

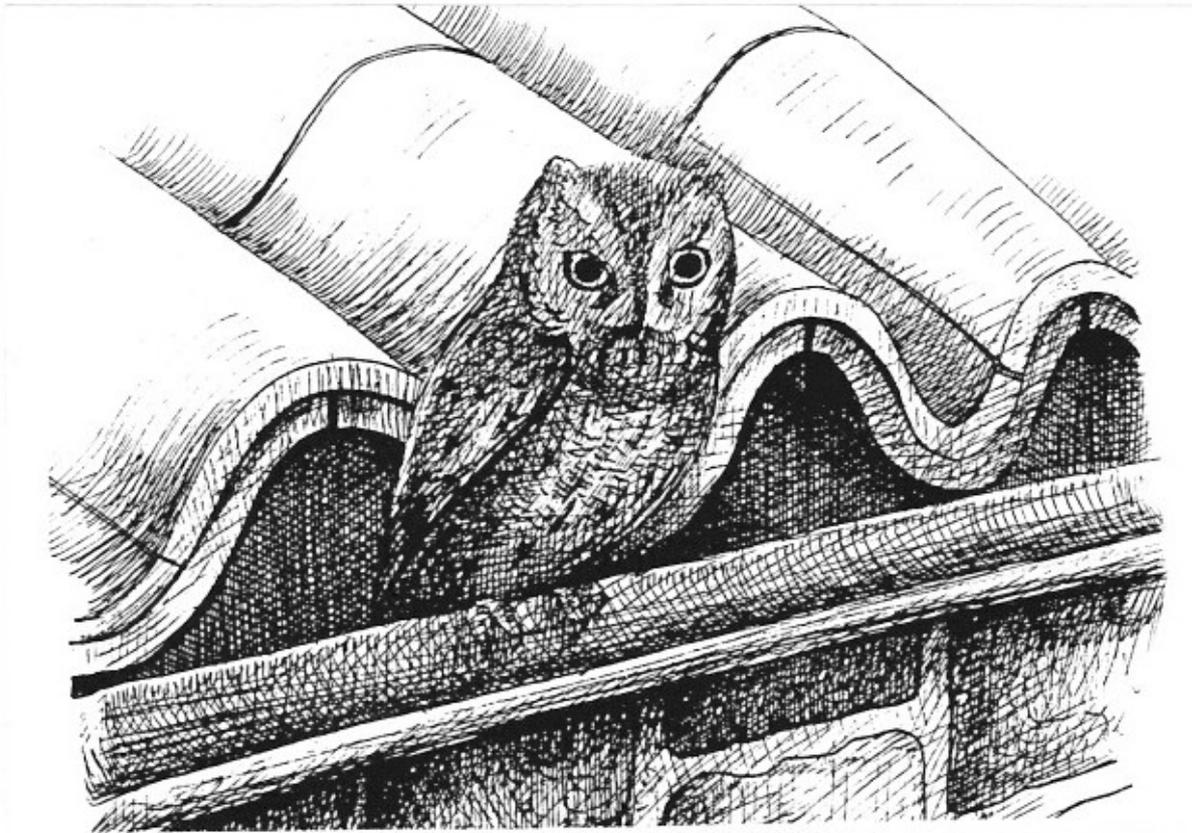
Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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SPRING IN THE SPANISH PYRENEES

25 April - 4 May 1994

Spring in the Spanish Pyrenees
25 April – 4 May 1994

Participants

Ian and Kate Anderson
David and Ruth Atkins
Margaret Biggs
Gwenda Cunningham
Mavis Stevens
Marcella Hume
Quentin Mair
Roger and Hazel Pawley
Phyllis Stacey
Margaret Wemys

Leaders: Chris Durdin, Norwich
 Rob Hume, Sandy

Juan Carlos Cirera Martínez from the Sociedad Española de Ornitología (Spanish Ornithological Society) spoke to the group on 2 May. He was presented with a Honeyguide cheque for £325 towards the SEO's Spanish Steppes project, plus 5,000 pesetas from two other naturalists, Shirley and Derek, who we used to see at Prudencia's most evenings. A thank you letter from Juan Carlos appears at the back of this report.

Our hosts: John and Vivien Boucher, The Painting School and Centre for Study Tours, Calle Mayor 30, 22770 Berdún, Huesca, Spain.

Report and illustrations by Rob Hume

Monday 25 April - Bilbao to Berdún

Heathrow was warm and sunny; Bilbao was ... well, dull.

It's so cold' said John Boucher at the airport. 'We had snow yesterday on the hills immediately north of Berdún: not much, but it was still snow.' The spring had been cold after an earlier warm spell: the weather seemed, for the moment, to be a bit uncertain.

In the event, our stay at Berdún proved to be the most superbly clear, sunny period. At first it was cool, crisp and sunny, but it gradually became hazier but genuinely hot. Only at the end did we have a little rain overnight, then a big thunderstorm on the night before we left: and the return journey to Bilbao was cloudy, dull and cool. The weather seemed to have been specially ordered just for us, the best of the year at just the right moment.

