

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

36 Thunder Lane Thorpe St Andrew Norwich NR7 0PX
Telephone and Fax 01603 300552 Evenings and weekends



Spring in the Spanish Pyrenees
5 - 12 May 2001

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List of participants

David Dalton Margaret Dalton	Dorset
Maurice Hutt	Brighton
Kitty Blair Ann Lennox	Edinburgh Inverness-shire
Penny Watson-Farrar	London
Angela Turner Ann Suckling	North Norfolk
Tony Summers Harvey Wood	Leicestershire
Jean Connor Dorothy Iveson	West Lothian Carlisle
Mavis Roadhouse	Sheffield
Margaret Marris	Dorset
Derek Boughton	Canterbury
Robin McKeown	Australia
Leaders Chris Gibson Will Woodrow	Dovercourt Norwich

Report by Chris Gibson, with bird list by Will Woodrow. 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 £400 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 £6,675, and the total from all Honeyguide holidays to £22,805. A thank-you letter from Juan Carlos appears at the end of this report.

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Saturday 5 May: The journey there...

The UK contingent met successfully at Gatwick, thankfully including Maurice who had a last-minute hitch – the infamous disappearing passport. The check-in area was buzzing with similar groups to ours – rambles, golfers and even the rival Honeyguide holiday to the Camargue. We boarded on time, to be greeted with the sight of rather more salubrious seats than we were accustomed to on flights of this nature. But very soon we came to appreciate the additional comfort as a 45 minute air traffic delay to our departure was announced.

As we left the ground in pleasant sunshine, the news was relayed of the expected weather in Bilbao: a forecast of cloud, showers and a temperature of just 12°C was not what we wanted to hear. And so it proved 90 minutes later as we disembarked, with the added delight of a strong northerly wind to contend with. The new airport terminal, albeit striking architecturally, was little compensation. Foot & Mouth precautions were understandably in place as we arrived, a good sign perhaps that we were leaving the trials of the past few months – flood and pestilence – behind us for a week.

Next task, to find Robin, recently arrived from Australia, was easily achieved, as was locating the coach, although the driver Jesus proved somewhat more elusive. Sadly, John Boucher, our host, was unable to meet us due to illness. Nevertheless we were soon underway – our Spanish adventure had really begun.

The forest-clad hills just outside Bilbao started off the theme that was to run for the whole trip – large birds of prey. The first pair of griffon vultures, soaring in spite of the weather, was a mere 20 km down the road, while a sprinkling of red and black kites turned into a veritable deluge as we neared our destination. Close to Vitoria, a white stork stood sentinel upon its church-top nest, while beyond this lowland belt, the foothills of the Pyrenean ranges started to loom. Straight away on reaching them, more griffons appeared sailing over the hillsides, an ever-present motif for the holiday and an unforgettable image. The plants along the road verges were also striking: yellow Spanish broom and gorse, and white *Robinia* served to brighten up what was in places a rather unprepossessing prospect. And furthermore, all the trees were in glorious, fresh green leaf, such a contrast from the delayed spring back home. But more familiar were the raindrops that spattered on the windscreen.

Approaching Pamplona, the landscape changed again, and for the better: dramatic mountain and cloudscapes accentuated by the legions of wind turbines on the more prominent hills. Mixed feelings there – it's good that renewable energy sources are being tapped and the rotation of the sails has a certain stately beauty, but any one could make mincemeat (literally) out of a vulture. Despite the late hour, we felt a brief stop at the Hotel Iturrimurri was in order. Descending to the *servicios*, we were greeted with a deafening wall of sound, music at full volume coming from the function room, but that too served its purpose, to make everyone appreciate the peace and tranquillity of the rest of the trip.

Back on the road, the final leg of our journey was completed in half light. The lower slopes of eroded marl appeared relatively lifeless, apart from the ubiquitous gorse-like *Genista scoparia* in full bloom. And 'lifeless' was a highly appropriate description of the reservoir at Yesa, its waters an incredible milky-blue on account of the suspended marl, but broken only by a couple of mallards, just one coot and great crested grebe, and a party of seven grey herons heading to roost as we drove past. Then, perched on a distant hilltop lay Berdún, a welcome, dramatic and distinctive sight from any angle, made all the more dramatic by its lights twinkling in the dusk.

