

Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays
Spring in the Spanish Pyrenees

23 April — 2 May 1995



Against the rising sun, fields of bare, ploughed earth look black-brown, rubbly-textured but hard-edged. Between them, rectangles of dark, rough yellow-green are fields of rape, while acres of cereals create shiny, vibrant pale green, crossed by furrows and lines of tractor trails and shimmering in the wind.

To the north, across a valley of furrowed grey, are black horizontal scars, steep banks in deep shadow between plates of green and silver, tiny round-sided fields perched on every available piece of flat ground. Big, open cereal fields occupy the broad plain beyond, the old valley floor above the level of the present, incised river. Behind them are olive-grey hills and snowy peaks beneath an eggshell-blue sky.

Westwards, the Aragon valley extends to the gleam of the Embalse de Yesa, a reservoir between ranges of hills which fade away into extreme distance. Closer, the bare earth is pink-red, the corn crops soft green, the rape dominant with its full, violent yellow. Later, the yellow will become harsher under the higher sun, the reds deeper.

A short walk around the village perimeter reveals the southward prospect, across the Aragon valley to hills in the south and, farther left, the strange shapes of the Sierra de la Peña and Sierra de Oroel. Here the colours are already strong and vibrant, with hills of olive-grey, hedgerows and banks of deep green, twisted black-boled almonds, trembling poplars, fields of green, yellow and strong red. Beneath my feet are old buildings with yellow tiles and a spread of newer housing and white barns opening out at the foot of the hill.

This is Berdún on a sunny morning before breakfast. On this holiday, we had cold, windy, dull mornings before these full colours and warm sun, but they helped because the atmosphere remained clear, only rarely obscuring Oroel in a grey haze. The cold wind brought other benefits, too. On a still, warm day, the local vultures are lazy and wait for hot rising air before they bother to make a move, perhaps as late as midday. Given a strong wind roaring up the Berdún slope, and no prospect of real warmth, the griffons are out early, using the wind rather than rising air, and a pre-breakfast walk reveals 15 or 20 at a time hanging above the northern edge of the town.

On several mornings during this holiday, before breakfast, we had memorable views of griffons at head-height or even beneath us, or hanging

motionless above about as high as a decent tree, eyes glinting in the morning light, feathers crisply defined in minute detail. Once the wind dropped, later in the week, the vultures ceased to come until a less impressive evening performance. But we did get the kites: red kites in the sunshine, so close you can see the gleam in the pupil of an eye.

But this is jumping too far ahead. The Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays group assembled at Heathrow (all but two, David and Angela who arrived at Berdún by car) and awaited the British Airways flight to Bilbao at 11.15 am. It was rather grey and overcast at Bilbao and, by the time we had headed east towards Vitoria and Pamplona, via a white stork on its nest, it was really cloudy and sometimes wet. We stopped for coffee and practised our first 'cafe con leche por favors' at the Hoteles Iturrimurri at Ciordia, where we found it difficult, as always, to slip into the Spanish routine of throwing all our scraps of waste paper onto the shiny tiled floor with its heap of litter all along one side.

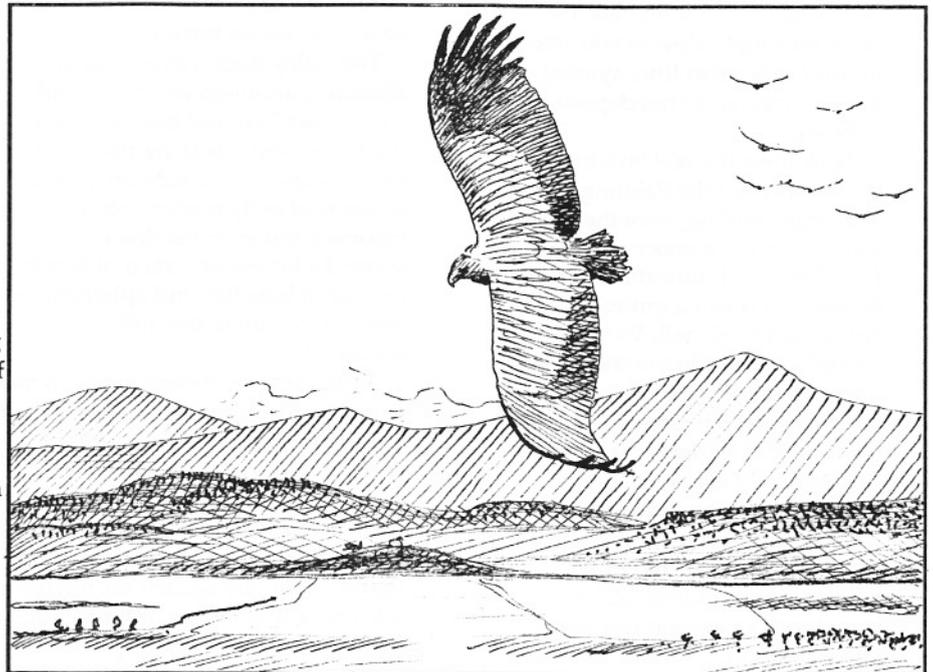
At Bilbao we were welcomed by John Boucher and at Berdún we were greeted by Vivien Boucher, who gleefully proclaimed that the very first spot of rain in Berdun for weeks fell at the moment we drew up in the coach. It was cold.

