

# *Honeyguide*

**WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS**

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**Spring in the Spanish Pyrenees**

**28 April - 6 May 2000**

**Woodbridge RSPB Members' Group**

**Spring in the Spanish Pyrenees**  
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The group

Helen Revell  
John and Verna Lennard-Jones  
Bob Spillett  
Alan Parsons  
Colin and Shirley Coates  
Pat Burgess  
Kathleen Reynolds  
Keith and Anne Bennett  
Malcolm and Jane Key  
David and Valerie Levett  
William and Pauline Bryant  
Patricia Shannon  
Geoff and Hazel Woodard  
Anne and Danny Bell

Leaders

Rob Macklin and Kathy Archibald

Report by Rob Macklin. Illustrations by Rob Hume. Front cover: Berdún

As with all Honeyguide holidays, £25 of the price of the holiday was put towards a conservation project, in this case for La Sociedad Española de Ornitología (SEO, BirdLife Spain), the Spanish Ornithological Society, and its work in Extremadura. During the holiday, Juan Carlos Cirera of SEO's Zaragoza office came to Berdún to collect the cheque for £550 from this year's holiday in the Spanish Pyrenees (£25 per person).

This brings the total given to SEO since the first Honeyguide holiday in Spain in 1991 to £5,875, and the total from all Honeyguide holidays to £20,180. A thank-you letter from Juan Carlos appears at the end of this report (not this web version).

**Spring in the Spanish Pyrenees**  
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**Friday 28 April - *the journey there***

Grey and overcast skies at Stansted heightened the gloom when the ground staff would not allow Pauline to fly with her accidently-brought expired passport, even though she had a valid one at home. Very sadly, we had to leave Pauline and William behind in the hope that they would be able to get a stand-by the next day and join us as soon as possible. To add insult to injury the plane developed a fault in the radio equipment that delayed our take-off time by almost two hours. This was finally sorted out and we arrived at Bilbao airport at 11:30 and met up with Jesus, our coach driver, for the four-hour drive to Berdún.

On the way to our coffee stop at the Hotel Iturrimurri near Pamplona we spotted a white stork atop its nest near Vitoria Gasteiz, as well as several black kites and griffon vultures. At the hotel we all had good views of a red kite, goldfinches were singing in the garden while spotless starlings were nesting in the roof. A crested lark and skylark were singing over nearby fields. The journey on to Berdún turned up lots more griffons and black & red kites as well as brief views of a short-toed eagle over the Embalse de Yesa. At least eight great crested grebes were also on the edges of the reservoir.

We arrived at Berdún in the late afternoon to be greeted by our hosts John and Vivien Boucher who organised the rooms for the group. Kathy and I took a brief walk around the village turning up singing black redstarts and serins, several swallows and a calling Sardinian warbler as well as the usual collared doves and spotless starlings. A more exciting find was a soaring adult Egyptian vulture over the village.

The whole group met up in the painting school at 7pm to be briefed on housekeeping matters by John and a small introduction from Rob and Kathy about the week ahead. After one of many splendid suppers at Emilio's we returned to the painting school to look at slides of some of the birds we hoped to see during the week.

**Saturday 29 April - *local walks around Berdún***

A breezy start to the day but generally bright with the sun occasionally peeping through. Our initial exploration took us down the track towards the Río Veral. Almost immediately Helen spotted a male pied flycatcher in the scrub, which seemed to be alive with birds. A male whinchat and two pairs of curlew buntings gave us all great views, at least three nightingales were singing magnificently and a wryneck called loudly, although could we find it? Some of the group then had superb views of a singing male rock thrush which vanished as soon as everyone else tried to see it. We thought that would be the only glimpse of the week - how wrong can you be? A black redstart added his song to the general clamour and three little brown jobs turned out to be male Dartford warblers which appeared intermittently on top of the Spanish broom. A stunning pair of stonechats also allowed the group to have good views and a male tawny pipit performed its parachute display flight before quickly disappearing from view. Another new, spectacular species were two male subalpine warblers which sang from the scrub right in front of the group. What a morning!!!

Several fine specimens of lady orchids were found among the scrub together with clumps of stinking hellebore, globularia and stunning blue shrubby gromwell. A variety of spurges included caper and Pyrenean spurge. Overhead an adult Egyptian vulture complemented the many Griffon vultures which were in the air throughout the morning. We managed to tear ourselves away from the hillside scrub and headed for the river, past some splendid barberry bushes and small amelanchier trees in flower. A grey heron flew over and both blackcap and chiffchaff sang from the riverside trees. One of the highlights of the week was provided by three bee-eaters which sat

up in the poplars and allowed themselves to be viewed through the telescopes - what a magnificent sight! The birds seemed to be feeding on bees from nearby hives, which probably would not endear them to the locals. Another six birds joined the first group and all flew off along the river. A golden oriole was also calling from a group of poplars but was also proving very difficult to see.

Most of the group then climbed the gentle slope over the river to search for Pyrenean snakeshead fritillary. We walked along the edge of an arable field, lined with shepherd's needle, and there they were where we found them several years ago. This time there were at least 30 flowers here! After this we admired a corn bunting in the telescope and then spotted a female Montagu's harrier flying low along the skyline before quickly disappearing from view. A whitethroat sang from the scrub, a grey heron soared like an eagle and two ravens flew over uttering their "cronking" cries. After such a superb morning's birding we headed back to Emilio's for lunch only pausing to see a grey wagtail on the river and two beautiful scarce swallowtail butterflies. What a start to the holiday!!

Cloudy and cool conditions after lunch did not deter us from our walk down towards the Río Aragón. A female yellow wagtail was found among a flock of sheep just outside the village and a black redstart sang from the farm buildings. We then walked towards an almond grove to look for hoopoes but had to make do with four whinchats and superb views of two turtle doves on the roadside wires. Several wheatears flitted among the rocks and scrub and three red-legged partridges scuttled for cover. Some of the group then dropped back to look at flowers and were rewarded by excellent views of a pair of subalpine warblers. The fields here were full of sainfoin and the roadsides had many delights, including wild clary, thyme, field marigolds, carline and milk thistles and beautiful flax. One of the highlights of the day then appeared as a pale-phase booted eagle drifted low across the arable fields closely followed by another female Montagu's harrier - what a place for raptors!!

