

# North Spain Birding Tour Trip Report

August 8-28, 2019

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Stunning views from La Hermida lookout, Picos de Europa

Report compiled by tour leader Álvaro Peral  
Images courtesy of Álvaro Peral and Virginia Moreno



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## Introduction

This extraordinarily long bird tour has been a recognition tour that served us as our summer holidays. The purpose of this has been to include a considerable amount of Spain within our next birding destinations. Among these destinations, Sierra de **Gredos**, the **Picos** de Europa and the Spanish **Pyrenees** as main birding areas. Other interesting spots covered have been El Jerte valley, Ávila plains, La Nava lagoon, the Basque Country wetlands and coast and the plains of **Belchite** and Madrid provinces.

Although August is not the most productive month to visit the area, we managed to see nearly all our target species, i.e., Lammergeier, Wallcreeper, Goshawk, Alpine Chough, Egyptian Vulture, Cinereous Vulture, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Alpine Accentor, Dunnock, Bluethroat. Black Woodpecker and up to 6 Dupont's Larks were heard but not seen.

With our limited time for such an ambitious itinerary, we allowed a few hours to scan for Brown Bear but didn't find it. The stay in the Palencia province got us a nice array of Butterflies, and same for lizard species.

The following trip report must be used as reference on what to expect on each site in summer and we recommend doing a careful time planning and avoiding covering all of these areas on a single tour. Instead, planning a 7-10 day tour combining Picos de Europa with any of the other bird areas above mentioned seems the best option for those short of time.

## Day 1 (8/8/2019) – Ronda to El Jerte

A family breakfast in Ronda and our brand new Pistaccia van just washed and filled up. We hit the road at 10am and after a short visit to our friend Peter we drive tirelessly till southern Extremadura in the province of Badajoz. Our first stop was at Villafranca de los Barros, and it's a pity the AMUS bird recovery centre was about to close, so we had a go on the several vineyard crops looking for Scrub Robin. Extremadura in summer at 2pm is not the place you want to stay under the sun, so we soon decided to enjoy a great meal at Venta Marina, very friendly staff there! Back in the road we made a quick car-tour around the beautiful town of Plasencia but decided not to stop till we got to Tornavacas, already in the Jerte valley. Not much time for birding today but saw scores of Black Kites already on migration. We spent the night at the Garganta de los Infiernos, where we got **Grey Wagtail**, **Bee-eater**, Jay and **Short-toed Treecreeper**. A very nice and bosky spot where we even enjoyed a quick bath in the river!

## Day 2 (9/8/2019) – From Extremadura to Gredos

A very unexpected morning rain made it difficult to look for Dipper in the Garganta de la Nogaleta in Navaconcejo. There we got nice views of **Golden Oriole**, singing nearby in the canopy. I must say that was the only remarkable sight because the rain that followed was a bit of a distressing moment and it wasn't till we covered the river near Jerte town that we managed to see the Dippers. The perseverance was finally rewarded and we got a family of 3 **Dippers** fishing and playing at a reasonable distance. A cautious approach is the key!



We carried on and as we went up the windy road to Tornavacas pass, the mist couldn't allow us to watch what seemed to have been a wonderful landscape. Fortunately a Buzzard took cover on a tree quite close to our van, it seemed as tired of the rain as us. We soon arrived to the Gredos area and had lunch in the tiny village of Navacepeda de Tormes. We enjoyed birding on route to the plataforma de Gredos following the Barbellido river and a distant **Golden Eagle** was our favourite sight of the day. Up at La Plataforma it started to rain heavily and we then turned back towards the Puente del Duque. A nice array of birds was waiting for us there: Short-toed Eagle, Crossbill, Mistle Thrush, Coal Tit, **Wheatear** and Jay. The day also allowed a foray to the Parador area, where it was presumably a bit late in the calendar to see Citril Finch. Instead, we got Black Redstart and Crossbill. Back to the Navagredos camping we got scores of Chaffinches and a few Carrion Crows. **Crag Martins** were nesting at the bar entrance.