For those who had not been before Berdún, I'm sure, lived up to its reputation. Perched on top of its steep-sided hill, dominated at one end by the square tower (once a fortress) of the church, it truly comes from another age. From a bend in the road by the reservoir, close to Tiermas, it suddenly appears in the far distance, looking, as John says, like a great ship mid-valley. Finally, as a red kite appears as if to greet us, the coach turns off the main Pamplona-Jaca road and swings up the side of the hill in a series of tight zigzags: how high will it get? How far will we have to carry our suitcases?

In the event it gets almost to the sole remaining archway, one of three ancient entrances to the town, just a steep ramp from the turn through the arch into the town square. And, thank goodness, the cases are carried up by car, using a more roundabout route, by John's son, also John, and Vivien Boucher.

How far to carry the suitcases was the last thing on Roger and Hazel's minds: more like 'one of our suitcases is missing – what exactly was in it?' After a long delay in Bilbao airport we had to leave minus one piece of baggage, with a promise from British Airways that it would be delivered, by taxi, the next day. It was, too!

Berdún looks wonderful from the valley below: but scarcely better than the valley looks from Berdún. Although the fields are largely clean, uniform cereal crops (or, in reduced proportion this year, oilseed rape) the splendid mixture of large and small fields, growing crops and bare, deep red earth, steep, eroded gullies and dark scarp slopes covered in evergreen oak, barns and tracks and sparse old orchards, makes a gloriously rich and varied scene. It is the variety of colours and textures that makes the landscape so interesting and pleasing to the eye. The backdrop is a series of long, low hills and higher, more distant sierra - Sierra de la Peña and Sierra Oroel, the latter a near-perfect cone from this viewpoint.

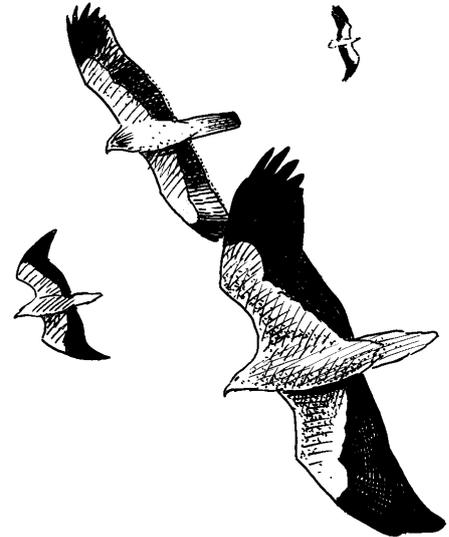
And then there's the view in the other direction - looking north past the low, dark grey-green foothills to the snowy peaks of the High Pyrenees. There's not a moment to lose: such a view might, after all, be obliterated by rain and low cloud tomorrow!

Soon we were settled in the Painting School, two houses in parallel streets. What a difference it is from a modern glass-and-concrete hotel. And quickly to Prudencia's little bar and restaurant, where we were to take all our meals, with its balcony overlooking the valley of the Veral (and the adjacent guttering which proved to be the most regular songpost of a scops owl!). Sadly Prudencia put in just the briefest appearance before heading for hospital, leaving us in the capable hands of her sister, Santas, and Vivien for the rest of our stay.

If the group is still a little quiet, tired and hesitant at this stage, the first meal is guaranteed to get the conversation going, not least about what we might be eating. How much should we have of this dish or that - 'Is this the first course or the main one?' 'Do you know what comes next?' 'Do we eat this with that, or separately – and should we use our plate, or the soup dish?' On top of that the free-flowing red wine just frees up everybody and the group always quickly settles into the spirit of things, a jovial, cheery approach that lasts for the rest of the holiday. This Honeyguide visit was certainly no exception.

The first evening ended with a remarkable night sky, the west being bright and silver-gilt with surprisingly black clouds low down, bluer with grey clouds higher up, then black with almost white clouds overhead - really strange. Venus was exceptionally bright against all this, while, in the opposite direction, Jupiter shone brilliantly before the moon rose, outlining patches of cloud in broad haloes of silver. Chris focused his telescope on Jupiter and we followed the movements of its four biggest moons all week.

The bird list on Monday 25 April, incidentally, was understandably short: white storks on a distant nest, assorted birds of prey from the coast including red and black kites, booted and short-toed eagles, buzzards and griffon vultures; spotless starlings (a first for the 'first time in Spain' contingent), crag martins, a distant wheeling flock of choughs (probably 60-80 birds) and so on. At Berdún, Egyptian vulture, white wagtail, scops owls.



Tuesday 25 April – Berdún

A few of us had a short walk around the village before breakfast in sunshine but a stiff, cold wind: this proved to be highly productive and the beet it would be during the holiday for vultures using the early-morning wind rising against the village slope. There were two adult Egyptian vultures and up to 23 griffon vultures, very low overhead, or level, or even down below us - extraordinary. Through 10x40s each griffon would literally fill the field of view, wingtip to wingtip.