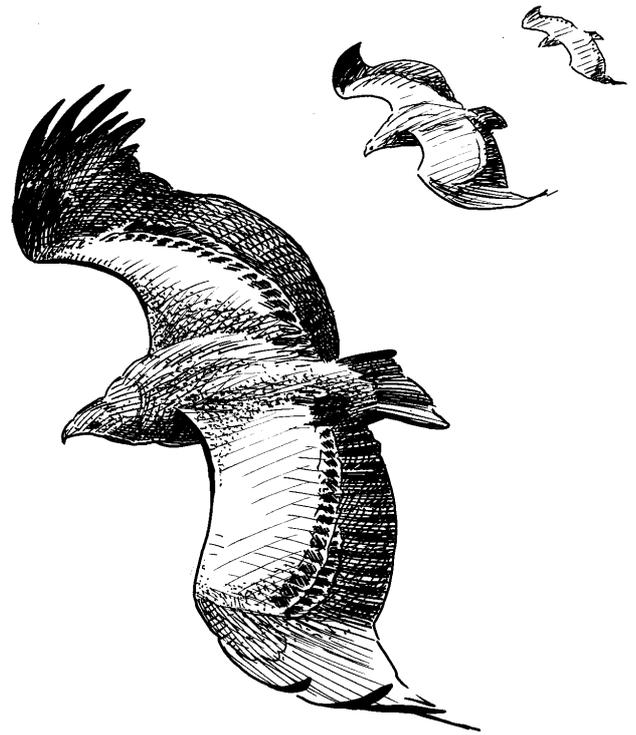
After carefully manoeuvring the bus up to the village, everyone gratefully disembarked to stretch cramped limbs, while Viv came to extend her welcome. Time to unpack and settle in for a few minutes, before we headed to Emilio's for the first of many delightfully tasty and convivial meals. After dinner – by now it was midnight – most of the group departed for bed, while the leaders took a first stroll round the town. Silence – broken only by a very occasional scops owl call, and to our great surprise a genet, which dropped out of a tree just in front of us, before scurrying down the slope, its distinctive ringed tail held aloft. But it was still very cool and windy, and most of the expected nightlife, from moths to nightingales, was keeping low.

Sunday 6 May: local walks around Berdún

It dawned clear, but still very breezy and cold, the penetrating wind coming straight off the snow-capped Pyrenees. Not that it put off all the birds, nor the birdwatchers: we were able to catch up with singing nightingale

and firecrest. Then, remarkably, as early as 7am, the vultures appeared. First an Egyptian, then a few griffons, and soon a whole battalion of griffons – 60 or more in total – followed by eight ravens. It seems they realised that thermals were out of the question on a day such as this, and so headed to Berdún to take advantage of the updraughts from the wind striking the hill. What an incredible sight, eyeball to wingtip by the northern slope, and ‘flying barn doors’ just 20m over the rooftops.

After a typically simple breakfast, we had a short meeting in the library to introduce the facilities and routines for the holiday. But we were raring to go, and so we set out on an orientation perambulation of Berdún, to get to grips with the village, its surroundings and its common birds. Starlings, so often ignored, proved in the spotlight of a ‘scope to be spotless. Resplendent in their oily blue-black plumage, and distinctive in their more restricted range of calls than our starling, spotless starling was the first new species for many of the group. Sparrows, however were not Spanish, just ‘ordinary’ house, although altogether more smart than many of our grime-encrusted city birds. Or perhaps it was just the light – everything seemed to shine with colour, from goldfinches twittering in the trees to red kites sweeping majestically across the plains.



And then there were the black redstarts, all over the village; the males were particularly handsome as is usual with the more variegated Iberian race, and their distinctive sweet-wrapper rustle followed by a loud chattering song came from many a rooftop. Not so obvious, at least by sight, were the rock sparrows below the western lookout; had it not been for their buzzing, wheezing calls, they might well have remained incognito, and even the calls were blown away on the brisk wind. Similarly, while serins were jangling and nightingales serenading, all that reached our ears were short snippets between the gusts. Given the conditions, it is not surprising our attentions turned to the plants, particularly feral snapdragons and festoons of ivy-leaved toadflax on the old walls, but sad to report the trusty clump of rustyback ferns under the archway seems to have been sprayed with herbicide.