This seemed all too familiar and the phrase 'you should have been here yesterday' seemed about to arise, but obviously there would be much better to come. Rarely will Berdún and northern Aragon be dull and cold for long in spring. For Marcella and myself, old hands here now, it was, in any case,

a welcome return and all the first-timers were instantly enchanted by the village and its setting. Berdún, perched on its steep-sided hill and spilling out beyond its mediaeval walls, is always attractive and invites closer exploration at the earliest opportunity.

However, that would have to wait a while longer, until we were safely installed in our rooms in The Painting School and then fed and watered. The School is in fact two houses in adjacent streets, both old, traditional buildings in narrow, concrete streets lined with similar houses, all white-painted, with large doors framed in stone arches and tiny shuttered windows giving onto an assortment of fenced balconies. The streets curve and wind a little, so you see houses on both sides and don't get a clear view of hills or sky beyond until you are practically at the edge of town: which is never more than a couple of hundred yards east or west and much less north or south. It is irresistible to photographers; while there are more than 300 people living here, the streets are usually all but empty, although a few children play around the square and there are always one or two dogs about, eager to make new friends.

The Painting School houses have the same big, wooden doors which open into dark, cool corridors and stairs up to assorted bedrooms and bathrooms. Floors are tiled and gleaming, the walls white and decorated with John's paintings, beds spread with crisp cotton bedspreads and layers of cushions. Open the shutters and the light spills in; lucky ones have a view across the valley, others look out onto the old tiled roofs and deep streets of the town, themselves a fascination. Given the



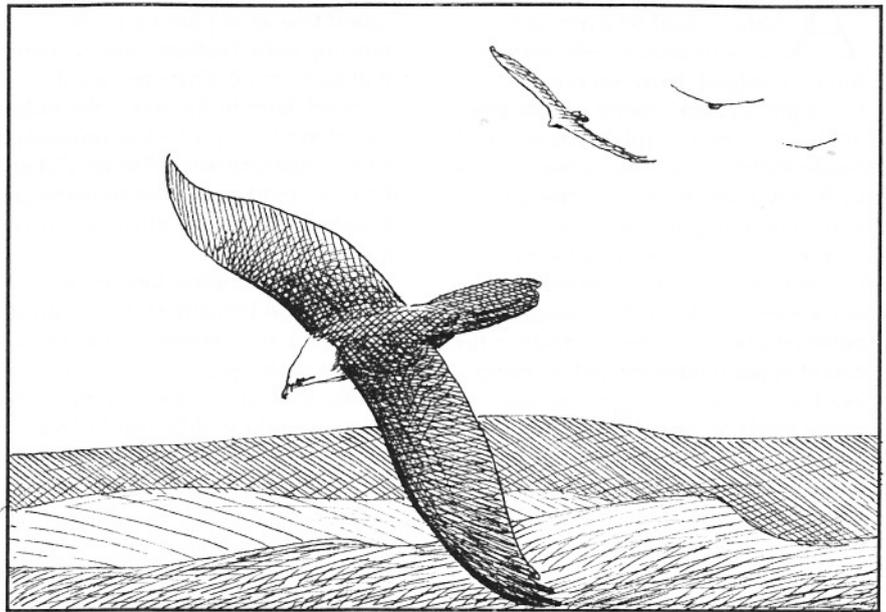
small size of this group, we all effectively had private facilities (and all rooms have wash basins anyway) and this proved very acceptable. As ever, the rooms were spotless and the constant supply of fresh towels throughout the stay was much appreciated, not to say marvelled at.

For several years we had eaten at a regular bar and restaurant in the town but circumstances this year forced a change: we used the Rincon de Emilio, just off the town square, and it was going to be interesting to see how things changed.

They were different, certainly: the food was more ordered, less bewildering, but equally appetising and plentiful. We kept the same, single long table format for the group and, best of all, retained the time-honoured system of paying for coffee but having a free flow of red and white Spanish wine, from Carinena — this undoubtedly plays a large part in making every Berdún group such a success! Emilio did us proud and worked very hard, with coffee, fresh bread, toast, cakes and jams for breakfast, lunches packed in specially-purchased, sealed containers and evening meals always interesting and tasty.

Berdún itself changes bit by bit. Noticeable to the regular visitor, the traditional, large Pyrenean chimneys, like tall, tapered pots with little hats on top, have nearly all gone: indeed, the Painting School may soon be the only place with the old-style chimneys displayed and maintained. A little bit more of the local character seeps away. Last year there was much effort expended in installing new benches and litter bins: the latter seemingly slow to take effect, unless the Spanish litter symbol actually means 'do not deposit litter in here'.