Arriving at the bridge over the Aragón, we saw crag martins which were nesting under the bridge and yet more nightingales in the scrub. A little egret fished in the shallows and close scrutiny of the shingle revealed the presence of two little-ringed plovers and common sandpipers. Both red and black kites graced the skies and another eight bee-eaters flew over but only seen by the two Kathies! A sand martin was then spotted among the crag martins and a grey wagtail called from the river. Most of the group then gratefully accepted a ride back to Berdún with John and Vivien while the rest of us searched the remnants of a reedbed on the far side of the river. Chiffchaffs were singing here, a spotted flycatcher was briefly seen and a Dartford warbler burst into song.

After such an amazing day around Berdún we were thrilled to learn on our arrival back at base that William and Pauline had arrived from Stansted. We were in good heart at Emilio's where the plentiful wine made the meal swing along. After supper we headed out to hunt for Scops owls and heard at least two birds calling although we could not locate them. Tired but replete we headed off to bed.

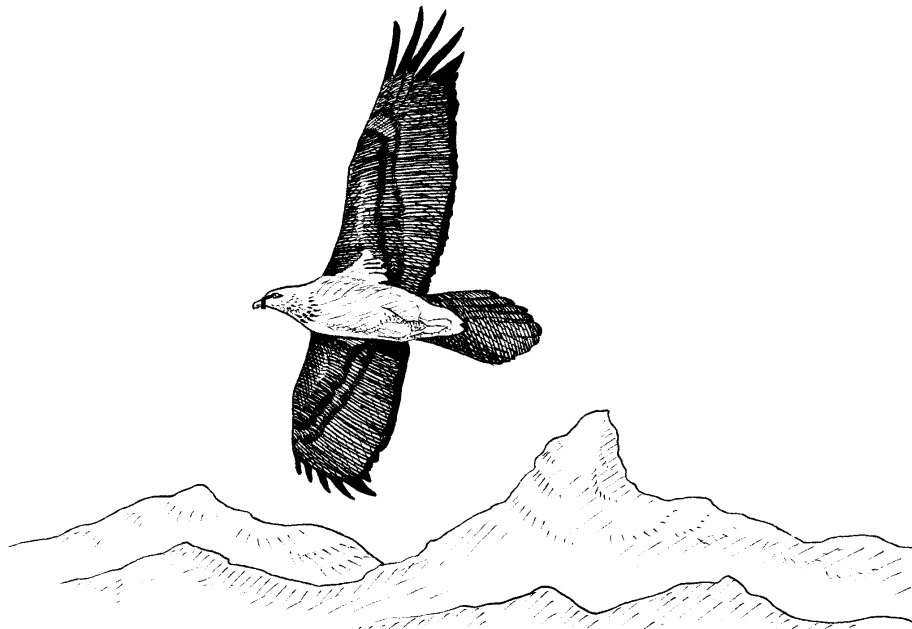
### **Sunday 30 April - Aisa**

An early morning walk down to the Río Veral was fairly uneventful although we did get very good views of the male rock thrush and several nightingales were in fine voice. After breakfast we headed off towards Aisa although our first stop was at the bridge of St. Miguel, part of the Santiago pilgrimage route, just outside Jaca. As we walked down the track to the old bridge we were treated to exceptional views of a firecrest which was feeding unconcernedly in an overhanging tree. We then had grand views of a red kite and two little brown jobs on telephone wires turned out to be our first views of rock sparrows. Our plant hunters also came into the frame here with the discovery of four spikes of early spider-orchids, surrounded by the attractive false vetch and more lovely white rockrose.

After this we then continued on our way to Aisa village and the members of the group in the cars were lucky enough to have excellent views of a pair of golden orioles. As we arrived at the village the sun finally broke through and it started to warm up a little. After a very welcome coffee we explored this delightful village looking out particularly for citril finches. We were not lucky enough to see the latter but had compensation in a raven mobbing a golden eagle over a nearby ridge; two peregrines were also soaring here and most of the group admired a very confiding swallow which sat on phone wires at eye level.

We arrived at the head of the Aisa valley at lunchtime so out came the packed lunches and the 'Spanish sticks'. Firecrests, coal tits and great tits were all singing in the surrounding trees and Colin spotted a crested tit which came really close. The real highlight here was provided by an immature lammergeier drifting across the valley allowing us all very good views. Two ravens flew over croaking and a kestrel mobbed a golden eagle which showed particularly well. We then noticed two Pyrenean chamois, or izard, across the valley and surmised that recent heavy snow had kept the animals lower down. During this eventful lunch, surrounded by cowslips, Kathy managed to find the lovely bulbous corydalis, Pyrenean violets and the first few hepatica flowers of the trip.

After lunch we scrambled up into this magnificent valley where hordes of lesser daffodils were still in flower. We also managed to find a few spring and trumpet gentians in flower although we were somewhat early for this species. At least 70 choughs flew out of the valley uttering their characteristic calls and another new species for the trip was water pipit with several of these lively birds singing alongside the river. The specialised alpine flora in this pristine place included bird's eye primrose, Pyrenean buttercup, yellow rock jasmine and Pyrenean squill, with strange stunted juniper bushes being the dominant vegetation. At the head of the valley three more rock thrushes gave a dazzling display, accompanied by the ubiquitous black redstarts and a family of izards with young, who watched us intently. Peering around the valley slopes we found at least another 18 izards feeding unconcernedly just below the snow line. As we headed back a pale-phase booted eagle drifted across the sky and two full adult lammergeiers quartered the surrounding slopes. A glorious end to an enthralling day!



### **Monday 1 May - *San Juan de la Peña***

After breakfast we headed east with the sun warm on our backs. Our first stop was on the banks of the Río Aragón where nightingales, blackcaps and greenfinches were in song. We walked through an area of tall poplars and, on cue, heard golden orioles singing in the distance. Hazel

found a wryneck in the trees but this soon vanished from sight. A little egret flew over the river, a cuckoo called and a yellow-legged gull drifted by. Sadly, the river was so full we could not walk along it as planned but we did find a very impressive patch of purple toothwort which is parasitic on poplars and has a delicious sweet scent.