The village also had rock sparrows (typically nesting in the top of hollow telegraph poles on the western slope below what became known as 'cold corner'), spotless starlings and serins, while black redstart, quail and nightingales were heard but not, as yet, seen.

After breakfast our first walk was a leisurely one down the hill to the Rio Veral, but it took a long while even to get out of the confines of the village, there was so much to see. It remained sunny but cold.

'Look at the spotless starlings' I said: 'you get excellent views of them on the church roof.'

'What's the spotted one then?'

'Erm, I'm not sure - it must still be in winter plumage but I've never seen one quite that spotted - oh, well, it must be a female anyway' as a male suddenly proved the point. The spotted, winter-type female remained all week and did look remarkably like a common starling, but the rest were genuinely spotless spotless and looked (and sounded) different.

Berdún is always a place for a good bird of prey list, but, better than that, the place to see them very well. No distant dots in the sky, these - here we had griffons as close as could be, a fine short-toed eagle displaying its typical hovering, black kites and red kites at close range, showing off in the sun. Crested larks were new birds for several people, while the wheatears were not but looked exceptionally smart. A scops owl called mid-morning; serins fizzed past, twittering endlessly as they flew about. A woodlark sang overhead, somewhere - finally being detected as a dot; in a patch of broom there were both Dartford and subalpine warblers carrying food. Cirl buntings were a little less evident than usual, while nightingales sang quite well and a couple were glimpsed.

Down by the river, several Cetti's warblers sang, and both blackcaps and garden warblers performed well. Ravens were frequently in view: one had earlier been carrying a large object in its left foot, while swooping and diving (sometimes chasing an Egyptian vulture). Several times it peeled pieces from the object with its bill, in mid air, and once or twice dropped it and caught it again (I think in its bill, although it was quickly transferred once more to its foot).

Butterflies in this cold wind were few and far between, but a scarce swallowtail did sail past. We searched the fields beyond the river for early spider orchids, with no success, although we did find a few on the track; there were, though, quite a few lady orchids, some very large and sturdy specimens, as well as a number of other interesting plants such as grape hyacinth.

After lunch in Berdún, we set off again, this time heading south to the Rio Aragón. It seemed a long, slow walk as flowers and the occasional bird brought the party to frequent halts, but eventually a breakaway group formed and forged ahead more determinedly to the river. Birds of prey were again pre-eminent, with a Montagu's harrier, booted eagle (a fine view), red and black kites and a buzzard. Red-legged partridges were genuine, wild, indigenous ones rather than the introduced stock we are used to back home; there were little ringed plovers and common sandpipers on the riverside shingle. A yellow-legged gull flew by (a bit unusual here), while a hoopoe gave a brief view, a splendid male pied flycatcher better ones, and we added a variety of warblers (including, briefly, melodious which proved to be extremely difficult after that). Twenty cirl buntings were feeding together as if spring had yet to arrive.

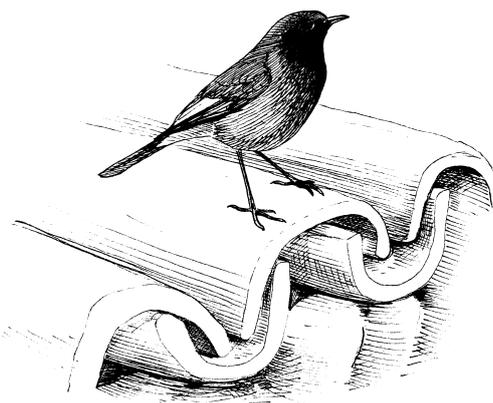
Some accepted a lift back home, others walked. In the meantime Ruth and David had arrived from Bilbao by car on the first leg of their epic tour of the Pyrenees and France with a Honeyguide holiday at both ends.

The evening meal turned into a bit of a party, for Chris's birthday, complete with cake and candle (the town didn't run to sufficient candles for the proper one-per-year arrangement).

From the town walls at dusk we heard scops owls and some people saw both scops and barn, and we also heard what seemed to be a distant nightjar, the first I've heard here in several years visiting – but it was not heard again.

Wednesday 27 April - Hecho, San Juan de la Peña

Golden orioles were calling from the scrubby wood by what used to be the town rubbish tip. The chute has gone and the rubbish partly removed, and the scar will no doubt soon disappear. Berdún is now a town of wheelie bins and as-yet-unwrapped litter bins to be erected beside the new benches, which were being put in place during our stay. It is an odd mix of an apparent unchanging, none-too-wealthy way of life with real extravagance.



There was a pied flycatcher in the village, too, and just a single swift, a sign of the cold, late spring. Normally Berdún sings with swifts, screaming and chasing over and through the streets. Serins, tree sparrows, goldfinches, spotless starlings, rock sparrows, black redstarts, red kites – such became the usual early-morning fare.