We then headed down onto the marl – the aptly-named Badlands – towards the Río Veral. A few Egyptian vultures drifted over; circl buntings and a singing Cetti’s warbler struggled valiantly to make their presence known. Two red-legged partridges flew up and out of sight, while a Dartford warbler dived and disappeared into a patch of scrub: it was amazing how birds could hide so effectively in the little scrub available in this skeletal, primeval landscape. *Genista*, box and barberry formed the structure, in turn providing some respite for more palatable species, such as beautiful flax and lady and early spider-orchids, from the incessant browsing of goats and sheep. Other plants had chemical defences – the poisons of stinking hellebore, for example, and the herby aroma of garden thyme, a dual defence against grazing and heat, and a wonderful addition to the scentscape. But perhaps the highlight was the wonderful show of shrubby rest-harrow in flower, lending a warm pink glow to the favoured slopes. Despite the wind, the sun was warm, and in shelter a few insects started to respond to the heat. An oil beetle crawled blobbily across the track, while hordes of grasshopper nymphs gave some indication of the later summer insect abundance and diversity.

Denser vegetation across the bridge seemed to be the sort of place migrant birds would congregate, and so it proved. A few blackcaps and single willow warbler and spotted flycatcher were taking advantage of the shelter, and in the clearings, small white butterflies and a silver-y moth were on the wing, investigating the flowers of hound’s-tongue and glorious patches of milkwort. By now it was fast approaching lunchtime, so a quick stroll back up the hill led us to a welcome drink and sustenance at Emilio’s.

After lunch, everyone was raring to continue our local explorations, many having shed surplus clothing. A walk southwards down the hill (in theory into shelter from the north wind), past a flowering Judas tree and across the main road took us towards Martes and the Río Aragon. The views back to Berdún, with a backdrop of the snow-

clad high Pyrenees were most memorable. Crested larks displayed all their features around the group of traditional Aragonese barns, while a flock of twelve goldfinches brightened up a grass field. A turtle dove hurtled through, as a couple of Egyptian vultures made a more leisurely fly-past at remarkably close quarters, and several northern wheatears were trying to escape the worst of the elements by sheltering behind walls and plough furrows.

In the more sheltered areas, butterfly activity increased, including clouded yellow, painted lady and wall brown. Other insects were noticeable by their song – the shrill chirping of field crickets started up every time the sun appeared. As we passed between agricultural fields, some starting to show the beautiful pink of sainfoin, it was sadly apparent that even in this relatively unintensified system, most arable weeds and many farmland birds were missing. Shepherd's-needle was the only plant of note. Still, there were at least a few singing skylarks amongst the ever-present corn buntings, while a male Montagu's harrier and pale phase booted eagle were just rewards for those with their eyes skywards.

Descending finally towards the river, the patches of scrub were a hive of bird activity, relative to the windswept surrounds. Subalpine warblers and circl buntings were the stars, and a tawny pipit perched all-too-briefly on a roadside bush. The wind resumed its ferocity as we crossed the bridge, making birdwatching nigh on impossible, but we were able to see common sandpipers and a little egret feeding, and watch swallows and house martins skimming low over the water.

As we waited for the prearranged lifts, we noticed the wind had shifted round westwards, and almost immediately we were seeing swifts, a trickle rapidly turning into a deluge. Massive weather-related feeding movements are well-documented in swifts, but rarely have I seen such an instant response to a relatively minor change in the weather.

The wild weather continued into the night, which soon became very cold. But the demand was there to check out the nightlife, so after dark out we went again. Scops owls were there, if distant and relatively quiet, a barn owl was seen leaving the church roof and the only nocturnal insect was a female fox moth being buffeted along. So before long, bed beckoned and we could only hope for a better start in the morning...

Monday 7 May: San Juan de la Peña

...as indeed it was – a clear, sunny and calm, if rather chilly, dawn. Enough to entice five early starters to wander with us down the hill towards the Veral. A wryneck that had been heard yesterday was seen, if rather distantly, a male rock thrush perched proud on a pylon, and the song of golden orioles drifted up from the riverside trees.