Now there is a real building site two doors from the Painting School as a large building, once the police station and since unoccupied (apart from John's painting studio, which he has lost) is being gutted and rebuilt as a town hall. Very fine it should look, too, in the end. A field lower down the hill is full of the old beams and tiles removed from the building and stored for later re-use. Beneath it, by the ramp from the roadway up through the ancient town gate, a new retaining wall is being built — over the course of the holiday it was, indeed, all but completed, a neat and tidy and effective result.



Day 2 — local walks

Far from the hot sunshine we hoped for (but, knowing the variability of the local weather, not necessarily wholeheartedly expected) we had a cool and windy morning with showers for the first exploration of the slopes to the Rio Veral and beyond.

It was grey and damp and so windswept that all the small birds were kept well down out of sight: although spotless starlings and black redstarts were about and indefatigable corn buntings continued to sing. But whereas normally one might expect crested larks and ciril buntings, not to mention nightingales, to delay the walk, this time we were down to the Veral in no time at all, as there was so little to see on the way.

The valley floor was a bit more sheltered, although not much, and we ventured around the track over the bridge and left along the foot of the far slope. A few lady orchids and a couple of early spider orchids bloomed, but even the flowers seemed a bit out of sorts in this cold (colourful blue flax and aphyllanthes being closed up in the dull conditions).

A big surprise, though, came in the magnificent and unmistakable form of a lammergeier. Griffon vultures were circling very low above Berdún and, as we reached the far side of the river, we looked back to see four or five of them plus a longer, leaner shape — literally against the hill over what once was the rubbish tip chute. If only we were up on the perimeter

road, what a view we might have had! But the lammergeier did not disappoint, as it flew out over the Veral, circled once or twice in that remarkable slow, stable, solid way that the species specialises in, and drifted off towards Binies. It was a good start.

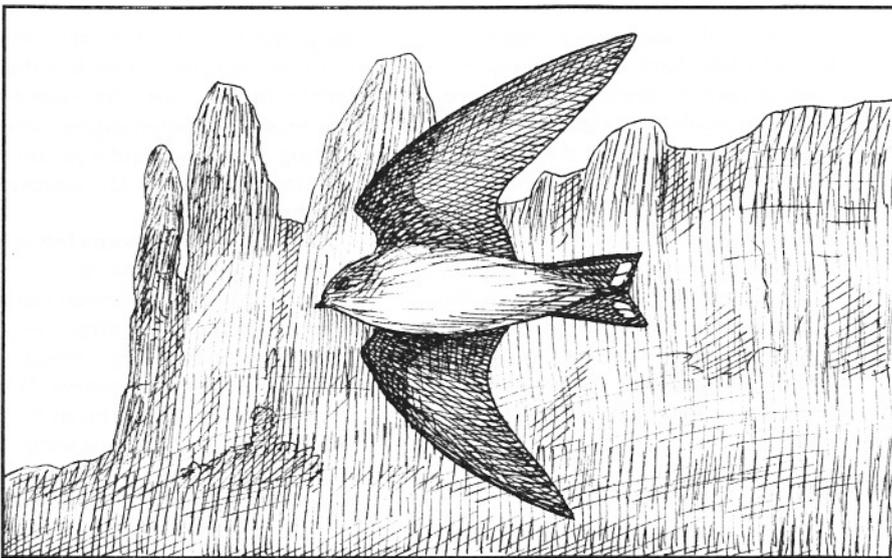
Normally the Veral is a good area for golden orioles but we heard and saw none: although I had actually seen a male very well indeed before breakfast, up in the village, which was a bit of a false dawn.

After lunch we took a walk in the other direction, towards the Aragon valley. Again it was remarkably cold and really windswept, so small birds were few and far between and unwilling to sit up in the open to be watched by a bunch of British visitors. There was a wheatear, a whinchat, the odd subalpine warbler and a fine booted eagle, but not a lot. And to my surprise at the Rio Aragon bridge the expected very large, mature poplar plantation, often so good for golden orioles in the past, had been clear-felled. We looked along the track north of the bridge, heading westwards along the valley, seeing little although a couple of firecrests and a couple of particularly fine, bright Bonelli's warblers put in an appearance. The whole area remains one to savour, with glorious views and all sorts of field corners, damp spots, thickets and secret tracks to explore given better weather.

Both Bonelli's warblers and firecrests were to be features of the holiday, but nearly always seen and not heard: firecrests seemed to be everywhere, always singing their

penetrating songs but impossible to see, while Bonelli's bubbled away, usually somewhere in the middle distance in the middle of an oak or conifer, giving little more than an occasional glimpse. With patience, both could be seen well at times, but despite their apparently higher numbers than usual everywhere we went, good views were few.

John and Vivien came down in a short sequence of shuttle trips to give us all lifts back to Berdún, welcome in the circumstances, although David and Angela walked back because they felt so responsible for the local dogs which had attached themselves to their heels



and seemed to need a walk back home — no doubt this was a regular trick. It was a windswept and chilly group that got back to the Painting School early, well before the evening meal at Emilio's.