We drove east in fine weather, via Puente la Reina, where we turned left before the bridge to Hecho. The Valle del Hecho is one of the more spectacular places hereabouts, with a narrowing valley increasingly dominated by craggy hills and glorious rich, varied, ancient forest.

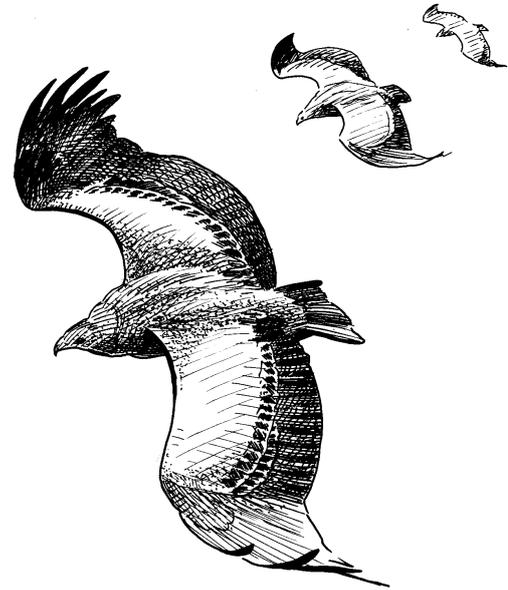
Near the top we stopped to walk through the gorge that had become known as an intermittent site for breeding wallcreepers. It was not to be our day: the 'creepers' could be there, of course, but they have huge territories and, if, say, the female was on eggs and the male far off feeding, you might not see one for hours.

Nevertheless, a lammergeier appeared, as well as two golden eagles, and it was hard to know what to watch at times. High up were some choughs and, although they were subtle, to say the least, a few alpine choughs. The lammergeier crossed the valley and perched on a ledge, well within decent telescope range, showing the bushy 'beards' and the rich, red-brown of the chest. Amazingly a second appeared and joined

it on its cliff: later, both flew back over the gorge, followed by a third. Lammergeiers are in many ways *the* birds of the Pyrenees and to see them so well, while more or less expected these days, was excellent. As it happened, we were not to see them like that again.

Other notable birds of this lovely valley were 60-80 griffon vultures, two Egyptians, crag martins, grey wagtails, dippers and ravens. The trees in the forest beyond the gorge showed endless signs of immense woodpecker activity, but there were no woodpeckers to be seen or heard.

We backtracked to Puente la Reina and turned on to Santa Cruz and the monasteries of San Juan de la Peña. We had lunch in the picnic site area quite low down, then moved on up and stopped at the top and later walked through the forest to the viewpoints overlooking the Aragón valley and Jaca. As so often happens here, birdwatching proved difficult, with quite a lot about but nothing very easy to see. Citril finches, though, were extremely good – these are really good birds to see and one male in the small group that Chris spotted was a specially vivid individual. We heard black woodpeckers in two areas but didn't see one. Griffon vultures, Egyptian vultures, golden eagles, booted eagle, a very high peregrine - already the list began to seem quite familiar, but, unusually here, there were no lammergeiers.



The evening in Berdún was again beautifully clear, with barn and scops owls in evidence and both Venus and Jupiter shining brilliantly.

Thursday 28 April - Aísa

A Bonelli's warbler sang from the trees below Prudencia's in the morning and it was to be there on most subsequent days, if a little elusive.

This was the chance to take advantage of the weather and get up high, amending our intended programme to suit the conditions. It might rain in a day or two...

We set off, Jose driving a small coach as usual, along the main road to Jaca. A brief stop at San Miguel bridge, at Vivien's recommendation, proved well worth while, not least for the views of this lovely ancient bridge near the town. While there we noticed a bee-eater or two, then at least a dozen – most of us had excellent views of these stunning birds in flight. Butterflies included a Spanish festoon, never obviously bright in flight or at a distance, but remarkable when settled at close range.

From here we travelled upwards to Aísa where we stopped for coffee in the village. Spotless starlings sang from the church while the sounds of cronking ravens and calling wrynecks carried across the valley. The village itself is in a good state of repair but retains its ancient character. Above Aísa the road finally came to a halt in the Río Estarrun/Bisaurin valley. Here we lunched in a small clearing above the road, where the first spring gentians were in flower and tiny patches of snow hung on in the shade.

As we walked higher, so we entered a wonderful, broad valley, increasingly variegated with big snowfields, bordered each side by high, snowy peaks and rocky crags. With no more than a few narrow sheep-tracks, this seemed a different world altogether, silent and remote, warm and calm. There is always something indescribably impressive, awesome, about big mountains and the wide open spaces of high valleys such as this.

The bird life, at first, was thin on the ground, but the flowers and setting made this a day of days. We argued over the trumpet (or Pyrenean?) gentians, flowering in their hundreds, and agreed to blame the books for not being more clear; spring gentians were there in thousands, as were lesser wild daffodils. Birdseye primroses grew in much more discreet clumps in wet flushes while the 'white' crocuses were mostly pale lilac.