Our next stop was in the small and very picturesque village of Santa Cruz de la Seros at the foot of San Juan de la Peña. Several crag martins were in evidence around the Romanesque church which was once part of a flourishing religious community, created in the 11th century but abandoned in the 16th. Most of the group took the opportunity to have a look around the building with its unusual alabaster windows, and some of us were narrowly missed by an incredible swooping buzzard as we came out of the church. In the clear skies a whole host of raptors were soaring and among the many griffons yet another lammergeier appeared. These were joined by two Egyptian vultures, a peregrine falcon and a pale-phase booted eagle. As if this wasn't enough a magnificent Bonelli's eagle soared and drifted overhead for a full five minutes! After this excitement we set up the telescopes on the overlooking cliffs and targeted several griffons on their nests. The owner of the local bar where we had just had coffee seemed very interested in the goings on and had a good look at the vultures through the scopes.

On the road up to the monastery we stopped off at a magnificent viewpoint where we looked down on all the vultures and two ravens flew around calling noisily. There were some good butterflies here including the bright yellow cleopatra, a Spanish festoon and several delicate wood whites. Being May-day holiday, the road at the original monastery was full of cars and the Guardia Civil had to bump one off the road to allow us through, amid much applause for Alfredo's driving skills! By the time we reached the top it was time for lunch at the picnic tables near the abandoned monastery. Crested tits and coal tits were singing among the pines and another two ravens flew over. It was hard not to notice the rootings of wild boar under the trees although this species is almost entirely nocturnal here.

After lunch we climbed up the steep path to the ridge through hordes of beautiful hepatica flowers in shades of white, pink and blue, lovely white drooping wild daffodils, mats of bearberry and vicious clumps of particularly spiny hedgehog broom. It was worth the exertion when the top was reached with its superlative 360-degree views across the sierras. The woods here rang with singing blackcaps, chiffchaffs, coal tits and firecrests. Both green and great spotted woodpeckers called from the dense woods but no sign of black woodpeckers. A humming-bird hawkmoth was finding some excellent nectar sources on the ridge top and a brightly coloured butterfly turned out to be a chequered skipper. Along the ridge were masses of delightful little rock narcissus and quite a few specimens of yellow elder-flowered orchids, with just one pink one nestling among the broom. Some of the asphodel was just coming into flower, and we saw many pines decorated with tents full of caterpillars and others with large clumps of mistletoe. As we descended the ridge we had to negotiate a party of pine procession moth caterpillars at the bottom, after which we saw an impressive large black cricket near a couple of anthills.

We then decided to explore the track up to the ruined chapel of St. Teresa and were glad of the shade of the trees as it was beginning to really warm up. Glorious Cleopatra butterflies were much in evidence here, even posing for the cameras on some early purple orchids, and we had our only sighting of a large tortoiseshell.

The two Kathies and John then called us back as they had found a small flock of crossbills in the pines. We all trooped down the track and there they were; first a flock of six birds then another four including a brightly-coloured red-brick male. As we watched their feeding antics a crested tit was discovered carrying nesting material into a rather dilapidated nestbox, which allowed us all great views

After this excitement it was time for a beer at the new bar by the monastery. While we sat there another lammergeier drifted over quickly followed by an adult golden eagle. What an area for raptors!! Colin and Geoff, who had ventured further into the woods, were rewarded with close

encounters with a short-toed treecreeper, a nuthatch and a great spotted woodpecker. We then boarded the bus for a quick stop at the lower monastery which is built into the overhanging rock - very spectacular. Most of the group took the chance to look around this national monument surrounded by Iberian woodland echoing to the sounds of singing song thrush, blackcap and firecrest. A stunning day!!

### **Tuesday 2 May - *Castillo de Loarre and Riglos***

On our way south we decided to have a look at the Embalse de Peña which has occasionally turned up interesting birds. The reservoir itself was rather quiet with just a couple of great crested grebes, mallards and a yellow-legged gull. Both house and crag martins were building nests on the overhanging rocks and the usual nightingale and Cetti's warbler sang from dense scrub. A pale-phase booted eagle drifted over but the highlight here was a male blue rock thrush perched out in the open on top of the crags. Alpine toadflax was growing along the wall here, and a beautiful hairless mossy saxifrage adorned the rocks. There was a lovely bush of yellow flowering wild jasmine and masses of rosemary growing out of the rock-face.

We then decided to head south for Castillo de Loarre at the very southern end of the pre-Pyrenean range. This magnificent castle dominates the landscape in this area and is also very good for wildlife. A southern grey shrike and two woodchat shrikes were briefly seen from the bus on the way up to the castle. As we disembarked from the bus a black redstart sang well from the castle walls and a hoopoe swiftly disappeared from view. However we were not to be thwarted in our efforts for this species and were fortunate enough to see four birds together on nearby rocks. Ten choughs seemed to be breeding around the castle and at least three woodlarks were singing high up in the sky. Kathie found Pyrenean honeysuckle growing on the castle walls!

The position of this castle on the Sierra de Loarre inevitably attracts birds of prey we were not to be disappointed. A short-toed eagle drifted along the ridge occasionally hanging in the air with its legs dangling; this sort of diagnostic behaviour makes this particular species relatively easy to identify. A peregrine was soaring high over the ridge, three Egyptian vultures circled overhead and yet another golden eagle flew over. Two dark blobs on distant telephone wires turned out to be woodchat shrikes which, infuriatingly, refused to come any closer. Butterflies were very much in evidence as the morning began to warm up and we identified black-eyed blue, green-underside blue and the magnificent cleopatra. Anne was particularly pleased to find a large Egyptian locust. After all this excitement it was time for lunch below the castle walls with magnificent views and ever present soaring griffon vultures. After lunch we explored the area of scrub below the castle where Sardinian, Dartford and subalpine warblers were all singing. To cap a memorable visit to this site we then spotted a soaring honey buzzard and the only hobby of the trip flew swiftly over.