## Day 3 (10/8/2019) – Sierra de Gredos

We were very happy about the weather forecast and got up quite early to get to the mountains got busy with weekend excursionists. It was 7:45 at La Plataforma and the car parking was already nearly filled up! The morning lights combined with the mist in the valleys was of an extreme beauty and it was only interrupted by the sound of the Dunnocks. We sat down and enjoyed the blessing sun and some packed breakfast. The area looked so beautiful that we spent some time filming a short video: <http://bit.do/wildandalucia>. The smart male **Bluethroat** below accrobatically landed on an accurate spot in front of us:



The gorse had no longer flowers but the area had a stunning grey and yellow colour throughout the itinerary. We walked up to the Cavadores fountains and found good numbers of juvenile Wheatear on the way. The fountain was interesting for photographers since **Dunnocks** were very active there. We had a quick view to the Gredos cirque and found Griffon and Black Vulture, Kestrel and Booted Eagle. We also had nice sights of **Spanish Ibex** and Cyren's Rock Lizard (below).



A pair of **Red-rumped Swallows** were flying over the car park. Back to lower altitudes, we heard Rock Sparrow and saw the first Black-eared Wheatears for the tour. A pair of **Red Kites** were playing overhead as Chaffinches, Carrion Crows and Serins were commonly seen near Puente del Duque. We then drove to the Puerto del Pico, where a **Goshawk** surprised us flying above us with no time for a decent picture. **Rock Bunting** and a juvenile **Cuckoo** were also there.



## Day 4 (11/8/2019) – Crossing Castilla - León

Arenas de San Pedro definitely wasn't the most calm village to book our hotel, so we hit the road early in the morning towards Ávila. On route we got scores of Buzzard and we chanced yesterday's Goshawk (how lucky!). A pair of **Hoopoe**, more Black Kites and Magpies accompanied us till we got to the medieval town of Ávila. We stopped at the Mirador de los Cuatro Pilares and got a pair of **Booted Eagles** (both Black and pale morphs) and a Red Kite right there. With this starter, we couldn't help walking in to see the old town, which turned out to be a fantastic cultural foray.

We then headed towards the renowned Laguna de La Nava, which was as we expected quite low in water levels, but still enough to reward us with the largest number of **Marsh Harriers** both of us remember! Dozens of **Lapwings** were constantly stressed by them. **Scarce Swallowtail** (picture) was present in the area. The lagoon is right at vast plateau known as Tierra de Campos. Voles are common and therefore raptors gather in considerable numbers there. Among them, we got 2 **Montagu's Harrier**, Common and Lesser Kestrel and Buzzard. The church belltowers at the many little villages of the Tierra de Campos always had **Lesser Kestrel** and **White Stork**.

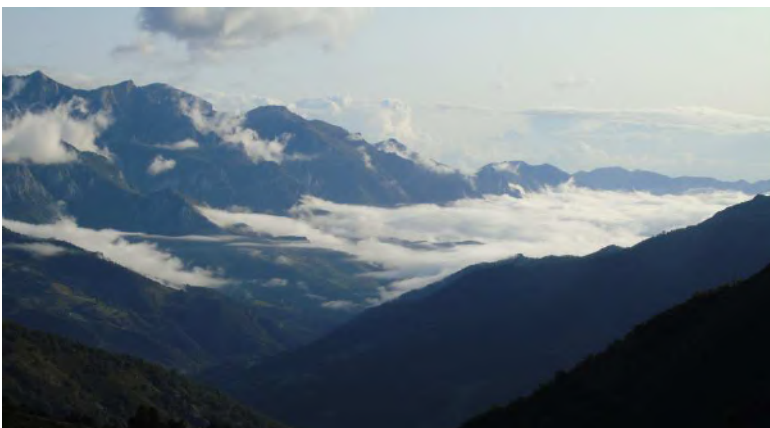




I was time then to continue towards Picos de Europa. We had dinner at the Pico de las 3 provincias and looked for Brown Bear. The temperatures dropped down very quickly!