At the end of the valley Quentin and Marcella went on ahead and came across a group of chamois: 'as big as a horse!' said Marcella, although often as not it was Quentin whose leg was pulled about the size of the local chamois later in the week (whenever we saw a horse, a cow, once even a field of llamas – 'look at the size of those! As big as a chamois!'). The chamois were, indeed, obliging, giving the best views most of us had ever had: at least 35 all told, in groups of one or two to 14 or more. One group contained a very small kid. One individual, standing up against the sun, slowly and delicately crossed the top of a waterfall, which was whipped by the wind into a flurry of spray flashing in the sunshine above the cascade – a wonderful sight.

Sadly the local 'accentors' were all dunnocks – not an alpine accentor to be seen. Back by the bus there were a couple of golden eagles, a bit distant, and a lammergeier flew over, but the bird list was small - by far the best were a male ring ouzel, well-spotted by Margaret, and 230 alpine choughs. The chough flocks wheeled about and descended onto grassy slopes, dashing about as if grabbing whatever insects had been taken by surprise before flying up again, spinning and turning like blown leaves, before dropping onto the next slope to repeat the process.

The only problem was the wet ground underfoot, in places, where snowbeds were melting and whole slopes turned into films of running water, and the occasional deep bed of snow which we had to cross. Mostly this was easy, sometimes we went in over our knees, but suddenly there was a major incident – Hazel sank in snow to the waist, with one foot sticking out at a peculiar angle above the surface! Help! Chris, bless him, was quickly on the scene and, like the gentleman he is, walked gingerly out onto the snow to rescue poor Hazel. He got closer paused – and took out his camera to take a series of embarrassing pictures while the rest of us dissolved into laughter. That, I have to record, included Hazel and Roger, too. The heave out of the snow with Chris using one hand under an arm and the other grabbing the back of Hazel's belt was hardly elegant, but proved effective.

Although the walk back down to the bug was a bit of a scramble and we were fairly tired by the time we got back, I think most of us would willingly have spent much more time in that magical valley, especially given the sunny, hot weather that belied the snow-bound surroundings. This was heaven.

Friday 29 April - Arbayún and Lumbier

At 'cold corner' in Berdún a woodlark gave one of the most long-sustained song-flight I have ever seen, above the standard rock sparrows, black redstarts, serins and red kites. Incidentally, a red kite, showing the glint in its eye as it came by, gave unequalled views, too.

This was a really hot day. Virtually cloudless throughout, it built up to burning heat by early afternoon, the sun reflected back from the pale walls of Lumbier's gorge, the Foz de Lumbier. First though, we went to the Foz de Arbayún, traditionally the place to get to early to watch the vultures getting up and on the move.

In fact, we were far too early, really, as the vultures were pretty sluggish. Several had downy chicks. In the end we saw 50-80 birds – griffons that is – plus perhaps four Egyptian vultures, a booted eagle, a short-toed eagle and a good, close peregrine. Over 100 alpine swifts added extra speed and power overhead-

Down on the ground there were lady orchids, several monkey orchids, a Provence orchid and a strange early purple orchid.

Lumbier is a relatively small gorge and allows good views of choughs and griffon vultures at close range, as well as rock sparrows and crag martins. Black redstarts included one or two exceptionally fine, bright males. A Bonelli's warbler performed fairly well at the entrance; beyond the exit some of us saw a Sardinian warbler, above a meadow with hundreds of lady orchids and a few early spiders.

At Lumbier we lunched near the river, which was so full and fast-flowing that the grassy banks alongside were underwater and we had to make do with bits of rock and scraps of shade by the road. Then we walked through the gorge and on beyond that, along the river and across fields to the main road. By then it was a bit hot, dusty and tiring and a coke, or a beer, or an ice cream (or all three) proved more than welcome.

Saturday 30 April – Binies

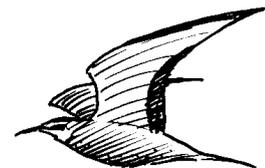
Another clear, sunny morning - but all seemed quiet in Berdún and, apart from the Bonelli's warbler, birds were difficult. The Pyrenean peaks were strikingly clear and sharp against the glow of the early morning sky, but, after two or three hot days, it was evident that they very quickly became pale, hazy and washed out as the haze built up ready for another warm day. The all-day-long clarity of the first day or two had gone.

John and Vivien ferried us a few at a time to Binies, the entrance to the Foz de Binies, which is very close but, nevertheless, one of the more attractive of the low gorges in these hot foothills. Off we set, walking up through the gorge at a slow and irregular pace, identifying flowers, butterflies and birds as we went.

