

ORNITHOLIDAYS TOUR TO SPAIN – SOUTHERN CATALONIA
Birds, Butterflies & Bouquets

10 – 17 MAY 2012



Leader: Steve West

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A Personal Diary

Thursday 10th May

The Ornitholidays group and guide were united at Barcelona Airport and were soon on their way south for the short drive to the Montsant Natural Park area.

This very Mediterranean massif is a harmonious blend of quiet, winding roads, sunny slopes and terraces with vineyards and pinewoods, quaint hilltop villages, peaceful river valleys and huge domineering rock faces.

The birdlife here corresponds, and we spent the remainder of our first afternoon in Montsant making the acquaintance of birds such as Sardinian Warbler, Melodious and Subalpine Warblers, small groups of colourful European Bee-eaters, European Serin, Cirl Bunting, Corn Bunting, Black Redstart and Spotless Starling. A Pied Flycatcher was a late migrant, silent unlike the Common Nightingales which seemed to be singing ceaselessly on every bend of the road.

And we had all of this in the vicinity of our friendly hotel in a stunning location at Morera de Montsant.

Friday 11th May

Our first destination was just a short drive away, and in fact was visible from our hotel: the clifftop village of Siurana. Legend has it that Abdelazia, the last Moorish queen, jumped to her death from these cliffs rather than be captured by the Christian besiegers. She was mounted on her white horse, which obviously had other thoughts about jumping off cliffs, and tried to brake at the last moment by digging in its hoofs into the solid rock.

Before we could get to Siurana however we had already spotted European Bee-eater and two Red-rumped Swallows. Once a very localised species to Catalonia the Red-rumped Swallow is now expanding its range in the northeast corner of Spain, although this particular area was a stronghold for the species from many years ago.

Shortly after we came across a Grey Wagtail and a very obliging Firecrest alongside a small stream. This was followed by a walk through the quiet and lovely Siurana, admiring the views, butterflies and some birds like Cirl Bunting, Eurasian Crag Martin and Alpine Swift.

From here we drove on towards Ulldemolins, with brief stop to look at Woodchat Shrike and European Turtle Dove en-route. Lunch at Ulldemolins was in the shady woodland surrounding a Hermitage equipped with picnic tables, toilets, running water and even a children's playground - not that we used the latter!

Western Bonelli's Warblers and Short-toed Treecreeper kept us entertained until it was time to engage on a short excursion down to the river Montsant. The deep pools looked very inviting in the afternoon heat, although we reluctantly declined the invitation.

Later on in the afternoon we had good views of the Woodlark, and watched and listened as it sang its melodious, melancholy song. A Tawny Pipit and Rock Sparrow also put in a brief appearance, while back near the hotel we tracked down the male Western Orphean Warbler we had heard singing the previous evening. And with great success, getting really close up views of this rather different and attractive Sylvia warbler.

Saturday 12th May

Not far down the road from Morera stand the ruins of Scala Dei. This was a Carthusian monastery, which stood proud in its magnificent setting, until it was abandoned after liberal reforms in the 19th Century.

It was only mid-morning and it was already getting quite warm, something which did not go unnoticed by the butterflies. On a short but pleasant walk here we saw Spotted Flycatcher and had tantalizing glimpses of Golden Orioles, and heard but could not see a Eurasian Wryneck.

We followed the road further, winding its way down deeper into this fascinating massif, passing terraced slopes, vineyards and cliffs. A Blue Rock Thrush sat on a lofty perch and eventually we encountered our first Eurasian Griffon Vulture of the trip.

However, our main bird target of the day was another one - Bonelli's Eagle. A rare and declining species over most of Europe thankfully this magnificent bird seems to be holding its ground in these mountains. Our search bore its fruits, and before long we were watching a superb adult Bonelli's Eagle sailing in and landing on the rocks in front of us and at a nice close range.

Well satisfied with our encounter we made way to another hilltop hermitage, in search of shade, a breeze and somewhere to sit and enjoy our picnics. This we found, as well as a marvellous opportunity to compare Scarce Swallowtail and Swallowtail butterflies and commanding views of no fewer than seven Spanish provinces.