The afternoon was pressing on so we headed straight for the village of Riglos. This picturesque settlement is overshadowed by massive sandstone cliffs which unfortunately have become very popular with European climbers in recent years. We were lucky that there seemed to be only two climbers so any disturbance was minimal. A flock of 20 or so choughs were wheeling around the cliffs and it was heartening to see a pair of Egyptian vultures still present at the site as well as loads of Griffons. We walked up through the village to the base of the church intending to search for black wheatears; no sooner had we arrived than we saw a male actually going into his nest in the rocks. The female then joined him and we enjoyed excellent views of both birds. As we were watching them a humming-bird hawk-moth buzzed by avidly searching out nectar sources. Some of us then climbed up through the rocks behind the church and were rewarded by sighting up to six citril finches in the scrub. This bird can be difficult at the best of times so we were very fortunate to catch up with this small group!

With everyone hot and tired we adjourned to a new, local bar for cold beers and lemonades but still found time to have a good look at a singing nightingale by the bus on the outskirts of the

village. Flower highlights here included rosy garlic, blue gromwell, Calabrian soapwort and drifts of purple irises up the hillside making it look like a Van Gogh painting.

### **Wednesday 3 May - Foz de Biniés & Río Veral**

The day dawned fine, sunny and calm; ideal conditions for our planned exploration of the gorge at Biniés. A Cetti's warbler burst into song as we arrived at the entrance to the gorge, giving us a fleeting glimpse as it flew across the road and a pair of circl buntings gave us all good views. We then spent a good half hour getting to grips with two singing Bonelli's warblers which were much easier heard than seen. Many of the group did finally get a look at this elusive warbler among its perfect leafy camouflage.

Petrocoptis, the pink endemic to this part of the Pyrenees, was growing on the walls of the gorge, as was a fabulous great rosette of Pyrenean saxifrage complete with flower spike; something we had never seen before. In fact there was a wealth of flowers all the way along the roadsides, including the exquisite mini-bluebell style Pyrenean hyacinth. Busy in plant identification, John found a huge female slow-worm, swollen with young, and we saw several of the large shiny black violet carpenter bees.

Griffon vultures were very much in evidence overhead with many pairs breeding on the cliffs and these were joined by a pair of Egyptian vultures. A peregrine flew over when everyone was searching for the Bonelli's warblers and then a sub-adult lammergeier drifted overhead making five sightings of this amazing bird during the week. Crag martins were breeding on the cliffs and 10 choughs were no doubt breeding here also. The scrub also revealed a short-toed treecreeper, a female pied flycatcher and a very good view of a firecrest. Butterflies were out in force in the warm conditions and we found a dainty panoptes blue perched up on a dead orchid. The only Camberwell beauty of the week was located resting high up on a bush and we were very fortunate to get it into the telescope.

Dippers could be heard calling along the fast-flowing river and various members of the group saw several birds; at least five birds were thought to be involved. A common sandpiper and a grey wagtail were also found on the river.

As we reached the end of the gorge the roadside was absolutely alive with clouds of scarce swallowtail butterflies which were busy taking minerals from the ground. An open area of meadow beside the river made the most perfect place for lunch, surrounded by lady orchids, dingy skippers, Spanish fritillaries and mountain small whites. Vivien made a very welcome appearance, laden down with the most sumptuous picnic of hot Spanish omelette, salad and fresh pineapple - what a treat!

After lunch many of the group took up the offer of a lift back to Berdún in the bus with Jesus. The rest of us opted for the long walk back to base via the badlands along the Río Veral. A circl bunting was singing in full view at the start of the walk and we also had very good views of a singing male subalpine warbler. A large stick nest in one of the poplars turned out to have a black kite using it and the bird seemed somewhat oblivious to our presence. We then had a grand view of a hovering short-toed eagle at close quarters with its feet hanging down, intent on hunting snakes and lizards. We then arrived at an open area of grass and scrub and were met by Vivien who had gone on ahead. Diligent searching turned up several species of orchids including sombre bee-orchids, burnt orchids, early spider orchids, lady orchids and a single spike of a green-winged orchid. Another Spanish festoon butterfly was found here and another new species was a pale clouded yellow.

We continued our walk along the river with Berdún looming up before us, crossing arable fields and walking through areas planted with apple trees. Several circl buntings were among the trees and five whinchats were feeding in an open field. Another two pied flycatchers were seen in the scrub, a turtle dove flew over and a redstart flashed its red tail as it disappeared into the scrub.



The last part of the walk involved struggling up the hill from the river where we met some of the group going in the other direction. A cool beer at Emilio's was a must after this! Most of the group who had arrived back earlier had a chance to explore Berdún a little more and John and Verna discovered the henbane growing beside the promenade where the town looks down from on high across the badlands.

Before dinner we visited the church and were treated to a memorable impromptu organ recital by David. The church itself was very impressive but suffers the same threat from thieves as our churches and sadly has to be kept locked.

After dinner John gave us a fascinating insight into some of the history and architecture of the area and the huge changes in agriculture he and Vivien have witnessed over the past 30 years.

#### **Thursday 4 May - Col de Portalet / Formigal**

A pre-breakfast walk was largely uneventful under threatening grey skies with a strong wind. At least 1000 swifts had gathered over the village, presumably being held up on their journey north. Red kites and griffons were flying low with a couple of the latter just above ground level. Two crested larks were seen on the roadside and we had good views of a nightingale in song.

After breakfast we boarded the bus for the long trip up to the French border at Col de Portalet at approximately 1800 metres or 6000 feet above sea level. The drive there took about two hours and Geoff spotted a red-backed shrike from the bus and a yellowhammer was seen in roadside scrub by the ski resort of Formigal. We arrived at our destination in late morning and after parking the bus in France decided on a cup of coffee to warm us up in the cool mountain conditions. Water pipits in both summer and winter plumage were singing over the car park as we disembarked.