Day 3 — Riglos and Aguero

Pre-breakfast, in cold, grey, windy conditions, a magnificent female peregrine hung over Berdún and dived after pigeons. At least 15 griffon vultures soared above the slope; as always, the streets had a selection of white wagtails, black redstarts, serins, greenfinches and goldfinches and a rock sparrow twanged not far away. Somehow goldfinches and richly-coloured greenfinches seem better suited to southern Europe than Britain, when the sun comes out.

We had the coach for the day and could not stop just because it happened to be cold, windy and heavy with low, grey cloud: but it

seemed sensible not to head north into the hills, but to go south, for Aguero and Riglos.

It proved a good decision and the weather improved greatly, although the cold, gusty wind continued and in places threatened to blow us off our feet. Individual swirls and gusts of wind could be heard coming and we could see the trees in their path bending under the pressure, then suddenly it was time to hold onto the tripods and turn back to wind for a few moments until the worst had passed — remarkable gale-force blasts that rolled down through the hills. Needless to say, small birds were again impossible to find,

generally speaking, and the list at Aguero was a bit short.

Still, it was a beautiful walk: Aguero, despite a lot of recent development, manages to look the part in every sense, old, picturesque, set beneath spectacular cliffs and overhanging pinnacles. We walked a circuit around the narrow road by the cemetery and back down through the little town — glorious but not so birdy as we had hoped, and not a butterfly in sight. Griffon and Egyptian vultures, a few choughs and ravens and red kites salvaged the morning, birdwise, and some of us had a particularly close encounter with a brilliant booted eagle which dived to the roadside a matter of a few yards away before flying off out over the low ground to the south. Even before our arrival, we had seen particularly large numbers of griffons from the coach, in a day that was to be especially good for vulture-watching.

We moved to Riglos station, a

suitably sunny and moderately sheltered spot for lunch, entertained by the sounds of Sardinian warblers and glimpses of short-toed treecreepers and serins. There was a constant flow of griffon vultures, and occasional Egyptians, overhead and another booted eagle (a species we saw more frequently than usual on this holiday).

Emilio has invested in large, shiny white plastic containers with screw tops concealing smaller, inner bowls with clear plastic lids, so we had picnic lunches presented in style. With three or four big loaves of fresh bread to carve up, too, we made a good job of it.

Then we drove the short distance to Riglos and arrived in superbly bright, sunny conditions, the amber and ochre cliffs vivid against deep blue, but the wind remained cold and very strong. The dizzy overhangs are always impressive but today they seemed about to topple over under the weight of the gale. And I had never seen so many climbers, swarming all over Los Mallos de Riglos.

A walk to the west was not very good for birds, other than crag martins and black redstarts, but gave us a good view of the village and cliffs and the lowlands spread far out below us to the south. Going back through the village and out to the east, we found a few more small birds, including a Dartford warbler, but the real benefit was to see 80 or so griffon vultures on ledges. At one point most flew off and later 50 or so gathered low over the road not far away, but Guy, Peter and I could not see what the attraction was.

The slopes with their mixed fields of crops, olives, almonds and other trees, with very many mountain ash-like trees just breaking into rich red leaf, glittered under the sun and can never have looked more beautiful, especially the valley at the farthest point of our walk.

Day 4 — Hecho and San Juan de la Peña

Better weather: cold, but sunny early on. The pre-breakfast griffon vulture display was as good as ever I've seen it, with 25 or more, often 18 at once, soaring at extreme low level and so serene and beautiful you wouldn't believe it. Vultures beautiful? Yes!

We were picked up 'as usual' by our regular coach driver Evaristo, he of the sunny disposition and helpful

nature (actually, he was grumpy) and drove east to Puente le Reina. Here we turned north, heading up the long, broad Hecho valley, which gradually narrowed and became ever more spectacular. There was plenty of snow about on the surrounding peaks and down in the valley the cold wind bit through anyone unwary enough not to have sufficient warm clothing, but it was a glorious morning all the same. The combination of high peaks, enormous cliffs and mixed mature forest creates a beautiful setting for some good birds — and low down in the valley there are green fields, too, which happened to be full of choughs.

We stopped for a better look and found around 4-500 choughs and 100 or more alpine choughs — brilliant. Typically, of course, once we wanted to see the difference in bill colour and wing and tail shape, all the alpine moved off and we could only see the red-billed ones, but with persistence we got a good look at both species.

At the head of the valley is a past wallcreeper breeding site and we walked through the gorge, waiting a long time in the forlorn hope that a wallcreeper might appear. Eventually, beyond the gorge, one did, but sadly the group by then had largely dispersed, bored with wallcreeper-hoping and those who stood beside me as I saw the bird fly across a distant crag were unable to pick it up. Richard and Olga, however, had their own star bird as a lammergeier flew over, spotted by Olga through her camera lens.