## Day 5 (12/8/2019) – Picos de Europa

It was quite a cold night (3 °C) and we waited for the sun to warm us up at the Brown Bear Statue at the Llesba Pass. The morning light was magnificent (picture below) and we started walking the Cosgaya track. The heath soon produced a lot of buntings and a few **Dunnocks**. After an hour walk we reached a big Rowan where a few where **Bullfinches** were found eating its berries. On the walk back we chanced a dozen of **Water Pipit**, a few Mistle Thrush, Blackcap, Griffon Vulture and a Short-toed Eagle. Then we checked the other side of San Glorio Pass without remarkable sights other than butterflies. I guess I was very much focused on finding the Citril Finches, which were no longer there. After a nice photo stop in a picturesque viewpoint we headed to the charming and busy town of Potes, where we enjoyed a magnificent meal at Bar El Cantón. At just a few minutes



from Potes we popped by the Tama visitors' centre, where we met Michel. He is a very friendly guide that gave us precise information on where to find some species. It's a pity we couldn't allow us more time to look for the Brown Bear. We hit the road and headed to Argüébanes to look for Middle spotted Woodpecker. The local government had designed a bird itinerary that we had to check. Driving the new van into the narrow steep streets was more than challenging. Virginia

wisely stayed in the van and I hiked up the so-called “ITOR-PNPE-4 itinerario ornitológico”, which turned out to be of a very inappropriate design on a very steep track clearly unable to follow by many. The woodpeckers were not there although a friendly neighbour had seen one a few days ago and I was happy to find Cork Oaks along the way back.



## Day 6 (13/8/2019) – Fuente Dé

Fuente Dé is a place where you can take a cable car that gets you to the alpine level and therefore allows you to find high mountain birds without a severe hike up. We arrived to get the tickets by 8:30 and arrived to the upper facilities by 9:20. The ride up is extremely beautiful and fast. You suddenly find yourself at the top and still surrounded by an amazing rocky scenery. Our main target there was the Wallcreeper and the rest would literally be a plus. Just a few minutes after



we started walking we saw the first **Alpine Accentor**. We were used to seeing them at a very short distance in Andalucía but here it wasn't the case. I believe I heard a **Wallcreeper**, so we waited around a rocky outcrop for around 15 min and suddenly we got it! It kept flying from a boulder to another with its Hoopoe-like (relaxed but determined) flight. This sight made our day and we then enjoyed a relaxed walk and allowed time for another illustrative video on the area, and looked for the local newts and small lizards. We soon chanced the first **Yellow-billed Choughs** and saw a second Wallcreeper, this time at a very close range. Of course my bridge camera didn't focus it in flights and I swore I'd get myself a decent one once in life. We hiked up towards the Horcados Rojos ridge and we turned back near the top for it was a very hot day. **Red-billed Chough** was seen



far up the cliffs. No trace of White-winged Snow Finches, but we enjoyed further views of Alpine Accentor, Dunnock and a few **Water Pipit**. We had lunch at the cable car upper station and got outstanding views of Griffon Vulture flying at a close range and at eye level. We took the cable car ride down back to the car and decided to go for the Black Woodpeckers nearby. We managed to park in a tiny village named Ilces and walked to Ilces Beech forest. Simply not recommended, for it is very steep and poorly marked. We decided to give it a go from the other side, so we rode back to Espinama, where we parked by the church and enjoyed a much better track following the river. The walk was nice but we didn't hear much besides **Great Spotted Woodpecker**.