After coffee we decided to investigate a track behind the bars which led into the hills. We had to negotiate various snow drifts but steadily left the trappings of civilisation behind. Wild daffodils, oxlips and spring gentians grew in the turf here and purple and yellow saxifrage clung to the rocks, along with entire-leaved primrose and masses of mountain houseleeks. Two kestrels and several griffons drifted along the ridge and several water pipits and black redstarts gave us close-up views. Yet another pair of rock thrushes were displaying and generally making themselves amazingly visible up here. As we continued along the track two chamois could be seen on the slopes across the valley. A movement in the rocks turned out to be a huge fox which still retained its winter coat making it appear huge and grey. It soon saw us and bounded off up the mountain making very impressive speed. As soon as it was far enough away it slowed to a walk and casually looked back at us. The rocks below then came alive with two marmots which were probably the intended prey of the fox in spite of their large size. We watched the marmots for several minutes and one of the animals returned to sentry duty with just his head showing. Another marmot was then seen across the valley high up on the slopes. A flash of black and white seen by Helen turned out to be a pair of black-eared wheatears but they quickly disappeared from view. We all thought it somewhat strange to hear singing skylarks and dunnocks up here but five alpine choughs were expected. Both species of chough were seen here and the alpine variety were easily identified by their fluty calls.

After all this excitement we made our way back to the bus to collect our lunch. It was still quite cold so lunch was taken either on the bus or on nearby rocks. We were serenaded throughout lunch by 'oystercatcher' type calls which turned out to be made by watching marmots in the rocks. Much interest was provided by two skiers who climbed to the top of the ridge before skiing gently down. After lunch we explored the area below the car park finding 19 lizards grazing on the newly-exposed grass. Birds were somewhat scarce here although a solitary buzzard went over and wheatears looked for food among the rocks. Marsh marigolds were growing in the little streams of snow-melt and Kathy found a wonderful patch of white and purple crocuses.

Most folk then returned to the shops to hunt for souvenirs and some took advantage of the cafés to sample what was apparently delicious strawberry liqueur! The long drive back to Berdún was notable for two cormorants on the Embalse de Bubal and a hunting female marsh harrier over the cereal fields outside Berdún.

Before dinner we were treated to an excellent talk on the wildlife of Aragón by Juan Carlos of SEO, focusing on the Important Bird Areas in Aragón. We then presented him with a cheque for £550, our contribution to the important conservation work going on in this part of Spain.

### **Friday 5 May - *Río Aragón, Arbayún and Lumbier gorges***

Our last full day in Aragón began with a little cloud cover but soon turned sunny and very warm. Our first stop was alongside the Río Aragón just west of Berdún. We walked over the bridge and immediately noticed a substantial sand martin colony in the riverbank which seemed to us to be very vulnerable to attack by predators. Yet another wryneck called from the trees and this time we were able to muster a fleeting glimpse before it disappeared into the scrub. A woodlark was singing from its perch in a dead tree allowing very good views and an Iberian chiffchaff was finally identified by its song which has a little rattle tacked on to the end. As we heading back to the bus three honey buzzards flew low over the trees towards the east and were briefly joined in the air by a common buzzard. Another two honey buzzards were over the village of Liédena on the way to Arbayún.

Our next destination was the viewpoint over the gorge at Arbayún which we finally reached after getting a little lost in Lumbier. As expected, griffon vultures were in the air in numbers and were joined by two golden eagles. Four black and white shapes scythed through the sky and were soon identified as alpine swifts; this species proved very elusive during the week with very little migration in evidence. A short-toed treecreeper was found feeding among ivy on the rocks and a subalpine warbler was seen carrying nesting material. The sky was getting ominously black; thunder was rolling around and then the heavens opened so we beat a hasty retreat back to the bus and moved on to Lumbier, fully expecting the rain to continue but luck was on our side again.

We arrived at the car park in hot sun and could see that it was still raining higher up in the mountains. We had lunch at the picnic tables and Kathy immediately picked up a fan-tailed warbler calling from the adjacent cereal field. Several of us saw it quickly fly off so Geoff decided to walk along the road to see if he could re-locate the bird. Although he was unsuccessful he was fortunate enough to find three citril finches - a splendid find! While we were having lunch at least 40 choughs wheeled overhead and were joined by our first jackdaws of the trip. Two Egyptian vultures soared very low overhead and one of them perched up on a rock to give us the once over. New butterflies here were clouded yellow and common blue. Beautiful bright pink Pyrenean rockroses were growing around the edge of the picnic area and more splendid spurges grew here too (later identified as *Euphorbia serrata* - I think!).

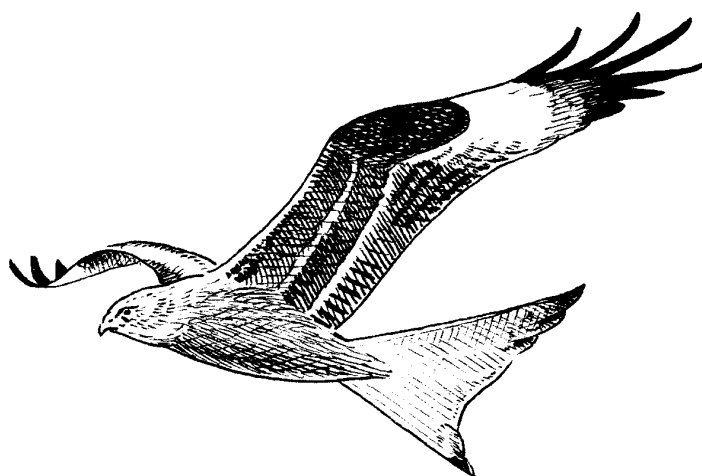
As we entered this magnificent gorge two pairs of kestrels were sparring with each other and the two males locked talons before spiralling towards the ground. It looked inevitable that they would hit the ground but they disentangled just in time to avoid disaster. Two alpine swifts were then seen hurtling in and out of their nest hole in the rocks. Blue rock thrushes were very much in evidence and could be heard singing from the high crags. At least three pairs were involved and everyone managed to see at least one of these glorious birds whose plumage comes alive as the sun illuminates the males' blue sheen. We also had close up views of yet another singing nightingale and a firecrest across the river became very accessible when seen through the telescope. Geoff and Kathy were watching a stunning yellow serin singing on a dead branch when he was joined by a female and we actually saw them mating. A couple of common sandpipers on the river were joined by both grey and white wagtails while at least two dippers put in the occasional appearance. Two more pairs of kestrels were found at the bottom end of the gorge but no amount of searching could locate the legendary but elusive wallcreeper.