As we retreated along the valley we stopped in a wooded area and were treated to a wonderful view of a short-toed eagle, yellow eyes flashing in the sun — firecrests were as noisy but elusive as ever. Our lunch stop near a river was fine and dry, and nearby there was a rubbish tip, fortunately out of our sight, over which as many as 10 black and 20 red kites, plus the odd raven and Egyptian vulture, soared — red kites sometimes came remarkably close. In the river beneath the bridge were many barbel and some other, smaller fish, silvery-olive with a darker side stripe.

As we left the valley, the surprise ending was a flock of some 80 or so alpine swifts, feeding over the river and fields right down at Puente le Reina. These proved to be almost the only ones of the trip: they were

strangely absent from their breeding areas.

At Puente le Reina we headed east, then turned up to Santa Cruz de la Seros and on to the San Juan de la Peña road. A walk up through the forest was interesting and produced yet more glimpses of singing firecrests and Bonelli's warblers, but the main birds were a pair of lammergeiers. This used to be a stronghold of lammergeiers years ago when they were very rare — I saw one, my second-ever (the first being at Riglos) at the same spot when the road was merely a dirt track over the hillside — and it has always, since, been a regular and dependable place for them. Last year, though, we saw none, so I was especially pleased to see a superb pair of adults back in the old place, soaring magnificently along the face of the huge, black, conglomerate cliffs. As they turned in the sun we were treated to fine views of their rusty undersides, white heads and charcoal uppersides which faded out into shiny, almost silvery wingtips.

There was also a booted eagle, the odd crested tit and singing short-toed treecreeper (not seen), plus a few griffon vultures, but we did not have a very long walk through the woods.

Day 5 — Foz de Binies

A John and Vivien shuttle service day — driving to Binies and walking up along the beautiful gorge, then back again to be picked up at 5 pm for the return 'home' (or, in the case of a few energetic souls, a long walk all the way back to Berdún).

It was generally bright, with sunny spells — a bit warmer than it had been to date. Yet the local griffons didn't bother stirring themselves until we were back through the gorge in the afternoon, when a good wind and some sunshine brought 50-odd out on the wing. The gorge, with its clear, rushing river, produced rather few birds, but crag martins were always in

evidence and dippers led us a bit of a dance — poor Sophia wanted above all to see a dipper, but missed practically every one.

We had lunch in our 'usual' meadow at the top, and John kindly drove out to deliver the big lunch boxes so that we didn't have to carry everything all day. The meadow was good for scarce swallowtails and odd lady orchids, but not many. I was disappointed that the next little valley did not appear to have red-backed shrikes, which had previously been more or less guaranteed.

In the river were many big, muscular barbel and some superbly patterned trout, best viewed from above close to the sluice at the top of the gorge. Overhead the skies were unusually empty, but back at the bottom of the gorge later there were two excellent booted eagles really putting on a show, and a passing lammergeier ('only a lammergeier!' — what a bird).

At last there were some butterflies about, too — many scarce swallowtails, a Camberwell beauty, brimstones and Cleopatras, clouded yellows and orange-tips, wood whites and Spanish festoons. The festoons always look a bit dull, yellowish or dingy on the wing, but a close inspection (if you can get one to settle) reveals the full patterning of black, yellow, white and red checkers.

Day 6 — Arbayon and Lumbier

Warmth! But, along with it came low cloud and thick furls of wet fog. Oh dear. . .

There wasn't much in Berdún on



the pre-breakfast walk, which was a bit depressing anyway given the prospect of a dull wet day. But we had the coach and we had to go: and Lumbier and Arbayon seemed the best bet. Clearly, high peaks were out.

To start with, though, we ventured south of the Embalse de Yesa, going as far as the abandoned old village of Ruesta. Here we heard a cuckoo, saw a few black redstarts and looked at the dilapidated buildings, while giving the weather a chance to improve.

On our return to the main road we stopped and walked back over the Rio Aragon bridge — by now it was warmer still and blue sky was beginning to appear. This proved a good spot, with several Spanish-race blue-headed (yellow) wagtails, a short-toed treecreeper, serins, woodlarks flying by, a glimpsed bee-eater and other odds and ends. On the river were some greenshanks and common sandpipers.

Across the bridge, on the right, was a large field and, of all things, what should be standing in the middle of it but — a crane. It soon saw us and took off, out of sight in a minute or two, but the huge bird was still a real surprise — a late, possibly sick or injured, migrant.

At the end of the reservoir I saw a white blob and mentally made a note to check it on the way back — which we duly did, when the white blob became four white blobs, little egrets. I had seen neither crane nor little egret before in my visits to the region.

However, before that we went to

the Foz de Arbayon viewpoint, stopping for lunch where we looked out over the dramatic gorge. Of the expected 100 alpine swifts, there was but one — but griffon vultures were around, albeit in small numbers, with one of the closest on a ledge with a big, fluffy chick.