## Day 7 (14/8/2019) – Palencia mountains

The Palencia province is a sanctuary for wildlife of all kinds. Not far from Picos makes itself a worthy day-trip, at least. We started ticking **Marsh Tit** at the Piedrasluengas pass, then visited the roman church of San Salvador de Cantamuda. The meadows on the way to Lebanza produced a few **Red-backed Shrikes** and we also saw **Red Fox**. The area is beautifully covered in yellow flowers packed with many species of butterflies. We decided to give another chance to the Brown



Bear at the Tenadas de Resoba but the area required a 4-wheel drive and more time. We visited the reservoir by Cervera, which produced Great Crested Grebe and Yellow-legged Gull.



## Day 8 (15/8/2019) – From Potes to the coast

Many cars and people along the La Hermida road, which made us decide to go directly to Sta Catalina viewpoint. This was a very nice spot to visit, not just for the impressive views shown in the cover of this trip report, but also for the variety of birds that can be seen from there. The area surrounding the cliffs are covered in a dense mixture of Pyrenean oak and Beech, resulting into many different types of woodland birds, including **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. We heard and then saw a family of **Honey Buzzards**. How beautiful their call sounds! Both species of Choughs were seen, and also decent numbers of **Griffon Vulture** at eye level. We would have liked to have seen Egyptian Vulture there, but no chance. We then drove directly to the charming sea town of San Vicente de La Barquera, where we got a few **Shag** right in front of its visitor centre.



## Day 9 (16/8/2019) – From San Vicente to Santander

Watching the sunrise in San Vicente is simply unforgettable. We walked the old town and the harbour, getting **Ruddy Turnstone**, Chough and **Whimbrel**. The best time to look for birds on this environment is at mid-tide, for them would be closer to you! At the Maza bridge we got Greenshank and **Honey Buzzard**. We drove to Abaño and completed the list with Mute Swan.



Not far from there in the Monte Cabezón there is a secuoya forest that we thought would be interesting for birds. Although it wasn't very useful for bird watching, we found it interesting, and best of all, shady! On the way to Santander we stopped at the Liencres Dune complex. It was so packed with people that we didn't even get off the car and kept going. What once was a coastal

paradise like no other in Spain is now not even worth visiting. North Spain is so much crowded than our beloved Andalucía... After a nice short walk in Santander we headed towards Santoña's visitor centre, where the staff was very knowledgeable and friendly. In fact, they gave us direction on where a male **Eider** has been staying for the last years. It was a very distant and dark sight but enough to guess it was and Eider-like bird. It was a long day and we went to stay the night in the crowded and industrialized Laredo town.

## Day 10 (17/8/2019) – From Santoña to the Basque Country

A very ambitious planning pointed us to see both Santoña marshes and Urdaibai. Starting at the Colindres sea promenade we saw juvenile shanks spp, Ruddy Turnstone and scores of **Black-headed gull** already moulted to winter plumage. We went back to yesterday's observatory known as La Arenilla, where the Eider was still there (light is better in the afternoon), but also dozens of **Whimbrels**! The walk around the Bengoa marsh was even better, starting with a frightened **Purple Heron**, **Zitting Cisticola**, Redshank and Little Grebe. A distant Shelduck was seen from the little bird observatory at the end of the track. We then had to walk for 10 min along a road to access



a couple of lagoons East of the main marsh. It was worthwhile for we saw a **Leucistic Coot** (above) feeding its chicks. Other bird sights included dozens of Gadwall, a family of **Mute Swan**, Cetti's Warbler, Reed Warbler and Chiffchaff. Happy about this Coot, we drove to Noja where we checked its so-called Molino de las Aves and opposite watchtower to find **Black-winged Stilt** and **Cattle Egret**. We felt at home among these two species! Another spot we checked was the Casa de las Mareas at the Joyel marshes, which was very well kept and far from the many tourists at the coast. The Montehano quarry helped us adding **Crag Martin** and Kestrel. On the way to the Basque Country we had to stop at the beautiful cliff shown in the above picture, known as Sonabia. Again it was packed with cars and people, but we managed a nice little walk under the cliff and got dozens of Griffon Vultures very active. After a quick visit to a hide near the Urdaibai bird centre, it was time to go to our hotel in Bilbao.



