathland and suddenly there it was, sat out in full view on top of a tussock, only metres away from us! We were treated to absolutely crippling views of this incredibly hard-to-see bird, and over the next hour we found and re-found it, getting plenty of chances to admire its eerie, creaking song and strange down-curved bill.

Our Dupont's appetite well and truly sated, we headed straight to the stunning village of Alqu zar – a restored Moorish settlement perched precariously on the edge of the dramatic Vero Gorge. We settled into our sumptuous hotel and then, naturally, headed straight out to look for Wallcreepers! Our searching of the gorge from a viewpoint close by the fort walls didn't bring us this mountain beauty straight away, but we did enjoy nice views of Crag Martins and a Blue Rock Thrush in the soft evening light, although they were quickly forgotten when two Alpine Accentors appeared on the cliff face!

Extremely pleased with our day, we retired to the cosy hotel bar to celebrate before heading for our first hearty meal at Maribel restaurant, a short walk away through the town's picturesque streets.

## Day 5

## Monday 5th March

Despite the heavy rain at first light, some of the group headed out before breakfast to the previous evening's viewpoint. Their intrepid venture was rewarded with views of Wallcreeper in the canyon! They reported back, filling the rest of the group with a great deal of hope and perhaps just a smidge of jealousy!

The rain soon lifted and we headed out to explore the Vero Valley. Even the village itself gave us some good birds with a very close Hawfinch in the car park. We made stops all along the beautiful Vero Gorge and its formative river, spotting several Griffon Vultures, Northern Ravens, Common Buzzards, a Grey Wagtail and some lovely views of Crested Tits.

Stopping for our picnic at the Mirador de Vero, we enjoyed more raptors riding the increasing thermals including Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Peregrine Falcon and Black Kite amongst the throng of Griffon Vultures.

After lunch we took a stroll along a wooded path where, amongst the pines, we saw Firecrest, Crested Tit, Coal Tit and Short-toed Treecreeper. A short, easy stroll took us to the Tozal de Mallata, a viewpoint over the Vero River. From alongside the area's famous cave paintings, we viewed out over the steep sides of the canyon where there were many Griffon Vultures roosting on the canyon walls and soaring impressively overhead. We also picked out a pair of lovely adult Egyptian Vultures, newly arrived back from their migration and busy renewing their pair bond.

Then, after some time admiring the vulture experience, it was suddenly taken to a whole new level by a stunning adult Lammergeier which soared past beneath us, giving us the chance to admire this incredible creature from above!

We returned, elated, to Alquèzar and revisited the village viewpoint before dinner. This time our visit yielded Blue Rock Thrush, Eurasian Siskin, Crag Martin, Eurasian Bullfinch and Peregrine Falcon. And much to the relief of the guides and the group, a Wallcreeper was spotted foraging on the cliffs on the opposite side of the gorge! It remained for many minutes, affording views to everyone. Shortly after it disappeared from view, a second bird appeared on the cliffs much closer to us and we were able to further watch its fascinating foraging behavior as it worked upwards along cracks in the cliff face, hooking out large-bodied invertebrates.

## Day 6

## Tuesday 6th March

After another hearty breakfast of toast, tasty omelette, insanely good freshly-squeezed orange juice, fruits and good strong coffee, we headed out through the rolling hills, enjoying the sun on the soft greens and pretty pinks of the low-intensity arable fields and almond groves.

Arriving at the village of Santa Cilia we were greeted by Manu, one of the driving forces behind the local conservation organisation Fondo Amigos del Buitre (Friends of the Vulture Foundation). Part of their work involves the creation of a network of supplementary feeding stations around the Aragón Pyrenees, particularly to help the near-threatened Lammergeier and the endangered Egyptian Vulture. With him was a volunteer with the local authority who explained to us that she was using the feeding station as a base for monitoring short- and long-range movements of Griffon Vultures, by identifying and recording colour-ringed individuals.

After enjoying Rock Sparrows and a single Golden Eagle over the village, we drove up the slopes above it and walked the remainder of the distance to the feeding area, through sparse scrubby vegetation packed with singing Sardinian Warblers. There were numerous Griffon Vultures already circling high overhead, such that we almost missed a wave of dozens of migrating Black Kites drifting over!

We took up positions quietly on a rocky slope while Manu distributed meat from a wheelbarrow onto the ground. Mere seconds passed before we were surrounded by Griffon Vultures, only feet away! We watched enthralled as they scabbled and scuffled over scraps of sheep and goat carcass, intimidating each other by extending their terrifying two-metre wingspan and emitting unearthly hisses and screeches.

A pair of Egyptian Vultures turned up and we were treated to a rather poignant romantic display as this pair of endangered birds reinforced their bond by parallel flying, wingtip-to-wingtip, over our heads.

Whilst the main frenzy was going on we had had glimpses of Lammergeiers overhead, but it wasn't until we retreated further back and the mass of Griffon Vultures were dispersing that the 'bonebreakers' came in to do their thing! Although the gigantic vultures decided not to land, we had simply breath-taking views of three adults overhead, gold and black in the sunshine.

After a trip to the enjoyable interpretation centre, we had lunch by the side of Mirador de la Peña Falconera, another striking rocky outcrop and home to many breeding raptors. While John and Niki prepared the picnic, the group enjoyed wandering the nearby fields in search of finches, buntings and other farmland birds.