At Lumbier we stopped at the entrance to the gorge, the Foz de Lumbier, somewhat developed since my last visit with a new picnic site, tables and even some interpretation signs with silhouettes of wallcreepers and eagle owls and such impossible birds on them. A new 'where to watch birds in Spain' book says that it is possible to look into nests of eagle owls with ease, here — but, as always, I looked into every ledge, every cave, every tree, without seeing a sign of an eagle owl. And wallcreepers must be purely winter visitors. There were plenty of griffons, though, with some marvellous views throughout the afternoon, both of perched birds — often finding the top of a pinnacle to perch on in small groups — and of flying ones low overhead, or coming in to land on a ledge. These more 'active' views made a change from the usual 'sailing about high in the sky' types.

A few of us (Peter, Guy, Angela and David) walked through the pitch-black final tunnel, then returned and watched a super male blue rock thrush, which most of the others had already been looking at for a while. Black redstarts also showed themselves well, using the old telegraph poles which line the course of the disused railway. What a

sight (and sound) steam engines must have been going through this place! Again, oddly, there was a complete absence of alpine swifts — why so late in returning?

At Berdún, David (especially) and Angela had already built up an impressive record of barn owl sightings. Eventually, a barn owl was seen emerging from the church almost every night, but scops owls were very erratic in their calling and few of us (other than David) got a good view, or saw one at all.

Day 7 — Fago, Roncal and Belagua

Before breakfast I saw a hoopoe in Berdún, and a fine wryneck: also the usual rock sparrows, white wagtails, black redstarts and assortment of lovely finches — greenfinches, goldfinches, chaffinches and serins. Spotless starlings still appeal to me and need a good, close look, and a booted eagle added to the village list for the day. The views of the valley this morning were very subtle, soft and beautiful.

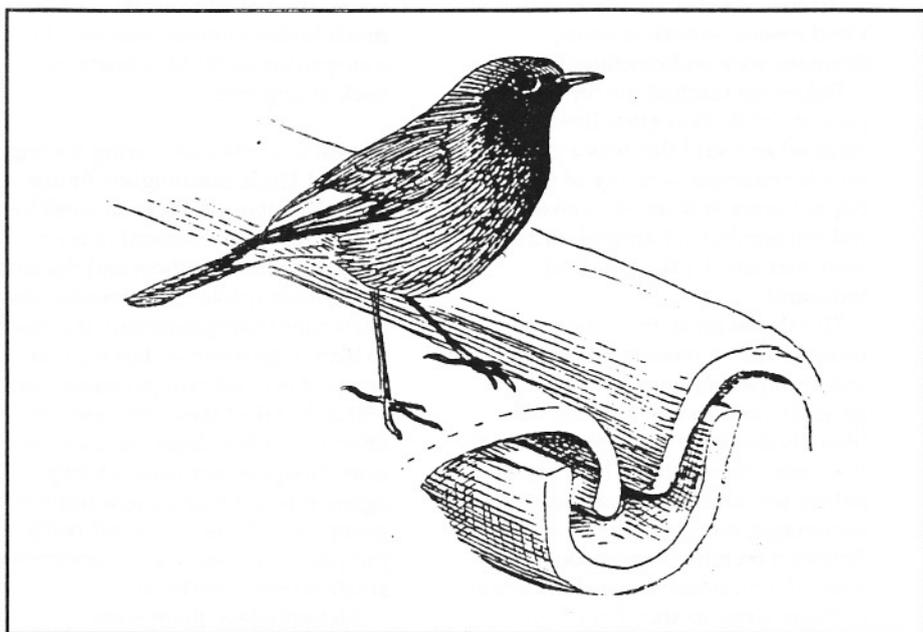
After heading a mile or two west, we turned north through Majones, stopping to look at some bee-eaters on wires, and then stopped to walk up through a gorge towards Fago. Two separate lammergeiers flew over but otherwise it was quiet: I was (and still am) perplexed by the lack of eagles, vultures, choughs and alpine swifts. . . Subalpine warblers gave wonderful close-up views.

Above Fago we turned left towards the Roncal valley but the promise of better weather was dashed by heavy cloud and drizzly rain. In the valley above Roncal we stopped for lunch, this time forced, for the only time, to eat inside the coach in a particularly dull and cold spell.

Then we drove on right up to the Belagua refuge: it was sunny and clear by then and we were amazed to see a complete covering of heavy snow. Could this be a chance to see some of the high-altitude specials? No sooner had we stopped than a bank of thick cloud swept over, and that was that.

Retreating to the foot of the zigzag climb, we found a field full of water pipits, kept low by the snow no doubt, and a very busy, noisy flock of alpine choughs — 350-400 of them, with 30-odd choughs nearby. But a walk in a nearby beech forest proved fruitless and it began to rain.

This was scenically a good day but



not the best ever for birds and the wet or dull, cold weather was hardly right for butterflies. In the cloud and extensive snow high on the hills we were hard put to see more than a handful of spring gentians — an odd sort of day, really, when Emilio's food and wine were particularly appreciated.

Day 8 — local walks

The heat! Warm and sunny weather at last and surely we deserved it. This was more or less a repeat of our first day, but with more experience behind us and a leisurely approach to the whole affair. Many people decided on a morning off, pottering about Berdún, which is such an ideal place to potter (especially after John Boucher had given us his entertaining and instructive talk about local history, architecture and traditions).