After breakfast, we headed east, notching up a few birds on the way, including a couple of woodchat shrikes, a hoopoe and several turtle doves, evidently recently arrived. Our first destination was the historic village of Santa Cruz de la Seros, at the foot of la Peña. From the village, griffon vulture nests could be picked out on the towering cliffs, some in occupation, and as the morning progressed and thermals began to form, so the skies filled with griffons and other raptors, including Egyptian vultures and booted eagles. A few alpine swifts wheeled around with the raptors, almost invisible to the unaided eye, while crag martins were patrolling the churchyard, to and from their mud nests on the tower, and grey wagtails foraged around the stream.

A short walk up the hill soon produced some new plants. Cowslips, stinking hellebore and hepatica (in blue, pink and white) nestled in the hedge bottoms, with bold blue splashes of *Polygala nicaeensis* higher up. The pines here were very heavily infested with mistletoe. A male circl bunting sat in clear view of the party, to be then joined by his less clearly-marked mate - a fine opportunity to get to grips with the latter, a northern chiffchaff was in full familiar song, and three bullfinches rested briefly in view. Insects too were becoming active in the heat: orange tip and violet fritillaries added a splash of colour to the meadows, and a hummingbird hawk-moth put on a brief flurry of a show.

Once more in the bus, we took the long, twisty road uphill to the 'new' monastery at the top. The grassy surrounds of the monastery and car park were surprisingly rich, with swathes of grape hyacinth and green-winged orchid, emerging spikes of asphodel and a very obliging scarce swallowtail, showing its tiger-stripes to advantage as it sipped nectar. Around the pond, field crickets were very vocal, until anyone approached too close that is, and the area is clearly much used by wild boar. The rootings and snufflings of boar were very obvious all over the woodland: a delight to see, as I've long believed our British woodlands are much poorer for the lack of their dynamic effects.

A scramble up to the top of the slope took a little longer than anticipated, as the paths had become rather overgrown, but eventually we made it through the seeming impenetrable vegetation. And it was worth it, with wonderful views in every direction, raptors and ravens wheeling overhead, an array of delightful plants at our feet and festoons of lichen on the trees, indicating the quality of the air in these parts. The views of the peaks of San Juan de la Peña to the west and Oroel to the east were stunning, although it wasn't advisable to admire and walk because of the steep drop and vicious patches of hedgehog broom.

Back down for lunch among the pines, entertainment was laid on in the form of an acrobatic nuthatch. Then another walk through the trees produced a wide variety of woodland birds, including coal and crested tit, goldcrest and firecrest, with hepatica again being much in evidence. In the small clearings by the ruined chapel of St Teresa, the diminutive but sweetly-scented rock daffodil was flowering in glorious profusion - a host of golden mini-daffodils - along with elder-flowered and early purple-orchids. An Iberian wall lizard was basking on the ruins, and underfoot 'flocks' of giant springtails were moving through the broken ground.

The old monastery, a little way downhill, is set dramatically into the conglomerate cliffs, and a short stop here proved equally productive. Most of us headed down the track towards Santa Cruz, and almost immediately stumbled across a glorious, bronzed male firecrest. The song of blackcaps, robins and blackbirds resounded around the mixed woodland, the chorus also incorporating a trilling Bonelli's warbler. Several speckled wood butterflies were on the wing, typically defending sun flecks, and a green hairstreak made an iridescent addendum to the scrubby trackside. Also along the track, there were lots of black and red firebugs, especially on an iron manhole cover, and several recently emerged flower spikes of fly orchid. A deposit on the path, full of berries, appeared to be the spraint of a pine marten, and a false morel fungus rounded off a full taxonomic spectrum.

After dinner, I gave a short slide presentation about birds of prey and another Honeyguide tour which features raptors in north-east Greece; as darkness fell, my talk was interrupted by a calling scops owl. So after the talk, out we were again. Almost unsurpassable views of the owls down to 10 metres range; several fleeting views of a nightjar flying above the rooftops; and bats of at least four species in the detector. But where were the moths?

Tuesday 8 May: Riglos and Agüerro

Perfect weather before breakfast enticed seven takers for an early walk. We stayed around the village, and at last managed good views of rock sparrows by the lookout. Down below, the calls of a hoopoe drifted up, and we eventually found it perched on the corner of a barn, distant but distinctive.