Returning to Alquèzar, we took a walk descending between the towering walls of the Vero Gorge, passing Blue Rock Thrushes on the canyon walls. Deep at its base, we explored this spectacularly scenic area via a network of narrow ledges and suspension bridges, while the blue waters of the swollen Vero River thundered past us.

Yet again we encountered a Wallcreeper, and a Lammergeier sailed over our heads! As we ascended back to the village via a less steep path, we also enjoyed Hawfinch, Peregrine Falcon and a flock of Red-billed Chough making their way noisily to roost. On the outskirts of the village we were impressed by the sheer numbers of passerines, particularly Eurasian Blackcaps presumably on passage, which seemed to be dripping from every bush!

## Day 7

## Wednesday 7th March

For some, a last pre-breakfast visit to the village viewpoint was in order. It was a glorious peaceful morning, which again brought us nice views of Wallcreeper and singing Blue Rock Thrush, amongst other re-sightings of the local array of mountain and farmland birds. The highlight however, was undoubtedly the incredibly confiding pair of Alpine Accentors which were flitting around the rooftops, benches and treetops, and happily sitting within metres of our lenses!

Sadly it was now time to make our way to Zaragoza airport but, determined to finish on a high we headed for Vadiello dam, another renowned birding spot, en route. After parking up, John took the group right up to the steep walls of the dam, from where they saw Griffon Vultures and several Black Kites moving through. On return to the vehicles, Niki was waiting with a Wallcreeper in the telescope! There were also a pair of Peregrine Falcons performing overhead and, later on, a single Lammergeier drifted by, meaning we had done the Wallcreeper-Lammergeier double every day of our Pyrenees stay!

While John and Niki prepared the last of our delicious picnics featuring local meats and cheeses, salads, olives and fresh bread – not to mention a vast array of biscuits and cakes! – some of the group managed brief views of a Red Squirrel!

There was a bit more birding to be done from the vehicles as we passed through the expansive landscape of Aragón, spotting Black and Red Kites, Common Buzzard, Marsh Harrier, Griffon Vulture, White Stork, Cattle, Little and Great Egrets, Eurasian Hoopoe, Barn Swallow and Crag Martin as we drove.

Then it was time to say “¡Hasta luego!”, as Niki bade the group farewell at the airport after an absolutely superb trip, with amazing experiences of Wallcreepers and Cranes being only a small part of some quality birding! John accompanied the group back to the UK, where another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

John and Niki had a marvellous time on this trip, not just for the exceptional birding but for the great company, and would like to thank the group for their sharp eyes, solid teamwork, tireless enthusiasm and good humour which made this trip so special!

## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	March							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		10	✓	✓				
2	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			3					
3	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		1						
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓				
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		6						
6	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		4		4	1	2		
7	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>		H						
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	1	1		✓				✓
9	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>								✓
10	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				✓				✓
11	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>				✓				✓
12	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					1		1	
13	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>						1	4+1	1
14	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>						2	2	
15	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		200-250	✓
16	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		4	5	1			1	
17	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>						1	2	
18	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		3F	2	5				✓
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		4						
20	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		1	1	3	✓		✓	✓
21	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>			4	4			138	✓
22	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>					3	4	1	✓
23	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					✓			
24	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					✓			
25	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	H	10000	✓	✓				
26	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oediconemus</i>					2			
27	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓					
28	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>			1					
29	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		4	2					
30	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>		1	2					
31	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		2			✓			
32	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		3	2	3				
33	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
34	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>					✓	✓		
35	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
36	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		2	1					
37	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>							1	
38	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>					1			✓
39	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1		3		
40	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1	2	✓	2		✓	
41	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1	3	1				
42	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>						2	2	2
43	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>					3			
44	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		1	1	✓				✓
45	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>					6	50	75	✓
46	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>					✓			
47	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	March						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
48	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>					✓	✓	
50	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>					✓		
51	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
52	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
53	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			H	H			
54	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓	✓			
55	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		3		1			
56	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
57	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		✓	✓	✓			
58	Dupont's Lark	<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>			H 3-5	1			
59	Lesser Short-toed Lark	<i>Alaudala rufescens</i>				10			
60	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			1	3	1		
61	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				✓	✓	✓	
62	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>						1	
63	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				1			
64	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					✓		
65	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>				3			1
66	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				✓	H	✓	
67	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>				2	H	V	
68	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>					✓	1	
69	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>					2-3	2	2
70	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>					✓		
71	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	1	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			2		✓	✓	✓
74	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	1	✓			
75	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1		✓	✓	✓	
76	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>		1					
77	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		1		2	✓	✓	✓
78	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2	✓	✓	1
79	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓			
80	Black Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>				2			
81	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			1				
83	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓	✓				
84	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	H
85	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>				2			2
86	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			1				
87	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>					2	✓	
88	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	1	✓	✓	✓	1
89	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
90	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>		1	1			1	
92	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>					✓	3	5
93	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>					1		
94	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
95	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
96	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
97	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
98	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>					1	1	



	Common name	Scientific name	March						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
99	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
100	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>				1	1		
101	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				2		✓	
102	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		2	✓				

### Mammals

1	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		3	3				
2	Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>		2					
3	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				1			
4	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>							1
5	Bat sp.					✓			

### Other

1	Preying Mantis sp.			1					
2	Rush-leaf Jonquil	<i>Narcissus assoanus</i>					✓		
3	Crocus	<i>Crocus nevadensis</i>					✓		
4	Petrocoptis	<i>Petrocoptis guarensis</i>						✓	

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Vero Gorge at Alquezar



Wallcreeper