First, however, we visited the bakery: the local baker, married to a Scottish wife, had produced such superb bread for us, which we seemed to eat heaps of at every meal, and it was kind of him to let us in to see his marvellous bakery with its big, wood-fired oven. He uses wood which is a waste product from parquet floor production in France.

Down by the Rio Veral the golden orioles were no more co-operative and some calling wrynecks refused to show themselves. But a woodchat shrike gave us some perfect views and overhead both red kites and an Egyptian vulture came very close: indeed, the red kite was breathtaking, every eyelash clear and sharp! There were swifts back in Berdun and a better number of house martins and swallows, showing that spring arrivals were still underway. Nightingales were singing well, serins danced everywhere, curl buntings rattled away from the slopes. The bushes in the bottom of the valley had singing subalpine warblers and several melodious warblers, which gave satisfyingly close and open views. Spotted flycatchers hawked insects from the hedges; a distant woodlark sang.

In the afternoon, fairly late, John and Vivien took us down towards the Rio Aragon, in increasingly warm, sunny weather — bliss. We walked along the track north of the river, heading west (to the right) between the vineyards on the slopes below the escarpment and the fields

on the flat ground alongside the stony river bed. Richard spotted two white storks, which circled high up before drifting on north, obviously heading for a Pyrenean crossing into France. A small male peregrine flew over, as did a booted eagle and later a short-toed eagle, while the botanists were more interested, perhaps, in a cluster of fritillaries and some burnt-tip orchids.

A Camberwell beauty was watched on the outward walk and relocated for better views as we strode back to Vivien's car. Other butterflies included orange-tips and Moroccan orange-tips, Cleopatras and a number of scarce swallowtails. While the first car load returned along the valley bottom, some of us continued up the valley slope and out onto the broad Aragon plain, to the old Berdún aerodrome site. Richard, in usual style, elected to walk all the way back to Berdún.

Day 9 — the high peaks

Berdún in the morning came up with another bird for the list, in the shape of a pied flycatcher. A chough flew over, too — not for the first time this trip, although in previous years choughs had not been regular over Berdún itself.

We drove east, on to Jaca and beyond, seeing a steady stream of red and black kites and odd buzzards as we went. Occasionally a crested lark flew up from a roadside field, but oddly enough most of the group went home without ever having a really good view of one.

The Valle de Tena proved as spectacular as ever, in glorious sunshine — a strange combination of vivid greens, extensive snow, dramatic rock and dazzling blue sky.

Before we reached the top of the pass at Col de Pourtalet, Evaristo stopped and said this was a great area for chamois — many of them, as big as horses at least. We looked, but did not see: but, all around, there were gentians by the hundred thousand.

The slopes away from the road were literally covered with spring and trumpet gentians, and several mounds close to the roadside were liberally dotted with these flowers of the most intense blue. There were oxlips, too, and some Pyrenean buttercups, but very few elder-flowered orchids. The seasons seemed a bit mixed up and uncertain of themselves, as they have been

back home in the UK in recent years. But the gentians could not have been better.

On top, after a welcome cup of coffee, we explored more slopes below Col de Pourtalet. There was far less snow here than at Belagua, just the usual patchy stuff, with quite a bit more higher up. The Pic du Midi d'Ossau stood clear and sharp to the north and all around the peaks were startling in their clarity against the blue. Of all the birds made for such a background, the best must be the lammergeier: and, fortunately, a lammergeier did indeed appear, soaring high against peaks to the west of us. Other birds were rather few — water pipits and wheatears mostly — as expected up here, but the flowers — many wild daffodils and a few more gentians — and the extensive vistas all around made this a memorable day. The weather, at last, was absolutely perfect — shirt-sleeves and sunhats, up in the snow.

This was a fine last day and led nicely to a good evening meal with John joining us. Even the champagne came out, as Emilio bade us farewell.

Day 10 — going home

It was not so bright this morning, perhaps as well as we were all packed, breakfasted and on our way early. It would have been harder to leave a really sunny day in Berdún — it was hard enough, anyway, to say goodbye to Vivien and the little town which had been home for a too-short stay.

John accompanied us to Bilbao, where we waited for the slightly delayed British Airways flight; when we reached Heathrow, it was too much hotter, sunnier weather, during a surprising early-May heatwave back in England.

My list of birds seen during the trip totalled 116, a meaningless figure really but about right for a week here in spring. I know several of these were not seen by others and the lack of a golden oriole for everyone was a particular disappointment. It is easy to blame the weather, but we had sunny days and calm mornings and still didn't find them, despite our efforts, so it is a slight puzzle even now. Hoopoes are always tricky but, again, it is sad that we saw none as a group — and the cold wind really put paid to hopes of an abundance of small warblers early on.

Nevertheless, there were

memorable moments and Berdún continues to be at the centre of the finest area I know in Europe for large numbers and variety of birds of prey. The vultures are supreme.