## Day 11 (18/8/2019) – Urdaibai

The whole day was spent at the Urdaibai Reserve. We started early in the morning checking the marshes of San Cristóbal. The walk from the village to the hide is nice and we heard **Water Rail** and **Kingfisher**. There was a hide at the end but the tide was too low to allow decent bird sights. On the way back to the railway line we heard Iberian **Green Woodpecker** and saw a juvenile



**Firecrest.** We visited the island of Txatxarramendi, which is sort of a nice park with some woodland birds and a viewpoint to the tidal river just at the end of the path. There we identified Wren, Blackcap and Collared Dove. We had a lot to cover on this day, and quickly headed to the charming village of Bermeo for breakfast –which is not served till 9am-. On either side of Bermeo (East and West) the road offers pullouts with impressive views worth checking. We managed to park at the end of the marina and walked along the harbour, which must be way more productive by winter, as the whole north coast of Spain is. The Matxitxaco cape offers stunning views, to the right lays the Ízaro island, and to the left the famous San Juan de Gazteluatzeko península (picture above). It was very windy so not much birds were seen here, although the views were worth the visit. It started raining and we headed back to the Urdaibai Bird Center, where we enjoyed some birding under cover. Edorta was friendly and gave us some updated info on the birds there. The center is very user-friendly, I'd say of luxury standard and has a watchtower built in from which to look for birds. Outside the building there are 2 hides. The one to the right is only recommended when overcast for the sun hits directly to the front. It kept pouring rain so we went back to Bilbao.

## Day 12 (19/8/2019) – Bilbao

We took this day off in Bilbao where the Fiesta Grande was taking place. We really enjoyed this short break in an interesting city to spend one or two days.

## Day 13 (20/8/2019) – Heading to Navarra

From Bilbao we went to Vitoria, where a nice reserve can be found directly in town: Salburúa. We really liked it and were surprised to find such a diverse birdlife literally in town: White Stork, **Bee-eater**, Dunlin, **Booted Eagle**, **Yellow wagtail** and Moorhen were just some of them. Besides, there was a big herd of presumably Red Deer introduced artificially there, they look darker than ours in



central and southern Spain. Great park one could spend the whole day walking through. As we hit the road towards Pamplona we could find many **Red Kites** on route. We met our friends Cristina and Ricardo, who recently moved to Pamplona and they were kind enough to show us around the Arga river banks and old town. Of course with binoculars on, we got **Grey Wagtail** and Grey Heron besides a memorable dinner starring a big chuletón with cider.

## Day 14 (21/8/2019) – Eastern Pyrenees

We felt sorry for leaving Pamplona so early but promised Cristina and Ricardo to visit again. Again, another challenging planning for the day, which started by getting us into the famous foces, or gorges. The Foz de Lumbier (below, left) was one of our favourite spots throughout the week. It offers a nice walk along the gorge, renown for its big population of **Griffon Vulture**. **Alpine Swifts**





were nesting on a nearby crack –easy to tell by their guffaw-like sound-. A few **Blue Rock Thrushes** were there too, as **Crag Martin**, **Rock Sparrow** and **Whitethroat**. We then continued to a quick stop at the Foz de Arbayún (above, right). In this spectacular site, the light seemed fantastic in the morning and evening, but just that. Not many birds were seen except **Crag Martin**, flying very close the vantage point at eye level. Further on we skipped a third gorge, the Foz de Burgui, which should have been worthy for a pair of Lammergeiers were recently seen there -we tried on the following day but it was literally impossible to find a place where to park-.