A European Honey Buzzard, more Eurasian Griffon Vultures and a pair of Bonelli's Eagles made for some good afternoon fare, while views of Woodchat Shrikes punctuated the drive back towards Morera de Montsant.

After a welcome siesta and chillout we arranged a guided visit to a nearby wine cellar. This and the corresponding wine tasting was voted a great success!

Sunday 13th May

One measure of a good local guide is his/her ability to improvise; or so was the explanation for the modification of today's itinerary! The morning saw us driving to the plains of Lleida to the north, in order to catch up with some very special birds - plains birds.

Before long we were criss-crossing the plains of southern Lleida on a network of dusty tracks, coaxing the countryside to reveal its avian treasures. This it did, rewarding us with great views of Little Bustard, Stone Curlew, European Roller, Montagu's Harrier, Western Marsh Harrier, Short-toed Eagle, Eurasian Hobby, Little Owl and Iberian Grey Shrike. Before the midday heat took complete control we had also seen Calandra Larks and had had excellent views of three Great Spotted Cuckoos, one of which was feeding on insects on the path in front of our vehicle.

We had enjoyed a great morning's birding, better than we had even hoped for. We left the plains around midday, but not before locating a single Wood Sandpiper and a typically loud Great Reed Warbler on a small reservoir. Our next task was to find a shady picnic site, and then to drive the short distance to the monastery of Poblet. We had decided to go on one of the guided visits around this historical building, to admire its cloisters and grounds.

Then the winding roads came into their own once more and we made our way past Prades and out to an open area full of butterflies, flowers and Common Skylarks. We also saw Eurasian Hoopoe and Rock Sparrow before returning content to our hotel.

Monday 14th May

Today was going to be another very "birdy" day, but with the accent on wetland birds rather than dryland ones. The Ebro Delta is one of the most important wetlands in the Western Mediterranean and is host to a great variety of herons, gulls, terns, waders and more. Would a day here be enough we asked ourselves?

By making well-timed stops at the key sites on both the north and south sides of the river we effectively managed to see virtually all the species we had hoped for. The extensive ricefields hold good numbers of Audouin's Gull, Squacco Heron and Whiskered and Gull-billed Terns, while the northern bay "El Fangar" is an excellent place to see a selection of waders in addition to the handsome Slender-billed Gull and lots of Greater Flamingos.

Purple Swamphen, Glossy Ibis, Red-crested Pochard, Black-crowned Night Heron, Purple Heron and even a scarce White-winged Tern all showed well from different observation posts or towers, and we eventually laid eyes on the often elusive Little Bittern too.

No fewer than nine Collared Pratincoles lined up for observation, one of my personal favourites of the day. Additionally we also tracked down some interesting songbirds like Greater and Lesser Short Toed Larks, Tree Sparrow, Zitting Cisticola, Yellow Wagtail and a single Northern Wheatear, a late migrant. Now we could head to our hotel in the mountains of Els Ports in the knowledge that the Ebro Delta had done us justice!

Tuesday 15th May

Until now we had seen Eurasian Griffon Vultures in small numbers, so nothing had prepared us for the approximately 600 birds we would soon be watching plummeting down to tear at wheelbarrow loads of rabbits! En-route to the nearby feeding station we spotted a single Egyptian Vulture, was it one the birds we were going to see later, trying to get at a morsel between hundreds of squawking Eurasian Griffon Vultures?

Marvelling at the bird spectacle we had just witnessed we made our way into the heart of els Ports Natural Park. The rocky scenery combined with streams and pinewoods was really magnificent, and although birds are not abundant here there is usually something to attract the attention. Crested Tits and Firecrests called from the pines, while around the rocky crags the occasional Peregrine and Short-toed Eagle wheeled.

We made short incursions into several sites, noting European Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, a couple of Grey Wagtails, a Eurasian Nuthatch and a Blue Rock Thrush darting from one rocky perch to another. Another enjoyable day was coming to an end.

Wednesday 16th May

For our last full day of this, Ornitholidays' first Southern Catalonia tour, we drove to discover the birdlife of some impressive cliffs, flanking the grand River Ebro. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk flew past us before we arrived, surprisingly the first of the trip.