There were floral delights every step of the way, with one of the stars being the most improbable-looking shocking pink wild snapdragon. Turpentine trees grew all along the river and pitch trefoil, blue lettuce, hoary rockrose, yellow woundwort and many others were in flower all over the lower slopes. As we left the gorge and came out into more open country the heat of the afternoon continued to rise. A pair of circl buntings took fright and flew into the scrub and yet another pale-phase booted eagle flew low over our heads towards Liédena. Another booted eagle was then seen along the ridge to be joined by a hunting short-toed eagle and two buzzards. We had an excellent view of an Egyptian locust here and the warm conditions had tempted out many butterflies including dingy skipper, small copper, brown argus, peacock and several clouded yellows. By this stage the flower brigade were far behind, admiring drifts of blue aphyllanthes, lovely salmon-pink shrubby restharrow, white flax, masses of orchids and much more! Tired but very pleased with the day we were happy to see Jesus waiting with the bus at the end of the track. On the return journey to Berdún we passed the huge Embalse de Yesa where we counted 16 great crested grebes, four little egrets and a single grey heron.

Our last meal at Emilio's was enlivened by champagne and brought an end to a superb week in the Pyrenees with great birds, butterflies and flowers plus excellent food and wine at Emilio's; not to mention great company and a tremendous relaxed holiday atmosphere of real enjoyment. We were touched and delighted to receive our fabulous atlases of the birds and flowers of this magnificent region and look forward to future visits when we will be able to put them to good use. Many thanks to you all.

#### **Saturday 6 May - *the journey home***

Breakfast at 5:15 a.m. was a subdued affair and we were all on board the bus by 6 o'clock for the long journey back to Bilbao. Looking back at the lights of Berdún perched majestically above the dark surrounding plain was a memorable experience which reinforced the impression of Berdún as a magical place. Dawn began to break over the Embalse de Yesa in beautiful shades of purple and silver. The coffee stop at the Hotel Iturrimurri was very welcome and we saw the white stork standing up on the nest again on its church tower. Bilbao seemed even more startlingly ugly than it did a week ago - possibly something to do with where we had been in the meantime? The red valerian was impressive though! We made good time to the airport; although it was a great shame a trip to the Guggenheim would have been just too risky. A little hanging around at Bilbao gave us time to eat our packed lunches from Emilio and reflect on fond memories of the Pyrenees, Berdún and a truly fantastic week.



## Bird List

|                      |                        |                          |
|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Great crested grebe  | Cormorant              | Little egret             |
| Grey heron           | White stork            | Mallard                  |
| Tufted duck          | Honey buzzard          | Black kite               |
| Red kite             | Lammergeier            | Egyptian vulture         |
| Griffon vulture      | Short-toed eagle       | Marsh harrier            |
| Montagu's harrier    | Common buzzard         | Golden eagle             |
| Booted eagle         | Bonelli's eagle        | Common kestrel           |
| Hobby                | Peregrine              | Red-legged partridge     |
| Moorhen              | Coot                   | Little ringed plover     |
| Common sandpiper     | Yellow-legged gull     | Rock dove                |
| Woodpigeon           | Collared dove          | Turtle dove              |
| Cuckoo               | Barn owl               | Scops owl                |
| Swift                | Alpine swift           | Bee-eater                |
| Hoopoe               | Green woodpecker       | Great spotted woodpecker |
| Wryneck              | Crested lark           | Woodlark                 |
| Skylark              | Sand martin            | Crag martin              |
| Swallow              | House martin           | Tawny pipit              |
| Water pipit          | Yellow wagtail         | Grey wagtail             |
| White wagtail        | Dipper                 | Wren                     |
| Dunnock              | Robin                  | Nightingale              |
| Black redstart       | Redstart               | Whinchat                 |
| Stonechat            | Northern wheatear      | Black-eared wheatear     |
| Black wheatear       | Rock thrush            | Blue rock thrush         |
| Blackbird            | Song thrush            | Mistle thrush            |
| Cetti's warbler      | Fan-tailed warbler     | Dartford warbler         |
| Subalpine warbler    | Sardinian warbler      | Common whitethroat       |
| Garden warbler       | Blackcap               | Bonelli's warbler        |
| Chiffchaff           | Iberian chiffchaff     | Willow warbler           |
| Goldcrest            | Firecrest              | Spotted flycatcher       |
| Pied flycatcher      | Long-tailed tit        | Crested tit              |
| Coal tit             | Blue tit               | Great tit                |
| Nuthatch             | Short-toed treecreeper | Golden oriole            |
| Red-backed shrike    | Southern grey shrike   | Woodchat shrike          |
| Jay                  | Magpie                 | Alpine chough            |
| Red-billed chough    | Jackdaw                | Rook                     |
| Carrion crow         | Raven                  | Spotless starling        |
| House sparrow        | Rock sparrow           | Chaffinch                |
| Serin                | Citril finch           | Greenfinch               |
| Goldfinch            | Linnet                 | Crossbill                |
| Bullfinch            | Yellowhammer           | Cirl bunting             |
| Corn bunting         |                        |                          |
| <b>Species Total</b> | <b>121</b>             |                          |

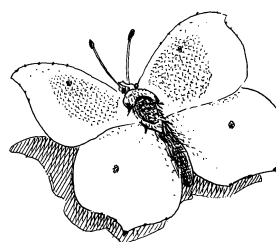
## Butterfly List

Swallowtail  
Large White  
Green-veined White  
Pale Clouded Yellow  
Cleopatra  
Small Copper  
Black-eyed Blue  
Common Blue  
Peacock  
Marbled Fritillary  
Wall Brown

**Species Total 33**

Scarce Swallowtail  
Small White  
Orange Tip  
Clouded Yellow  
Wood White  
Holly Blue  
Panoptes Blue  
Camberwell Beauty  
Painted Lady  
Spanish Fritillary  
Dingy Skipper

Spanish Festoon  
Mountain Small White  
Moroccan Orange Tip  
Brimstone  
Green Hairstreak  
Green-underside Blue  
Brown Argus  
Large Tortoiseshell  
Comma  
Southern Speckled Wood  
Chequered Skipper