Our next stop was a short walk near Isaba, at the Arrako dolmen. There a pair of juvenile **Red-backed Shrikes** were welcoming us to the Pyrenees. We then visited the Rincón de Belagua near the French border and walked it beautiful beech forest. There we made a circular route and added **Eurasian Treecreeper** before we tried the delicious home-made sponge cake that a German lady offers at the Bitxitoza bar. Friendly staff there, they even sold us some pieces of fruit.



The evening was spent at the Zuriza camping area towards the Hayedo de Tacheras al Achar de Alanos. The beautiful mountains balanced the lack of birds there. We heard **Tawny Owl** though.

## Day 15 (22/8/2019) – The Pyrenees

Our day started with breakfast at the Linza shelter among the scores of mountaineers there. We



tackled three different paths from there. First, the path that takes you to the Bosque de Gamueta via the Caballo pass turned out to be really steep to enjoy birding without a parachute. Secondly we enjoyed the 1 Km of accessible track along the Foyas del Ingeniero track. And third one was a wide track into the Gamueta forest, which turned out to be the most productive one, and heard a couple of Greater Spotted Woodpeckers and a few more woodland birds.

We then changed of strategy and decided to check high mountain passes. It was a great idea that allowed us watchin our first **Lammergeier** of the tour, mixed in a flock of over a hundred Griffon Vultures. Although it was a very far sight, it was easy to id this athletic (and faster) flight and romboidal shape of the tail. Soon after we chanced an **Egyptian Vulture** flying low near the road, which was unexpected for us.

We visited the Gabardito refuge (above) and walked the steep path of the GR path, which was very beautiful but it simply wasn't the right time of the year to see the birds there. A pair of Wallcreepers nested there last spring. The area was packed with grasshoppers and butterflies. The staff at the refuge was friendly and one can get a salad or eggs there from 2 to 4pm.



After lunch we visited the Selva de Oza. It was a circular route into the forest. It took us 2 h and we saw **Bullfinch** and **Long-tailed Tit**, but the most remarkable sight was a **Pine Marten** that we saw twice playing around and digging into the foliage. A short stop at the Senda de Los Cachos provided amazing views of **Dipper** and **Crossbill**.

We passed to say hello to our friends Lucía and Imanol managing Hotel Usón, which we highly recommend. On the way back to Ansó we came across **Egyptian Vulture** not far from the village:





We'd like to point out that the following roads and locations are quite narrow and require extra caution while driving:

- Road from Zuriza to Ansó
- Road to Refugio de Gabardito
- Boca del Infierno tunnel

## Day 16 (23/8/2019) – The Pyrenees

The forests near the charming village of Ansó finally rewarded with its woodpeckers. In a short stroll we heard **Black Woodpecker** and we saw **Iberian Green** and Greater Spotted Woodpeckers. A few more **Egyptian Vultures** and a female **Roe Deer** contributed to our excitement. How rewarding early morning starts can be! A few **Spotted Flycatchers** were active and noisy along our path, and we also got good views of **Coal Tit**, juveniles **Mistle Thrushes** and *phylloscopus* spp.



Leaving this section of the Pyrenees we continued along the Aragón river near Puente de La Reina, which is a fairly different environment, more plain and full with pastures and scattered trees. This allowed us to get **Cirl Bunting**, a pair of Booted Eagles and several Red Kites. The few fig trees were quite demanded by the birds and let us see Black Redstart, Blackcap, **Golden Oriole** and **Garden Warbler**.

From there we headed to Alastuey, where we saw **Sparrowhawk** and counted circa 300 **Griffon Vultures** catching up a thermal. This was a great sight we enjoyed for quite a while. At the village big numbers of Barn Swallow filled up the electric wires as they were getting ready to migrate.

In the afternoon we visited the San Juan de la Peña monastery and also Jaca. Either is an interesting place to spend half a day at, but we had an appointment to attend with many other birds and had to head to Fiscal, where we stayed the night.