Chris had brought a butterfly net and, in a fit of self-sacrifice, bought and ate a box of Ferrero Rocher chocolates at the airport to provide a clear, plastic box to examine his captives in. The sight of Chris floating like a butterfly, stinging like a bee, shirtless, net in hand, chasing fast-flying butterflies was – well, it was like little else. In fact, perhaps reflecting the recent cold rather than the current heat, butterflies were quite few: but we did get scarce swallowtail, Spanish festoon, clouded yellows, brimstones, Cleopatra, wood whites, orange-tips and Provençal fritillary.

Oddly, too, there were not many birds, either, but the griffon vultures put on a fine show (50-60) and were always entertaining. At the top of the gorge, where the road turns left to cross a wide valley, we found a magnificent male red-backed shrike – giving as good a view as anyone will ever get.

Turning homewards we walked back along the gorge and several people were picked up by John and Vivien for a drive back to Berdún, while some braver souls decided to walk along the Rio Veral. I always think that this walk, with its little fields, rows of tall poplars, small sheds and outbuildings and groups of people working the fields, looks like a Van Gogh or Pissarro painting come to life and so it did again. It is just brilliant and so were the bee-eaters – about 14 settled in a rather distant poplar.



Sunday 1 May – Pourtalet, the High Pyrenees

Jose scored maximum points as we exited Berdún, as he spotted a little owl on a pole. We set off via Puente la Reina and Jaca for Formigal and Puerto de Pourtalet (Col de Portalet in French).

The high tops were clear, sunny and warm, despite great swathes of snow. The Pic du Midi d'Ossau stood magnificently over all, as we walked to the east of the road and climbed a ridge of flower-rich limestone. There were wheatears, here, and some rock sparrows and water pipits, as well as a few alpine choughs around the touristy shops by the road. A chamois gave us a good view as we had lunch, although it was not of the typical horse-sized variety, but merely more like a decent-sized goat. There was also a fine view of alpine marmots.

As with Aísa, however, it was not the birds that made the day, but the flowers and the landscape. Margaret had time to appreciate the latter, in particular, when she tried to repeat Hazel's exploits in Aísa and put a foot through the crust of a deep snowdrift, only to get it trapped between two rocks underneath. Fortunately, by the time several of us had worked our way up, down or across to the spot she had freed the offending foot and simply needed a hand out of the snow.

At the border post, still hot and sunny when we returned, it was very obvious that the 40-50 per cent snow cover on the Spanish side turned almost immediately into 80 per cent or more snow on the French side of the line.

On the way down, after second-helping of coffee (or hot chocolate) at the tourist cafés, we stopped by some meadows below Formigal. Here Phyllis contrived to lose her hat, blown off into a deep, and steep-sided, gorge. By the time it had been retrieved, Phyllis was halfway down the steepest route, seemingly ready to follow it into the dim and distant depths, but happily she made a swift and safe return via the South Col with but a brief respite at Camp 3.

Apparently concerned at the implications of this, Chris decided it would be a good spot for the group photograph, perhaps before he lost any of the party. Jose did a sterling job taking pictures for just about everybody before being roped in, himself, to stand and smile ('Say lammergeier!') for the group portrait.

The flower list included a good variety of plants familiar from the books at home – such as oxlip – but found here in quite different situations, and others quite new to those who had not previously ventured onto high mountains, such as the delicate alpine snowbells. In general, most were not especially numerous: there were patches here and there with many trumpet and spring gentians, but few great swathes. There were wild daffodils (not the lessers of Aísa), *Primula hirsuta*, a patch of birdseye primroses, purple saxifrage, Pyrenean buttercup, mezereon, white crocuses, a few (and very small) elder-flowered orchids (which later put on more of a show) and one great big early purple orchid.

Back at Berdún we had the usual evening owl watch, including the remarkably obliging scops owl in the rainwater gutter next door to Prudencia's.

Monday 2 May – Berdún

From 'cold (and windy) corner' in Berdún three bee-eaters could be seen down by the main road, flying from wires and also clinging from a whitewashed barn wall. Elsewhere, it was sunny and very warm, as it was to remain all day.

A walk to the Rio Veral in the morning produced the expected local species: red kites (truly magnificent views and never 'taken for granted'), a booted eagle, a couple of short-toed eagles, Egyptian and griffon vultures, crested larks, a singing woodlark (plus a couple more heard, making four or five in the area all told), tawny pipit, subalpine warblers, ciril buntings and so on. Two bee-eaters put in an appearance, rather briefly.

In the poplars beyond the river the objective was golden oriole and, sure enough, we heard one or two singing. It took a while to see one, though, and few of us had decent views – patience and determination are required here!

Juan Carlos from the SEO came from Zaragoza to join us this evening. He gave us a super talk in excellent English about the Spanish Steppes and the SEO's Belchite reserve, and stayed for supper with the group. With ambassadors for the cause like Juan Carlos, conservation in Spain begins to have a chance.



Tuesday 3 May - Riglos and Agüero

There had been rain overnight! Not much, but the Berdún streets showed signs of a brief wash and, more spectacular, there had been a good deal of thunder. There was still a little thunder and light rain about at breakfast time, but it quickly turned into another hot, sunny day.

