

**ORNITHOLIDAYS TOUR TO SPAIN – THE PYRENEES**  
*Montane Raptorfest*

**26 May – 02 June 2013**



**Leader: Steve West**

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### A Personal Diary

#### **Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> May**

It was a late arrival for the group at Bilbao Airport and so without further ado we were on the motorway heading towards the Bardenas Reales. It was going to be a hello and goodnight arrival at the hotel, so we stopped for a quick snack en-route before arriving and getting to bed sometime around midnight.

#### **Monday 27<sup>th</sup> May**

It was a very short drive from our hotel before we were sampling the first birds of the Bardenas Reales. This is an arid region where erosion has worked over many years to sculpt some interesting and most unlikely forms from the sandstone bedrock. The vegetation is sparse and low, and so just right for a large number and variety of larks, in particular Calandra, Short-toed, Skylark, Crested and Thekla Larks, with another candidate we were hoping would appear sometime during the morning...

This is also ideal habitat for those delightful birds known as sandgrouse, and one of our first pleasant surprises was in fact encountering a group of nine Black-bellied Sandgrouse in flight. Shortly after, the attractive Pin-tailed Sandgrouse also appeared, announcing its presence by its far-reaching flight call. This they did at different times during the morning, flying past and around in pairs or small groups, and much to our delight.

This seemed an unlikely place to see a Great Reed Warbler, but sure enough a small reed-fringed pool held at least one of these loud and usually quite conspicuous birds. A female Montagu's Harrier was watched at close range near here before it flew around and started frightening Black-winged Stilts and other smaller birds, and another one was seen perched a little later on.

Driving along slowly, making short stops here and there enabled us to encounter a wide variety of interesting birds, which included Dartford Warbler, Iberian Grey Shrike, Black-eared Wheatear, European Bee-eater, Red-billed Chough, Rock Sparrow and Stone Curlew. By lunchtime we had also seen a number of birds of prey too, such as Eurasian Griffon Vulture, Egyptian Vulture, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle and Red Kite.

However, the most memorable thing about lunchtime was that we were munching into our sizeable sandwiches while listening to several Dupont's Larks in song, scanning the ground and the sky trying to set eyes upon this rare and elusive species. Eventually we discovered one, then more Dupont's Larks in display flight and happily all of us had the opportunity to formulate our own impressions about this difficult bird.

From here it was a short drive that took us to a hilltop hermitage. A Woodlark was singing, and there was a Little Owl characteristically perched on a stone building and poised for flight if we stared at it for too long. A Eurasian Golden Oriole put in the briefest of appearances, and before going for coffee with a party of priests we had also detected Sardinian Warbler, Eurasian Hoopoe, Cirl Bunting and Woodchat Shrike.

A Spotted Flycatcher appeared en-route to our next destination at Pitillas lagoon. Thunder clouds threatened on either side, but we somehow remained dry and kept on birding. At the lake we encountered summer-plumaged Black-necked Grebes, a Water Rail, Purple Herons, Yellow Wagtails, a single Black Tern among a small party of Whiskered Terns and waders such as Ringed Plover, Common Redshank, Black-winged Stilt and a lone Black-tailed Godwit. Zitting Cisticola and Common Skylark provided much of the audio entertainment and a single Eurasian Hobby shot past us to keep us alert.

It had been a good day's birding we agreed before packing up for the day and returning to our hotel.

#### **Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> May**

Before we completed our brief sojourn in the lowlands of Navarra we had a mission to embark upon: to spot some of the few remaining Great Bustards in the area while avoiding the rain. This was achieved by driving along the road between two likely villages, until the words "Bingo!" rang out – we had just discovered seven

very handsome males standing in a field at a prudent but reasonable distance from the road. We took great care not to scare them away, and we watched with satisfaction until we decided it was time to head for our next destination.

While driving to our next destination we saw a single European Turtle Dove, in addition to Egyptian Vultures and Eurasian Griffon Vultures and Black and Red Kites hanging around a feeding station in the hope of some fresh offerings that didn't seem to be on their way that day.

We pulled up in the Lumbier gorge car park and enjoyed a Melodious Warbler in full and defiant song on a windy treetop. Before the gorge itself we encountered Cirl Buntings and heard the song of the Iberian Chiffchaff, although the bird itself could not be seen, as it was singing from lush riverside vegetation.

An easy, level walk in the Lumbier gorge was good way to get close views of a number of rock-loving species such as Rock Sparrow, Blue Rock Thrush, Alpine Swift, Red-billed Chough and Black Redstart, while we also saw Grey Wagtail and White-throated Dipper on the river below. Much ambience was given to the walk by the rushing river and the spooky dark tunnels. We stopped at a nice little roadside restaurant/bar that made us a light lunch, and for some that was washed down by a refreshing glass of white wine, but not for me of course – I was driving.