## Day 17 (24/8/2019) – The Pyrenees

It was time for another short break and we decided to remember our younger days as rock climbers. We enjoyed doing the vía ferrata at Broto, which took us the whole morning and gave us night views of **Crag Martin** near the waterfall. We visited the Bucardo museum in Torla, which was interesting and enjoyed the views of Ordesa as a background. On the way to Aínsa the road was again too narrow and we pulled off to see a distant **Golden Eagle**. Aínsa was the most charming

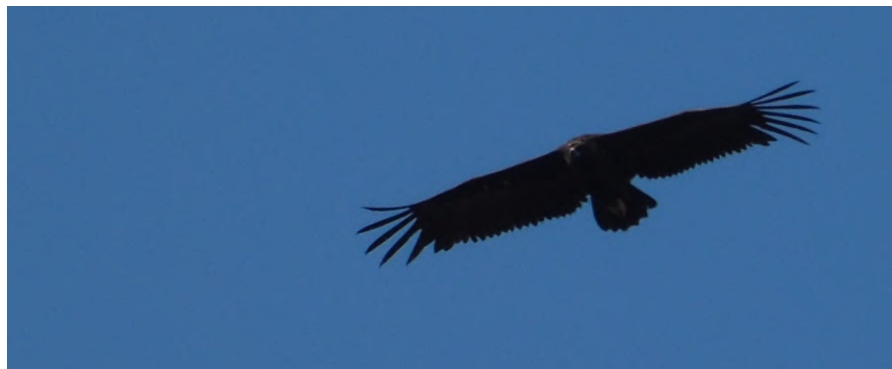


village we stayed at. We really liked it and the fact that the first building you come accross is the one dedicated to the Lammergeier Conservation Foundation was very special. In fact, we arranged an appointment with Juan Carlos, who showed us around and explained the great job this foundation has done to preserve the Lammergeiers. You can find the video we took [clicking here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FetMB8S47xE) or here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FetMB8S47xE>

## Day 18 (25/8/2019) – Aínsa

This was a great day. We started at San Urbez parking, where we made a circular route along the Bellos river. It took us 45 min, but we could have spent much more time there since the area was very beautiful. We had great views of two **Dippers** and also saw **Red Squirrel**. It was nice to find a





few **Common Primrose** too. We then visited the vulture feeding station managed by the FCQ and it turned out to be fantastic. It was about midday and we were not less than 30 “talkative” people on a hill waiting for the distant vultures to arrive below eye level. I was actually quite sceptic, but



as soon as they fed, around 200 **Griffon Vulture** literally rained down out of nowhere. It was quite fast and impressive. A Red Kite, two **Egyptian Vulture** and a **Black Vulture** attended as well. Our guide name was Álvaro too, he was very informative. We then went for lunch and headed towards Revilla, where we were seriously going to look for closer views of Lammergeier. I had a hunch about pulling off at a particular site and soon after we did we saw a distant juvenile Lammergeier that came closer and closer, just if like it was curious about our big green van. We were so happy



about this sight that couldn't believe two adult **Lammergeiers** (presumably their parents) showed up right after. How graceful Lammergeiers are when flying. We enjoyed watching them coming and going for around one hour, it was very much sought after! It was a great ending of the day that we went to celebrate having a special dinner in Aínsa.

## Day 19 (26/8/2019) – From the Pyrenees to Belchite

A quick early foray into the abandoned village of Escuaín was a nice little walk. Dozens of House Martin gathered in the area. Not many other birds were seen, so we decided to walk towards La Valle feeding station. It was a bit of a long walk -6 Km twice-, but we were rewarded by quick views of 3 **Lammergeiers** flying overhead as we walked up. At least one of them was a juvenile, so perhaps they were the same ones we saw on the previous day. We also heard a few **Goldcrest** and



saw **Marsh Tit** and **Bee-eater** migrating south. We should point out that the last third of this beautiful path is in very poor condition and may not suit the traveling naturalist. It was nice to find pieces of bones that the Lammergeiers had let drop. At the feeding station there is a small hide and there we met two friendly guides working for the Aragón Government through the Sarga agency: Dani and Tony. They pointed out a few **Pyrenean Chamois**, quite distant though.