## Plant List

Abbreviations of sites: B = Berdún area, including the Ríos Veral and Aragón

Bi = Biniés gorge  
J = San Juan de la Peña  
P = Embalse de Peña  
R = Riglos  
L = Lumbier gorge  
F = Formigal  
A = Aisa valley

## PTERIDOPHYTES (Ferns)

*Asplenium ruta-muraria* Wall-rue B  
*A. trichomanes* Maidenhair spleenwort B A  
*Ceterach officinarum* Rustyback fern B A  
*Polypodium vulgare* Common polypody Bi J L

## GYMNOSPERMS (Conifers)

*Cupressus sempervirens* Funeral cypress B R L  
*Juniperus communis* Juniper A  
*Pinus nigra* Black pine B Bi J A  
*P. mugo* Mountain pine A J

## DICOTYLEDONS

### Anacardiaceae; pistachio family

*Pistachia terebinthus* Turpentine tree B Bi L

### Umbelliferae; carrot family

*Eryngium campestre* Field eryngo B  
*Foeniculum vulgare* Fennel B L  
*Scandix pecten-veneris* Shepherd's-needle B  
*Myrrhis odorata* Sweet cicely B

**Aquifoliaceae; holly family**

*Ilex aquifolium* Holly J

**Araliaceae; ivy family**

*Hedera helix* Ivy B J L

**Compositae; daisy family**

*Bellis perennis* Daisy B J

*Chrysanthemum alpina* Alpine moon daisy R

*Calendula arvensis* Field marigold B

*C. officinalis* Marigold B

*Carduus acanthoides* Watted thistle B

*C. tenuiflorus* Slender thistle B

*Carlina acaulis* Stemless carline-thistle B A

*Silybum marianum* Milk thistle B R

*Lactuca perennis* Mountain or Blue lettuce P L

*Lapsana communis* Nipplewort L

*Helichrysum stoechas* L

*Santolina chamaecyparissus* Lavender cotton B

*Taraxacum* sp. Dandelion B A

*Tussilago farfara* Colt's-foot B A

**Berberidaceae; barberry family**

*Berberis vulgaris* Barberry B

**Boraginaceae; borage family**

*Borago officinalis* Borage B

*Buglossoides purpureocaerulea* Purple gromwell B

*Lithodora fruticosum* Shrubby gromwell B

*Lithospermum arvense* Corn gromwell B

*Symphytum officinale* Comfrey B

**Brassicaceae; cress family**

*Alliaria petiolata* Garlic mustard Bi

*Brassica napus* Rape B

*Capsella bursa-pastoris* Shepherd's-purse B

*Cardaria draba* Hoary Cress B

*Lunaria annua* Honesty B

**Buxaceae; box family**

*Buxus sempervirens* Box B Bi J R A L

**Caprifoliaceae; honeysuckle family**

*Lonicera periclymenum* Honeysuckle B

*L. pyrenaicum* Pyrenean honeysuckle Loarre

*L. xylosteum* Fly honeysuckle B Bi

*Sambucus ebulus* Danewort/ Dwarf elder L

*Viburnum lantana* Wayfaring tree B L

**Caryophyllaceae; pink family**

*Petrocoptis pyrenaica* Bi

*Silene alba* White campion Bi L

*S. vulgaris* Bladder campion Bi L

*S. nutans* Nottingham catchfly Bi

*Saponaria calabrica* Calabrian soapwort R

**Cistaceae; rockrose family**

*Helianthemum apenninum* White rock-rose B A

*H. canum* Hoary rock-rose P L

*H. nummularium* ssp. *pyrenaicum* Pyrenean rockrose L

**Convolvulaceae; bindweed family**

*Convolvulus arvensis* Field bindweed B L

**Cornaceae; dogwood family**

*Cornus sanguinea* Dogwood Bi L

**Crassulaceae; stonecrop family**

*Sedum dasyphyllum* Thick-leaved stonecrop L

*S. reflexum* Rock stonecrop L

*S. anacampseros* Reddish stonecrop J

*Sempervivum montanum* Mountain houseleek F

*Umbilicus rupestris* Navelwort Bi A L

**Cucurbitaceae; cucumber family**

*Bryonia dioica* White bryony Bi L

**Ericaceae; heather family**

*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* Bearberry J

**Euphorbiaceae; spurge family**

(some doubts over identification of this difficult group)

*Euphorbia amygdaloides* Wood spurge B

*E. chamaebuxus* Pyrenean spurge B

*E. characias* Large Mediterranean spurge B Bi P R L

*E. helioscopia* Sun spurge B

*E. lathyris* Caper spurge B

*E. serrata* L

**Fabaceae; pea family**

*Anthyllis montana* Mountain kidney-vetch B

*Astragalus monspessulanus* False vetch B L A

*Cercis siliquastrum* Judas tree B

*Colutea arborescens* Bladder senna Bi

*Coronilla emerus* False senna Bi

*C. scorpiodes* Annual scorpion vetch Bi

*Echinopartum horridum* Hedgehog broom J

*Genista hispanica* Spanish broom B

*Hippocrepis comosa* Horseshoe vetch B Bi

*Lathyrus aphaca* Yellow vetchling B

*L. montanus* Bitter vetch J

*L. setifolius* Red pea B

*L. filiformis* Slender vetch Bi

*Lotus corniculatus* Bird's-foot trefoil B

*Trifolium pratense* Red clover L

*Medicago arabica* Spotted medick B

*M. lupulina* Black medick B

*Onobrychis viciifolia* Sainfoin B

*Ononis fruticosa* Shrubby restharrow L

*Psoralea bituminosa* Pitch trefoil L

*Robinia pseudacacia* False acacia Bilbao

*Vicia cracca* Tufted vetch B L

*V. sativa* Common vetch B R

**Fagaceae; beech family**

*Fagus sylvatica* Beech J A

*Quercus coccifera* Kermes oak J L

*Q. ilex* Holm oak Bi P J

**Fumariaceae; fumitory family**

*Fumaria officinalis* Common fumitory B L  
*Corydalis bulbosa* Bulbous corydalis A