Before too long we had passed the spectacular gorge of Arbayún and were in the Pyrenees proper, in these parts embellished with the typical architecture of the houses, grazing animals and large tracts of conifers or lush deciduous woodland.

We came across our first Red-backed Shrike, a sleepy Short-toed Eagle on a post and then another gorge, this time Burgui, and again spectacular views. However, we now had a real target bird to think of, the Lammergeier. So we drove up along the road as far as Isaba and back down again. Distant and brief views of two Lammergeiers circling a peak were no more than appetizers, so fortunately we came across a very obliging bird flying low over the road and in a place where we could stop, get out of the vehicle and enjoy close and reasonably prolonged views of this emblematic species before checking in at our rural hotel in Burgui.

### **Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> May**

The weather forecast was not good for today and even for the rest of the week, but we were determined to get the most from our time in the Pyrenees. Things started well enough: green pastures towards the head of the valley held some interesting birds, which normally would have been at higher altitudes. There were numerous summer-plumaged Water Pipits, a male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, several Northern Wheatears and a large flock of Alpine Choughs and Red-billed Choughs totaling around 300 birds in all. We also managed to see a Red-backed Shrike and a Marsh Tit before making a decision about going up to the high mountain pass and the border with France. Increasing rain, decreasing temperatures and mist-shrouded hillsides seemed to advise otherwise, so we turned back and developed a Plan B.

An addition to the plan was a Lammergeier, which appeared in the same spot as we had seen it the day before and landed on a rocky ledge. It was close enough for us to be able to see all the salient details we knew to look for, and it didn't seem to be particularly bothered by our presence. Was the bird sand-bathing perhaps? A Peregrine Falcon flew past to add to the interest, although it couldn't do much to distract us from the handsome Lammergeier we had within our sights.

When we stopped for lunch by a riverside woodland the threat of rain had gone. Eurasian Golden Orioles called conspicuously, but no-one could actually see them. We got brief views of Subalpine and Melodious Warblers at another stop, and then drove to San Juan de la Peña, a popular spot in international birding circles. A walk through the woodland, with increasingly overcast skies revealed Crested Tit, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Firecrest and Great Spotted Woodpecker before we eventually got brief views of the main bird we had come to see, the Black Woodpecker.

### **Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> May**

With no signs of improvement in the weather conditions we decided to think laterally, and rather than head upwards along the valley we tried different valleys to our east. This strategy might have been effective at

another time, but not today. When we got to the mountain refuge, where we were planning a walk to look for Wallcreeper, it was raining, and quite heavily. And worse still, the refuge was closed, so there wasn't even a consoling cup of tea! We heard some Citril Finches somewhere among the trees but the heavy rain dissuaded us from waiting around any further.

After a hot chocolate in the village of Siresa we were out and about once more, looking for a likely spot with some interesting birds. We saw Egyptian Vulture, Cirl Bunting and Woodchat Shrike, and then searched for and found a couple of Eurasian Wrynecks.

We persisted with the idea of going east and followed the road up to the mountain refuge at Aragües. The scenery was magnificent, and it wasn't raining for the time being! We had our picnic lunches and saw a couple of Citril Finches, as well as a Red-backed Shrike, several Water Pipits, Crested Tits and both species of chough. After our picnic we headed back west via the Ansó Valley to enjoy more superb scenery and worsening weather. Several Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes, both male and female, were gathered around a ruined building. However, our second attempt to reach the mountain pass came to an end when the thermometer reached 2°C, and falling, and we encountered a snow plough but still there was ice on the road. This was not the way it was supposed to be at the end of May!

### **Friday 31<sup>st</sup> May**

We were in need of some bright weather so we decided to head south to seek the sun and some birds. Luckily we made the right decision!

Our first stop was Riglos, well not quite: a couple of roadside stops before reaching the village revealed European Turtle Dove and Melodious, Sardinian, Subalpine and Orphean Warblers. At Riglos itself we watched Rock Sparrows on the church and a Blue Rock Thrush on the vertical rock faces.

From here we continued on past Huesca, seeing White Storks on their nests, to a ruined castle on a barren-looking hillside. This was quite a special place for birds, and as hoped we saw Black, Black-eared and Northern Wheatears, Thekla and Crested Larks, Rock Sparrow, European Bee-eaters and another Blue Rock Thrush. We enjoyed our lunch and the sun on our faces before getting ready to head for the next site. Just before setting off though I heard a faint call, and sure enough it had come from a Spectacled Warbler, which we all watched darting up and down the hillside.