It was time to head back southward and leave the Pyrenees, which we had enjoyed very much. We drove south and made a couple of quick stops at the Sariñena lagoon, which was disappointing, for the lagoon's scarce facilities had no maintenance and the area was deeply affected by intensive agriculture. Aragón's environmental government is clearly focused in the Pyrenees, they haven't yet realised of the ecological value of the wetlands south of the Pyrenees. Apart from this reflexion, we managed to see a few **Bee-eater**, a **Marsh Harrier** and heard a Water Rail calling.

We set off towards the Belchite plains and enjoyed some early evening birding as the Sun was





about to set. It was a bit windy but we did see some interesting birds, including around 30 **Stone Curlew**, 10 **Red-legged Partridge** and saw a flock of 50 White Stork on passage. Our main target here was **Dupont's Lark** and we heard one at just a few meters from us. We looked for it till it was dark, but all we got was its unique and sweet sound.

## Day 20 (27/8/2019) – Belchite and Madrid

There had been thunderstorm at night and it was drizzling in the early morning. By 8:45 it had already cleared up so we started scouring the El Planerón SEO/Birdlife reserve. It was a very beautiful scenery and again we hear **Dupont's Lark**, up to 6 of them during the whole morning.



The Belchite plains are great for all sort of Larks. Some of them were difficult to identify because they were distant and shy, for example the **Calandra Lark**, which we saw around 20 individuals. **Corn Bunting** was also numerous and we saw again around 20 **Stone Curlew**. Other nice sights included **Hoopoe**, 3 **Iberian Grey Shrike**, 2 Marsh Harrier and we heard 2 **Little Owl**. A pair of juvenile **Red Fox** were actively hunting. A visit to a nearby pond produced **Sardinian Warbler** and Blackcap. A quick visit to the Lomaza Reserve produced our last Dupont's Lark of the tour besides a stunning juvenile of **Spiny-footed Lizard**. A very obliging visit to Belchite village was interesting for it preserves its old town just as it was left during the hard days of the Spanish Civil War.



We kept driving south till we reached the province of Madrid. It is remarkable how the busiest city in Spain is a great place to see birdlife without too much driving. We visited an IBA named Llanos del Torote and it was an excellent idea. Before we even got off the car a **Spanish Imperial Eagle**



dropped down to hunt near the road, it was a quick sight since we were driving and couldn't identify this large raptor till we pulled off and saw its magnificent colors and aquila proportions. It honestly doesn't look like the place where to expect to find this bird, but it is part of its hunting grounds. Quite happy about this sight, we seemed to be lucky with all the birds that followed. **Short-toed Eagle, Spotted Flycatcher, Bee-eater, Cetti's Warbler, Buzzard, Kestrel, Woodpigeon, Spotless Starling** and Greater Spotted Woodpecker were seen in just an hour spent at the spot.

We drove down to stay overnight "somewhere in La Mancha". La Mancha is a very interesting area for bird watching, similar to the more renowned Extremadura. It is the place where I grew up and started birding as a kid, but that's part of another story.

On the following day we drove all the way south to Ronda with just a quick stop at Santa Elena in Sierra Morena, where we saw another **Spanish Imperial Eagle** and some **Iberian Magpies**. We'll be back to this place soon to check for our Iberian Lynx tour in winter. For now we greet you if you have been patient enough to read this comprehensive trip report of Northern Spain. It's been a very ambitious holiday covering nearly all the main birding areas in central north Spain.

We hope you found this interesting and helps you enjoy the amazing birdlife we have throughout Spain.

Best wishes,

Álvaro & Virginia