We drove south to Santa Barbara and stopped first at a gorge near Murillo de Gallego, Looking across to the cliffs of Riglos, overhead were no fewer than 50 griffon vultures, flying together in close company beneath the clearing muggy cloud. Shortly afterwards we turned off the main road for Agüero, in brighter conditions.

Beside the road two bee-eaters perched on a wire and we halted in just the right position for everyone to enjoy long' close views of these marvellous creatures. This was one of the highlights of the holiday, in many ways. Below Agüero village, at the beginning of our circular walk, we listened to golden orioles and had some short, exciting views of the extraordinarily vivid males, while behind us a hoopoe called.

A woodlark sang while perched on a wire – superb stuff – while a dark-phase booted eagle circled at close range, showing the bright, white shoulder spots remarkably well. Swallows – ordinary swallows – proved to be highlights on this walk, too, swooping about low over the fields, shining in the sun. Little, elusive, tail-cocking warblers gave fleeting views and occasionally sat out in the open – Dartfords and Sardinians. Agüero, with its big cliffs and areas of (now all-too-scarce) scrubby hillside mixed with orchards is always an interesting and attractive spot.

Quite by chance, a bar and ice-cream shop was discovered: and, by still greater chance, it had a table football machine in it. Chris and Quentin (Norwich) lost (gamely) to a late comeback by David and Roger (Crystal Palace) after taking an apparently unassailable lead. (Or was it the other way round? Anyway, 2-0 became 2-3, a memorable match).

From Agüero we backtracked and crossed the main road to head up towards Riglos. Could Jose find a place with sun, shade, birds, wine and señoritas? Well, he said he could, no problem, and parked up beside the remains of the old Riglos railway station. What a sight the ancient, giant Spanish steam locomotives thundering uphill below Riglos must have been! Still, less of the steam nostalgia and back to the birds – at the lunch spot two woodlarks sang side by side and confirmed the species' position as, quietly, one of the birds of the trip. Woodlarks are brilliant singers and they performed well for us nearly every day. At the same time, we had lunch to the 'usual' chorus of nightingales – not showing themselves much, but still not to be forgotten as part of the daily backdrop to our activities.

At Riglos, some of the group saw black wheatears above the church while others watched different individuals at the entrance to the great amphitheatre between the towering cliffs. Some of us chatted to some French birdwatchers. Good birds here included a rock bunting, too, and fortunately (after a somewhat thin time for them) a magnificent lammergeier came over and reappeared for longer views a little later. It was a grey-bellied, dark-hooded immature bird.

The evening was a thoroughly enjoyable one' despite being our last in Berdún. We had a good meal, with good wine and champagne to celebrate a good holiday and to thank our hosts, John and Vivien, our caterer, Santas, who provided such a fascinating selection of good food, and each other, as we all felt we each deserved something for our various contributions.

Wednesday 4 May - Berdún to Bilbao

There were serious thunderstorms overnight, with extravagant lightning and crashing thunderclaps keeping people awake. We emerged to a dull, grey, misty morning with low cloud and drizzly rain. Did we mind? Not so much, as we were heading for Bilbao and home. Distant views of the white storks' nest relieved the generally fairly birdless drive before we reached Bilbao and managed a smooth and uneventful transit through the airport bureaucracy.

Bird List

Great crested grebe	Black redstart
Cormorant	Whinchat
White stork	Stonechat
Mallard	Wheatear
Black kite	Rock thrush
Red kite	Blue rock thrush
Lammergeier	Ring ousel
Egyptian vulture	Blackbird
Griffon vulture	Mistle thrush
Montagu's harrier	Cetti's warbler
Sparrowhawk	Reed warbler
Buzzard	Melodious warbler
Golden eagle	Dartford warbler
Booted eagle	Sardinian warbler
Kestrel	Subalpine warbler
Peregrine	Garden warbler
Red-legged partridge	Blackcap
Quail (heard)	Bonelli's warbler
Coot	Chiffchaff
Little ringed plover	Willow warbler (heard)
Common sandpiper	Firecrest
Yellow-legged gull	Spotted flycatcher
Woodpigeon	Pied flycatcher
Collared dove	Long-tailed tit
Turtle dove	Crested tit
Cuckoo	Coal tit
Barn owl	Blue tit
Scope owl	Great tit
Little owl	Nuthatch (heard)
Nightjar (heard)	Short-toed treecreeper
Swift	Golden oriole
Alpine swift	Red-backed shrike
Bee-eater	Woodchat shrike
Hoopoe	Jay
Wryneck (heard)	Magpie
Green woodpecker	Alpine chough
Black woodpecker (heard)	Chough
Great spotted woodpecker	Rook
Crested lark	Carrion crow
Woodlark	Raven
Skylark	Spotless starling
Crag martin	House sparrow
Swallow	Rock sparrow
House martin	Tree sparrow
Tawny pipit	Chaffinch
Tree pipit	Serin
Water pipit	Citril finch
Yellow wagtail	Greenfinch
Grey wagtail	Goldfinch
White wagtail	Linnet
Dipper	Bullfinch
Wren	Cirl bunting
Dunnock	Corn bunting
Robin	
Nightingale	110 species

FLOWER NOTES (Chris Durdin)

Flower highlights are noted in Rob's account in the main report, and the most comprehensive list of the plants of the Berdún area for keen botanists is in Chris Gibson's 1993 holiday report. The following are extracts from my notebook, noted here for interest and, perhaps, posterity, and this is not meant to be a comprehensive list of what we saw, more a recollection of some of the more interesting species, especially alpine species.