The next site was a sun-warmed river valley, where we spent some time enjoying a variety of birds including Orphean Warbler, Common Nightingale, Western Bonelli's Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher, as well as raptors such as Booted Eagle and Red Kite just above our heads. However, perhaps the main attraction were several noisy Eurasian Golden Orioles, singing from hiding in tall poplar trees and darting out now and then to investigate some nearby cherry trees in search of one of their favourite foods, ripe cherries!

We had one more site to investigate before driving back to our valley: the Salto de Roldán. A Tawny Pipit gave us good views before we reached the Salto de Roldán, the last stretch along a very narrow and precipitous road. Keep quiet everybody, let the driver concentrate! At this spectacular piece of rock we encountered Citril Finches, a lovely displaying male Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush and spent enjoyable moments looking down on Eurasian Griffon Vultures, Egyptian Vultures, kites and even a hovering Short-toed Eagle.

### **Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> June**

Today would be our last attempt to get a true taste of the high mountain birds (with Alpine Accentor, Snowfinch, Ring Ouzel and a few others mostly in mind). So we drove up along the road that would take us to the French border once more - and we kept on driving until we got to the first French village and cup of coffee that we could find! Thick fog all along the way and low temperatures, and a completely snow-covered landscape put stop to any thoughts of birding the high altitudes, so we started working on an incipient French list by walking around the pleasant village of Arrete - Spotted Flycatcher, Grey Wagtail and Song Thrush were among the first birds to feature.

By the time we travelled back into Spain nothing much had changed at the pass, so we had our lunch in the hotel and took a couple of walks in the vicinity of Burgui. This is where Vaughn really came into his own,

spotting the orchids along the way, with Lady Orchid, Monkey Orchid, and Lax-flowered Orchid to his credit. There were few birds apart from Firecrest and some of the more usual raptors. Another short walk in a different direction revealed White-throated Dippers - under a bridge of course – and a calling Eurasian Wryneck, and then we retired to the hotel for our last night together.

### **Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> June**

We said our grateful goodbye to our hotel and made our way towards Vitoria along the back roads, as it were. We were delayed temporarily by a mountain bike race, but before too long we were leaving the car and listening to an Iberian Chiffchaff. We managed to get brief views of this bird before it decided to part company with us and then we embarked on a pleasant walk through the forest of Izki. Here we saw Cirl Bunting, Eurasian Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper and several delightful Man Orchids, thanks again to Vaughn.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to the participants of this revised Pyrenees tour for placing their trust in Ornitholidays, for their flexibility and enthusiasm despite some very difficult weather conditions, and for sharing their leisure time and interesting insights and anecdotes with me.

We are also grateful for the friendly and professional service we received at both of our hotels in Navarra, and hope that similar experiences can be repeated in the future. But with a bit more sunshine please!

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June 2013

### **Weather report**

During the week we experienced temperatures ranging from 2°C to 24°C, and more than a usual fair share of rain, cloudy or overcast conditions, and cold temperatures for the latitude and the time of the year. These were not normal conditions by any means, in fact it was one of the worst Mays in most local people's memory, not only in Navarra, but in many other parts of Spain and indeed in Western Europe.

This influenced the itinerary and what we could see considerably: we made three attempts to bird the highest mountain area but with no luck. We were either turned back because of rain or ice, or we had to contend with blankets of snow and fog. Wind and cold were also dominant for much of the time lower down too, so no wonder butterflies were in very short supply.

Nevertheless, there is no question that this is a beautiful part of Spain, and given more normal weather conditions we are confident that the combination of plains, lakes, hillsides, mountains and forest that this itinerary offers will exceed expectations in years to come.

## CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING TOUR

No of days recorded	Abundance Scale (max for any one day)
1 2h means seen on 1 day and heard on 2 other days	1 = 1 - 4 2 = 5 - 9 3 = 10 - 100 4 = > 100

The sequence and nomenclature of this list follow Collins Bird Guide 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2010.