**Gentianaceae; gentian family**

*Gentiana acaulis* Trumpet gentian A  
*G. verna* Spring gentian F A

**Geraniaceae; geranium family**

*Erodium cicutarium* Common storksbill B  
*E. malacoides* Mallow-leaved storksbill B  
*Geranium molle* Dove's-foot cranesbill B L  
*G. dissectum* Cut-leaved cranesbill B L  
*G. divaricatum* Spreading cranesbill R  
*G. robertianum* Herb robert B Bi L  
*G. rotundifolium* Round-leaved cranesbill B Bi L



**Globulariaceae; globularia family**

*Globularia cordifolia* Matted globularia B  
*G. repens* J

**Hypericaceae; St. John's wort family**

*Hypericum perforatum* Perforate St. John's wort L

**Lamiaceae; mint family**

*Lamium amplexicaule* Henbit deadnettle B  
*L. purpureum* Red deadnettle B  
*Marrubium vulgare* White horehound L  
*Rosmarinus officinalis* Rosemary P R  
*Salvia verbenaca* Wild clary B L  
*Stachys recta* Yellow woundwort L  
*Thymus vulgaris* Garden thyme B Bi P R

**Linaceae; flax family**

*Linum narbonense* Beautiful flax B L  
*L. suffruticosum* White flax L

**Loranthaceae; mistletoe family**

*Viscum album ssp. austriacum* A J

**Malvaceae; mallow family**

*Malva sylvestris* Common mallow B

**Moraceae; fig family**

*Ficus carica* Fig B R

**Oleaceae; olive family**

*Jasminum fruticans* Wild jasmine P L  
*Olea europaea* Olive R

**Orobanchaceae; broomrape family**

*Lathraea clandestina* Purple toothwort B

**Papaveraceae; poppy family**

*Chelidonium majus* Greater celandine A  
*P. rhoeas* Common poppy B



**Polygalaceae; milkwort family**

*Polygala nicaeensis* Nice milkwort B  
*P. vulgaris* Common milkwort B

**Primulaceae; primrose family**

*Primula elatior* Oxlip F  
*P. farinosa* Bird's-eye primrose A  
*P. integrifolia* Entire-leaved primrose F  
*P. veris* Cowslip A  
*Vitaliana primuliflora* Yellow rock-jasmine F A  
*Androsace pyrenaica* Pyrenean rock-jasmine A  
*Anagallis arvensis* Scarlet pimpernel R

**Ranunculaceae; buttercup family**

*Caltha palustris* Marsh-marigold F  
*Clematis vitalba* Traveller's-joy B Bi L J  
*Helleborus foetidus* Stinking hellebore B Bi J L  
*H. viridis* Green hellebore A  
*Hepatica nobilis* J A  
*Ranunculus pyrenaicus* Pyrenean buttercup A F

**Resedaceae; mignonette family**

*Reseda lutea* Mignonette L  
*R. phyteuma* Corn mignonette B

**Rhamnaceae; buckthorn family**

*Rhamnus alaternus* Mediterranean buckthorn L

**Rosaceae; rose family**

*Crataegus monogyna* Hawthorn B Bi J L  
*Fragaria vesca* Wild strawberry Bi  
*Potentilla aurea* Golden cinquefoil B L  
*Prunus avium* Wild cherry J  
*Rosa canina* Dog rose L  
*Sanguisorba minor* Salad burnet B Bi L

**Rubiaceae; bedstraw family**

*Asperula arvensis* Blue woodruff Bi L

**Saxifragaceae; saxifrage family**

*Saxifraga pentadactylis* Hairless mossy saxifrage P  
*S. longifolia* Pyrenean saxifrage Bi L A  
*S. oppositifolia* Purple saxifrage F  
*S. aretioides* Yellow saxifrage F  
*S. moschata* Musky saxifrage F

**Scrophulariaceae; figwort family**

*Antirrhinum majus* Snapdragon B Bi L  
*Cymbalaria muralis* Ivy-leaved toadflax B L  
*Linaria alpina* Alpine toadflax L  
*L. pyrenaica* Pyrenean toadflax P  
*Verbascum sinuatum* Sinuous mullein L  
*Veronica persica* Common field speedwell B  
*V. nummularia* Pyrenean speedwell A  
*V. beccabunga* Brooklime A

**Solanaceae; nightshade family**

*Hyoscyamus niger* Henbane B

**Thymelaeaceae; daphne family**

*Daphne laureola* Spurge-laurel J F

**Valerianaceae; valerian family**

*Centranthus ruber* Red valerian Bilbao

*C. calcitrapa* L

*Valeriana globularifolia* Globularia-leaved valerian A

**Violaceae; violet family**

*Viola pyrenaica* A J

**MONOCOTYLEDONS**

**Amaryllidaceae; daffodil family**

*Narcissus minor* Lesser daffodil A

*N. pseudonarcissus ssp. moschatus* J

*N. pseudonarcissus ssp. pseudonarcissus* Wild daffodil F

*N. rupicola* Rock daffodil J A

**Dioscoreaceae; yam family**

*Tamus communis* Black bryony Bi

**Iridaceae; iris family**

*Crocus albiflorus* White crocus F

*C. vernus* Purple crocus F

*Iris germanica* Purple iris R

*I. pseudacorus* Yellow flag B

**Liliaceae; lily family**

*Allium roseum* Rosy garlic R

*Aphyllanthes monspeliensis* Blue grass-lily Bi

*Asparagus acutifolius* Asparagus B

*Asphodelus albus* White asphodel J

*Fritillaria pyrenaica* Pyrenean snakeshead fritillary B

*Hyacinthus amethystinus* Pyrenean hyacinth Bi

*Muscari neglectum* Grape-hyacinth B J L

*Merendera montana* J

**Orchidaceae; orchid family**

*Dactylorhiza sambucina* Elder-flowered orchid A J

*Ophrys fusca* Sombre Bee-orchid B

*O. sphegodes* Early Spider-orchid B L

*Orchis mascula* Early Purple-orchid J

*O. morio var. picta* Green-winged orchid B

*O. purpurea* Lady orchid B Bi L

*O. ustulata* Burnt-tip orchid B

*Anacamptis pyramidalis* Pyramidal orchid L

Rob Macklin & Kathy Archibald

May 2000