25 April, Berdún

a.m. by Veral: lady orchid, early spider orchid, white rock rose, fly honeysuckle (outside old barn), nice milkwort, grape hyacinth, shrubby gromwell, false vetch (= Montpellier milkvetch).

p.m. to the Aragón: rustyback fern under arch into Berdún, Judas tree, on the way through Berdún, brown vetch, horseshoe vetch, sainfoin fields, reed and giant reed by the river, beautiful flax.

27 April, Hecho and St Juan de La Peña

Hecho: strawberry *Fragaria viridis*, Pyrenean saxifrage, bush vetch, hepatica, cowslips, globularia.

St Juan: daffodil *Narcissus pseudonarcissus alpestris*, common dog violet, Pyrenean avens, rush-leaved & rock narcissi, bearberry, wood spurge, spurge laurel, lesser periwinkle, echinospartum.

28 April, Aísa

Navelwort (in Aísa village), solid-tubered corydalis, white crocus, trumpet gentian, spring gentian, birdseye primrose, a rock jasmine *Androsace villosa*, vitaliana, Pyrenean buttercup, juniper, lesser wild daffodil, rush-leaved narcissus, rock narcissus, cowslip, oxlip, last year's heads of stemless carline thistle, spurge laurel, stinking and green hellebores, common kidney vetch, coltsfoot, daisy.

29 April, Arbayún and Lumbier

Arbayún: Montpellier maple, lady, monkey, early purple and Provençal orchids, snakeshead fritillary, blue aphyllantes (= blue grass-lily).

Lumbier: rue-leaved saxifrage, hoary rockrose, Pyrenean flax (= white flax) *Linum suffruticosum salsaloides*, shrubby restharrow, pitch trefoil, wild jasmine, loads more lady and early spider orchids, kidney vetch var. *pyrenaica*, perfoliate honeysuckle, wild asparagus, large snapdragon, bladder senna.

30 April, Binies Gorge

Nottingham catchfly, blue lettuce, black and white bryonies, petrocotis, bladder senna, field and Montpellier maples, Pyrenean hyacinth, amelanchier, dogwood, barberry, holm, sessile and kermes oaks, large Mediterranean spurge, ash, maidenhair spleenwort (fern), wayfaring tree, greater celandine, a yellow onion *Allium moly*, a spurge *Euphorbia serrata*, butcher's broom, blue gromwell. Rock soapwort, purple toothwort under trees near river at top of gorge and again on the walk back along the Veral.

1 May, High Pyrenees at Portalet

Primula hirsuta, vitaliana, pennycress *Thlaspi alpestre*, alpine snowbell (right), *Daphne mezereon*, wild daffodil, oxlip, coltsfoot, Gouan's, Pyrenean and amplexicaule buttercups, spring and trumpet gentians, purple saxifrage, yellow-whitlow grass.

Meadow below Formigal: early purple & elder-flowered orchids, small ladies-mantle, Pyrenean vetch.

2 May, Berdún

Small alison *Alyssum alyssoides*, wall whitlow grass *Draba aizoides*.



BUTTERFLIES

Lumbier, 29 April: Wood white, clouded yellow, panoptes blue, Moroccan orange-tip, Cleopatra, peacock, orange-tip, swallowtail, Spanish festoon. And two praying mantises.

Binies, 30 April: wood white, violet fritillary, Provençal fritillary, orange-tip, Moroccan orange-tip, brimstone, Spanish festoon, swallowtail, scarce swallowtail, clouded yellow, Cleopatra.

Berdún, 2 May: small blue, dingy skipper, Glanville fritillary.



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INGLATERRA

Zaragoza 5th May, 1994

Dear Chris:

Once again I wish to thank you for contributing with your donation to our Conservation Project in Belchite (Zaragoza - Spain). Fortunately the Ornithological Reserve is growing up and saving some of the last pieces of natural vegetation steppes.

Please, extend my thanks to your 1994 customers in Berdún and all the others that have contributed to the project. All of you are invited to visit the reserve and how it's going on whenever you have the chance.

I hope see you again soon and be able to tell you good news about the steppes and their conservation.

Best wishes:

Juan Carlos Cirera Martínez
SEO/BirdLife manager in Aragón.