At our destination we surveyed the surroundings and took a short walk, getting views of Cetti's, European Reed and Great Reed Warblers and a Purple Heron, Little Egret and Black-crowned Night Heron over the river itself. We watched a pair of Peregrines and some Alpine Swifts patrolling the clifftops, and then searched a scrubby hillside for some interesting birds. We found them in the form of Rock Sparrow, Sardinian and singing Dartford Warblers, as well as several Thekla Larks. An approaching eagle turned out to be a pale phase Booted Eagle, a welcome addition to the day's birds.

Lunchtime was approaching so again it was time to seek out one of those very convenient hilltop hermitages. This one had marvellous views over the River Ebro, including the church tower of a village flooded to make a reservoir. An Osprey was another welcome surprise, as were plentiful butterflies flitting around the flowers at the base of the hermitage.

Early afternoon saw us pull up at Nonaspe, which we decided to investigate further. White Storks were nesting on the village buildings and flying between here and the river. We spotted a Common Kingfisher, Eurasian Hoopoe and Golden Oriole and followed the river a little way to get views of European Bee-eaters and Black-eared Wheatear.

Our last stop was at a hillside near Gandesa, known as the 700 hill, where a desperate battle was fought at the end of the Spanish Civil War. A single Red-billed Chough was seen from this strategic viewpoint and then we returned to our hotel, pausing first of all to admire a very ancient olive tree, lo Parot, reputedly at least 2,000 years old and the oldest tree in the Iberian Peninsula.

Acknowledgements

A heartfelt thank you for the tour participants who placed their trust in me and in Ornitholidays for what was a brand new tour. With their help, enthusiasm and positive feedback we concluded the tour with a smile and a great feeling of satisfaction that a good time had been enjoyed by all.

Special mention should also go to Tomás and Ricard at the Balcó del Priorat hotel for their dedication, flexibility and friendliness to our group. And for the excellent food too!

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July 2012

Itinerary and weather

Thursday 10 th May	Barcelona Airport > Morera de Montsant Warm and sunny. 28 °C.
Friday 11 th May	Siurana > Ulldemolins > Albarca 33°C. Hot and sunny.
Saturday 12 th May	Scala Dei > Cabacés > La Figuera 35°C. Hot and sunny.
Sunday 13 th May	Belianes > Poblet > Albarca 28°C. Sunny and clouds, breezy.
Monday 14 th May	Ebro Delta > Arnes 24°C. Sunny and windy.
Tuesday 15 th May	Valderrobles > Beceite > Estrets d'Arnes 23.5°C. Sunny and windy.
Wednesday 16 th May	Faió > Nonaspe > Gandesa 23.5°C. Sunny and windy.
Thursday 17 th May	Barcelona Airport

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

SPECIES	No of days recorded	Abundance Scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
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The sequence and nomenclature of this list follow Collins Bird Guide 2nd Edition 2010.

Common Shelduck	1	1	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Mallard	3	3	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Gadwall	1	2	<i>Anas strepera</i>
Red-crested Pochard	1	2	<i>Netta rufina</i>
Red-legged Partridge	2	1	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Little Grebe	1	1	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	1	1	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Great Cormorant	1	1	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Little Bittern	1	1	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>
Black-crowned Night Heron	1	2	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Cattle Egret	1	2	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Little Egret	2	2	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Squacco Heron	1	2	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>
Great Egret	1	1	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Grey Heron	1	2	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Purple Heron	2	2	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
White Stork	1	2	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Glossy Ibis	1	3	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
Greater Flamingo	1	3	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
European Honey Buzzard	1	1	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>
Eurasian Griffon Vulture	5	4	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>
Egyptian Vulture	1	1	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>
Osprey	1	1	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Short-toed Eagle	4	1	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
Booted Eagle	1	1	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>
Bonelli's Eagle	2	1	<i>Hieraaetus fasciatus</i>
Black Kite	3	1	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	1	1	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Montagu's Harrier	1	1	<i>Circus pygargus</i>
Common Buzzard	1	1	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	1	1	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Kestrel	7	1	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Eurasian Hobby	1	1	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>
Peregrine Falcon	2	1	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Common Moorhen	1	3	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	1	3	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Purple Swamphen	1	3	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>
Little Bustard	1	2	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher	1	1	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Pied Avocet	1	2	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Black-winged Stilt	1	3	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
Stone Curlew	1	2	<i>Burhinus oedicephalus</i>
Collared Pratincole	1	2	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>
Common Ringed Plover	1	2	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Kentish Plover	1	2	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Grey Plover	1	1	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Sanderling	1	2	<i>Calidris alba</i>
Dunlin	1	2	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Curlew Sandpiper	1	3	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>
Little Stint	1	2	<i>Calidris minuta</i>