SPECIES	No of days recorded	Abundance Scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Gadwall	1	1	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Mallard	2	2	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Common Pochard	1	2	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	1	1	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Red-legged Partridge	2	2	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Common Quail	- 1h	1	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>
Little Grebe	1	2	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	1	1	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	1	2	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
Cattle Egret	1	3	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Little Egret	1	1	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Grey Heron	4	2	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Purple Heron	1	1	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
White Stork	3	2	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Lammergeier	2	1	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
Eurasian Griffon Vulture	6	3	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>
Egyptian Vulture	6	3	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>
Short-toed Eagle	3	1	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
Booted Eagle	5	2	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>
Red Kite	6	2	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Black Kite	6	3	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	4	1	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Montagu's Harrier	1	1	<i>Circus pygargus</i>
Common Buzzard	5	1	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Common Kestrel	5	2	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Eurasian Hobby	1	1	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>
Peregrine Falcon	1	1	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Water Rail	1	1	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Common Moorhen	1	2	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	1	3	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Great Bustard	1	2	<i>Otis tarda</i>
Black-winged Stilt	1	2	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Stone Curlew	2	2	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>
Common Ringed Plover	1	1	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Black-tailed Godwit	1	1	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Common Redshank	1	1	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	2	2	<i>Larus michahellis</i>
Whiskered Tern	1	2	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>
Black Tern	1	1	<i>Chlidonia niger</i>
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	1	2	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	1	2	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>
Feral Pigeon (Rock Dove)	5	3	<i>Columba livia</i>
Common Wood Pigeon	4	2	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	6	2	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
European Turtle Dove	2	1	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>
Common Cuckoo	- 3h	1	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Tawny Owl	- 2h	1	<i>Strix aluco</i>
Common Swift	5	3	<i>Apus apus</i>
Alpine Swift	2	1	<i>Apus melba</i>

Eurasian Hoopoe	3	1	<i>Upupa epops</i>
European Bee-eater	2	2	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
Black Woodpecker	1	1	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
(Iberian) Green Woodpecker	1	1h	<i>Picus viridis</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	2	1h	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Eurasian Wryneck	1	1h	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>
Common Skylark	1		<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Crested Lark	4		<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Thekla Lark	2		<i>Galerida theklae</i>
Woodlark	1	1h	<i>Lullula arborea</i>
Greater Short-toed Lark	1		<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
Calandra Lark	1		<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>
Dupont's Lark	1		<i>Chersophilus duponti</i>
Common Sand Martin	1		<i>Riparia riparia</i>
Eurasian Crag Martin	5		<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
Barn Swallow	5		<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Common House Martin	6		<i>Delichon urbica</i>
Tawny Pipit	2		<i>Anthus campestris</i>
Water Pipit	3		<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
Yellow Wagtail	1		<i>Motacilla flava</i>
Grey Wagtail	4		<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
White Wagtail	6		<i>Motacilla alba</i>
White-throated Dipper	2		<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
European Robin	3	1h	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Common Nightingale	2	3h	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>
Black Redstart	6		<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Northern Wheatear	4		<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Black-eared Wheatear	2		<i>Oenanthe hispanica</i>
Black Wheatear	1		<i>Oenanthe leucura</i>
Common Stonechat	6		<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
Blue Rock Thrush	2		<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush	3		<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>
Song Thrush	1	3h	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Mistle Thrush	1	1h	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Common Blackbird	5		<i>Turdus merula</i>
Blackcap	2	1h	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Western Orphean Warbler	1		<i>Sylvia hortensis</i>
Spectacled Warbler	1		<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>
Sardinian Warbler	1	1h	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Subalpine Warbler	2	1h	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>
Dartford Warbler	2		<i>Sylvia undata</i>
Cetti's Warbler	-	2h	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
European Reed Warbler	1		<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Great Reed Warbler	1		<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>
Melodious Warbler	3	2h	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>
Western Bonelli's Warbler	2		<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>
Common Chiffchaff	-	1h	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Iberian Chiffchaff	1	1h	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>
Goldcrest	1	1h	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Firecrest	2	2h	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>
Eurasian Wren	2	2h	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Spotted Flycatcher	5		<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
Great Tit	5		<i>Parus major</i>
Coal Tit	-	1h	<i>Periparus ater</i>
European Blue Tit	3		<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Crested Tit	1	1h	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
Marsh Tit	1		<i>Poecile palustris</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	1		<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Iberian Grey Shrike	1		<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
Red-backed Shrike	4		<i>Lanius collurio</i>
Woodchat Shrike	3		<i>Lanius senator</i>
Common Magpie	5		<i>Pica pica</i>
Eurasian Jay	4		<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>

Red-billed Chough	6	3	<i>Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax</i>
Alpine Chough	3	3	<i>Pyrrhonorax graculus</i>
Western Jackdaw	1	2	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Carrion Crow	6	2	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Common Raven	5	3	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Spotless Starling	2	3	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
Eurasian Golden Oriole	2 2h	1	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>
House Sparrow	6	3	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Rock Sparrow	4	2	<i>Petronia petronia</i>
Common Chaffinch	4 1h	2	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Common Linnet	6	1	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
European Goldfinch	6	3	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
European Greenfinch	6	2	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Citrel Finch	2	1	<i>Serinus cirinella</i>
European Serin	6	2	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
Cirl Bunting	4 1h	2	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>
Corn Bunting	6	3	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>
<b>MAMMALS</b>			
European Rabbit	1	1	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>

This list represents those birds and other animals seen by party members of this tour.