

## SPRING IN THE SPANISH PYRENEES – A BRIEF SUMMARY

### 29 April – 7 May 2011

On royal wedding Friday a group of 8 Honeyguide friends, including leader Chris Gibson, met at Stansted Airport destined for Casa Sarasa, a small rural hotel at the foot of the medieval, hilltop village of Berdún, situated in the foothills of the Spanish Pyrenees, for a full week's exploration.

From the first nightingale-serenaded evening at the Casa, our very comfortable base for the week run by Peter and Melanie Rich, it was clear that the hospitality was going to be first-class. Spacious, en-suite, Spanish-styled rooms, some fully equipped for self-catering, provided our accommodation in the beautifully restored annexe. Expertly cooked 3-course dinners with red and white Rioja, breakfasts including still-warm-from-the-oven croissants, and imaginatively prepared picnic lunches, all featuring locally sourced ingredients such as Berdún pork, were the order of the week and contributed significantly to the enjoyment of the holiday.

The weather also proved exceptional, with warm sunshine every day.

In Santa Cruz a short walk up the hill gave us our best views ever of Bonelli's warbler as it sang from the top of a pine tree. At the upper monastery tiny rock daffodils were in flower and we noted our first fritillary butterflies, small pearl-bordered and Glanville.

By the dam at La Pena several stands of *Ramonda myconi* were in bloom, some even on the sunny side, and the beautiful chequered blue butterfly was identified. En route we had seen two hoopoes flying over the reservoir. Later, at the Mallos de Riglos, a black wheatear was clearly nesting under some roof tiles in the village, which lies at the base of massive red conglomerate cliffs.

At the high mountain pass of Portalet, with patches of snow still lying, a lammergeier, that most rare vulture but which we were lucky enough to see nearly every day, drifted over, a marmot called, watching us from above, and a vivid orange male rock thrush perched on rocks as we gloried in the spring and trumpet gentians and other alpine plants. Further down the mountain thousands of elder-flowered orchids in both red and yellow forms were in perfect condition.

A trek through mixed woodland at Gabardito brought us to a massive rock face where we had very good views of a wallcreeper, red wing-flicking its way about the sheer rock in bright sunshine.

Nearer Berdún, at Bailo village, red and black kites followed the plough and lambs were being born. Melanie took us on a delightful hillside ramble to the village of Arés where a Dartford warbler emerged briefly from the scrub and Malcolm found a southern white admiral, and she also led us to a newly returned colony of ground-nesting bee-eaters next to the Rio Aragón.

Our last excursion was to one of Chris's all-time favourite places – Aisa, a pristine U-shaped valley where separate flocks of alpine and red-billed choughs, izards, rock bunting, plants and amazing scenery stole the day. But the finale was at Fago gorge, where we watched a golden eagle with prey in its talons being mobbed by a lammergeier, and then saw a wild boar!

It was one of the best Honeyguide holidays ever – and I've been on a few. I look forward to returning.