Common Sandpiper	1	1	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Wood Sandpiper	1	1	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
Common Redshank	1	1	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Bar-tailed Godwit	1	1	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
Black-headed Gull	1	3	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Slender-billed Gull	1	2	<i>Larus genei</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	2	3	<i>Larus michahellis</i>
Audouin's Gull	1	3	<i>Larus audouinii</i>
Little Tern	1	2	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>
Sandwich Tern	1	2	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>
Common Tern	1	1	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Gull-billed Tern	1	2	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>
Whiskered Tern	1	3	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>
White-winged Tern	1	1	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Feral Pigeon (Rock Dove)	7	3	<i>Columba livia</i>
Stock Dove	3	1	<i>Columba oenas</i>
Common Wood Pigeon	6	2	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	7	2	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
European Turtle Dove	3	1	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>
Monk Parakeet	1	1	<i>Myiopsitta monachus</i>
Great Spotted Cuckoo	1	1	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>
Common Cuckoo	-	4h	1 <i>Cuculus canorus</i>
Little Owl	1	1	<i>Athene noctua</i>
Common Swift	7	3	<i>Apus apus</i>
Alpine Swift	2	2	<i>Apus melba</i>
Eurasian Hoopoe	3	1	<i>Upupa epops</i>
Common Kingfisher	1	1	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
European Bee-eater	7	3	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
European Roller	1	2	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>
European Green Woodpecker	1	1	<i>Picus viridis</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	1	1	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Common Skylark	1	2	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Crested Lark	3	2	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Thekla Lark	1	1	<i>Galerida theklae</i>
Woodlark	1	1	<i>Lullula arborea</i>
Greater Short-toed Lark	1	1	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>
Lesser Short-toed Lark	1	2	<i>Calandrella rufescens</i>
Calandra Lark	1	1	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>
Eurasian Crag Martin	3	2	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
Barn Swallow	7	3	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Red-rumped Swallow	1	1	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>
Common House Martin	6	3	<i>Delichon urbica</i>
Tawny Pipit	1	1	<i>Anthus campestris</i>
Yellow Wagtail	1	2	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
Grey Wagtail	2	1	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
White Wagtail	5	1	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
European Robin	7	1	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Common Nightingale	3	4h	2 <i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>
Black Redstart	3	1	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Northern Wheatear	1	1	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Common Stonechat	6	1	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
Blue Rock Thrush	3	1	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>
Mistle Thrush	5	2	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Common Blackbird	7	2	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Blackcap	1	3h	2 <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Western Orphean Warbler	1	4h	1 <i>Sylvia hortensis</i>
Sardinian Warbler	7	2	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Subalpine Warbler	1	1	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>
Dartford Warbler	1	1	<i>Sylvia undata</i>
Cetti's Warbler	1	1	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
European Reed Warbler	1	1	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Great Reed Warbler	3	1	<i>Acrocephalus arundinaceus</i>
Melodious Warbler	6	1	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>
Zitting Cisticola	1	1	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>