As always, here, the group was a happy one — is it really just the wine? Of course not: Honeyguiders are a friendly bunch and the town, the food, the Painting School and the

Spanish people (despite a mutual general lack of the language) all add up to a special feeling at Berdun and on the daily excursions. It is hard to beat it. But the wine does help, too.

My thanks to all the group for your company and patience: I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I did. Thanks tooto Emilio for his admirable catering, and to John and Vivien, especially, for allowing us to share their superb Painting School for a few days.

The Group

Patricia Anderson, King's Lynn
Jill and Peter Blake, King's Lynn
Sophia Hankinson, King's Lynn
Angela and David Lancashire, Bakewell
Iris and Guy Lewis, Towcester
Richard Tibbitts, Edinburgh
Olga Ward, Sheringham
Marcella and Rob Hume, Sandy

With commiserations to Joyce and Frank Dunn of Hartlepool, who had to withdraw at the last moment after a car accident: perhaps next year.

Thanks to Chris Durdin of Honeyguide for his usual excellent organisation and pre-holiday information; to Emilio for his food; and to John and Vivien Boucher for providing us with such a great place to stay.

Seeing things

Patricia saw an oriole flying near town,
David, at dusk, saw a barn owl swoop down,
But Guy never saw a robin.

Richard saw bee-eaters, wandering alone,
Sophia saw a dipper — or was it a stone?
But Guy never saw a robin.

Iris saw alpine flowers, white, blue and pink,
Olga's bins broke and she started to drink,
But Guy never saw a robin.

Marcella, though footsore, did not once complain,
Jill saw a moth half as big as a plane,
But Guy never saw a robin.

Rob showed us hundreds of feathery things —
Crested and spotted with long or short wings,
But Guy never saw a robin.

Angela's Spanish was fluent and true,
Peter, in dreams, saw Prince Charles in the loo,
But Guy never saw a robin.

(With apologies to Olga, who didn't, and Guy, who did.) Richard Tibbitts

Day 1 — Berdun (+ journey from Bilbao, previous day)

Day 2 — Agüero-Riglos

Day 3 — Hecho & San Juan de la Pena

Day 4 — Berdun-Foz de Binies

Day 5 — Ruesta-C137 bridge-Arbayon-Lumbier-Yesa

Day 6 — Fago-Roncal-Belagua

Day 7 — Berdun-Veral-Aragon

Day 8 — Formigal-Col de Pourtalet

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Great crested grebe	/	/			/			
Cormorant	/							
Little egret				/				
Grey heron					/		/	
White stork	/						/	(+ return to Bilbao)
Mallard	/				/	/	/	
Black kite	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Red kite	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Lammergeier		/		/	/		/	/
Egyptian vulture		/	/	/	/	/	/	
Griffon vulture	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	
Short-toed eagle	/		/		/		/	
Marsh harrier		/		/				
Montagu's harrier		/	/	/				/
Sparrowhawk				/	/	/	/	
Buzzard	/		/	/	/	/	/	/
Booted eagle	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	
Osprey			/					
Kestrel	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Hobby					/			
Peregrine		/	/	/	/	/	/	
Red-legged partridge				/		/	/	
Quail	h		h	h	h	h	h	(h = heard)
Crane					/			
Little ringed plover					/	/		
Lapwing					/			
Redshank					/			
Greenshank			h		/			
Common sandpiper			/		/	/		/
Yellow-legged gull	/				/		/	
Stock dove					/	h		
Woodpigeon				/	/	/	/	/
Collared dove	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Turtle dove					/	/	/	/
Cuckoo				h	h	h	h	
Barn owl	/	/	/			/		
Scops owl	h		/		h	h	h	
Little owl				/				
Swift	/		/		/	/	/	/
Alpine swift			/		/			
Kingfisher					/			
Bee-eater	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	
Hoopoe						/		
Wryneck						/	/	
Green woodpecker		/		/	h	/	/	/
Great spotted woodpecker			h		/	h	/	/
Crested lark	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Woodlark	h				/	h	/	
Skylark	h			h	/		/	/
Sand martin								/
Crag martin			/	/	/	/	/	/
Swallow	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
House martin			/	/	/	/	/	/
Tawny pipit								/
Water pipit	/				/			/
Yellow wagtail		/		/	/			
Grey wagtail			/	/	/	/		
White wagtail	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Dipper				/	/	/		



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Chris Durdin
HONEYGUIDE
36, Thunder Lane
Thorpe St. Andrew
Norwich, NR7 OPX
INGLATERRA

Zaragoza, 30th May, 1995

Dear Chris:

Once again I wish to thank you for contributing with your donation to our Conservation Project in the steppes of Belchite (Zaragoza - Spain). Thanks to you and people and groups like yours the Ornithological Reserve goes on growing up and saving some of the last areas with high natural value.

Please, extend my thanks to your 1995 customers in Berdún and all the others that have contributed to the project. All of you are invited to visit the reserve whenever you have the chance.

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

Best wishes:

Juan Carlos Cirera Martínez
SEO/BirdLife manager in Aragón.