Western Bonelli's Warbler	5	2	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>
Common Chiffchaff	- 1h	1	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Firecrest	3	1	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>
Winter Wren	- 6h	1	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Pied Flycatcher	1	1	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>
Great Tit	6	2	<i>Parus major</i>
Coal Tit	4	2	<i>Periparus ater</i>
European Blue Tit	6	2	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Crested Tit	1	1	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
Long-tailed Tit	2	2	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	1	1	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Short-toed Treecreeper	1 2h	1	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
Iberian Grey Shrike	1	1	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
Woodchat Shrike	5	1	<i>Lanius senator</i>
Common Magpie	6	2	<i>Pica pica</i>
Eurasian Jay	6	2	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Red-billed Chough	1	1	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
Western Jackdaw	1	2	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Carrion Crow	2	1	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Common Raven	3	1	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Spotless Starling	7	3	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
House Sparrow	7	3	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	1	1	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Rock Sparrow	3	1	<i>Petronia petronia</i>
Common Chaffinch	5	2	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
European Goldfinch	7	2	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
European Greenfinch	5	2	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
European Serin	7	2	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
Cirl Bunting	7	2	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>
Corn Bunting	5	2	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>

BUTTERFLIES

Papilionidae



Swallowtail

1 *Papilio machaon*



Scarce Swallowtail

2 *Iphiclides podalirius*



Spanish Festoon

1 *Zerynthia rumina*

Pieridae



Orange Tip

1 *Anthocharis cardamines*



Provence Orange Tip

3 *Anthocharis euphenoides*



Black Veined White

1 *Aporia crataegi*



Berger's Clouded Yellow

1 *Colias alfacariensis*










Clouded Yellow

2 *Colias crocea*



Cleopatra

1 *Gonepteryx cleopatra*

	Common Brimstone	1	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>
	Wood White	1	<i>Leptidea sinapis</i>
	Large White	2	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
	Southern Small White	1	<i>Pieris mannii</i>
	Green-veined White	1	<i>Pieris napi</i>
	Small White	1	<i>Pieris rapae</i>
	Bath White	2	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>

Lycaenidae





	Green Hairstreak	1	<i>Callophrys rubi</i>
	Green-Underside Blue	1	<i>Glaucopsyche alexis</i>
	Escher's Blue	1	<i>Polyommatus escheri</i>
	Blue Spot Hairstreak	2	<i>Satyrium spini</i>

Libytheidae

	Nettle Tree Butterfly	1	<i>Libythea celtis</i>
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Nymphalidae

	Wall Brown	2	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>
	Iberian Marbled White	2	<i>Melanargia lachesis</i>
	Speckled Wood	2	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>
	Spanish Gatekeeper	2	<i>Pyronia bathseba</i>
	Small Tortoiseshell	2	<i>Aglais urticae</i>
	Painted Lady	1	<i>Cynthia cardui</i>
	Marsh Fritillary	1	<i>Euphydryas aurinia</i>
	Spanish Fritillary	1	<i>Euphydryas desfontainii</i>

	Southern White Admiral	1	<i>Limenitis reducta</i>
	Provençal Fritillary	1	<i>Melitaea deione</i>
	Spotted Fritillary	1	<i>Melitaea didyma</i>
	Knapweed Fritillary	1	<i>Melitaea phoebe</i>
	Lesser Spotted Fritillary	1	<i>Melitaea trivia</i>
	Red Admiral	1	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>

Hesperiidae

	Southern Grizzled Skipper	1	<i>Pyrgus malvoides</i>
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Butterflies

The general pace of this tour was relaxed, which allowed us time to look at the butterflies. Without going into a drawn-out daily account there were some interesting observations which are worth mentioning, and which will hopefully be a stimulus for butterfly fans to join future tours!

Some of the most conspicuous and widespread of the species during our time together included the Scarce Swallowtail, the Swallowtail, the Clouded Yellow and the Provence Orange Tip. Whites were often encountered too, including the delightful Black-veined White and the Iberian Marbled White.

The only hairstreaks we saw were the Green and the Blue Spot Hairstreak, while there were more blues than we managed to identify, the latter being Escher's Blue and Green Underside Blue.

Fritillaries were numerous and quite varied, Provençal, Spotted, Knapweed, possible Lesser Spotted and Spanish Fritillary were just those we managed to get reasonable views of to consider attempting identification.

Nettle Tree Butterfly, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Southern White Admiral, Spanish Festoon and Cleopatra were seen only at one or two localities, but perhaps were enjoyed all the more for that!

This is a marvellous area for butterflies and the Ornitholidays butterfly list would really benefit from having more participants searching for these winged wonders in future years.

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