Roadside views of several woodchat shrikes, a southern grey shrike and a couple of bee-eaters helped to spice up the journey, as if it needed it given the scenery, until we came to the massive conglomerate cliffs of Riglos, the final outpost of the Pre-Pyrenean range. Unfortunately, the climbers had beaten us to it, so there were only a few griffons on nest and noisy parties of choughs around the cliff. But overhead, vultures were everywhere, along with a single, distant lammergeier, typically flying directly away from us, and a rather more obliging short-toed eagle. Sardinian warblers were there too - but keeping almost invisible in the low scrub, a delicious, aromatic mix of box, rosemary and *Genista*, while as for the blue rock thrush singing, it was coming from every direction at once as the song ricocheted around the rocks. A Cleopatra, like a supercharged brimstone, flew around, along with large numbers of violet carpenter-bees, evidently revelling in the nectar of the false acacias.



More human influences also attracted our attention, especially the field margin with glorious swathes of poppies, mayweeds, tassel hyacinth (*pictured left*), beautiful flax, saw spurge and tufted vetch, along with both blue and red forms of scarlet pimpernel. New interpretive signs had appeared in the village, detailing the wildlife, recreational opportunities and geological history of the area, all under a lammergeier logo (what else?!). Since my previous visit two years earlier, there seems to have been a great leap forward in the overt recognition of environmental issues, and I would like to think that Honeyguide and its customers have contributed at least a little bit to that most welcome process.

The old railway station at Riglos provided a very warm location for lunch. Flying insects were skipping around the flowers, especially of thyme, in all directions. It was so warm, they were especially difficult to see well, but we did manage to identify common and black-eyed blues, orange tip, burnet companion, tawny wave and yellow belle, the latter three being day-flying moths. And then more careful searching of the grassy area produced numerous other insects including a longhorn beetle, a squash

bug and a praying mantis - lack of specific identification takes away nothing from the fascination of such creatures. In the meantime, sharp-eyed Dorothy came back clutching the shed skin of a rather large snake.

After lunch, we headed to Agüerro – the undeveloped equivalent of Riglos across the valley – via an unscheduled stop to look at a couple of bee-eaters, which also produced black-eared wheatears. At Agüerro, the ever-present griffons circled above, if anything even better than before as small groups swooped low overhead with an awe-inspiring audible rush of wind through their flight feathers. There were also a few on the rock ledges, including two chicks in one nest cavity, and a superb short-toed eagle drifted past. The dense scrub after a little walk eventually yielded up some of its secrets, in the shape of both Dartford and subalpine warblers while butterflies included brimstone, wood white and several Moroccan orange-tips, a striking yellow with orange wingtips.

The scrub here bore a close resemblance to that at Riglos, but with a few added extras, including two species of juniper – scale-leaved *Juniperus phoenicea* and needle-leaved *J. oxycedrus*. Most unexpected was a group of violet bird's-nest orchids, just coming into flower: this saprophytic plant is more usually associated with woodland. Heading homeward, we stopped for photos, a broad view of Los Mallos (the Fingers) of Riglos, which conveniently also produced a small, if fleeting flock of six bee-eaters.

After dinner, the entertainment just kept coming. Juan Carlos, local SEO representative, came to meet us, to give us a slide talk, and to receive the cheque from Honeyguide, the participants' contribution to conservation in Spain. As always, the talk was beautifully presented – how many of us could give such an informative talk, laced with humour, in a second language? – and served to highlight how many of the conservation issues we face back home - from tourism to agriculture, and pollution to development in floodplains - apply equally in Spain. But it is a simple fact that as Spain is one of the epicentres of European biodiversity, the stakes are even higher

Once again there was a demand for a Scops owl walk – they did not disappoint! Neither did the nightjar, especially for Angela seeing it out of her bedroom window, or the bats, green toads singing in the valley, or common toad lumbering across the street. But for me these were knocked out of contention by the late discovery of a giant peacock moth under a street light. Fully ten centimetres wingspan, it was crying out to be kept until breakfast time.

Wednesday 9 May: Biniés gorge and walk back to Berdún

The continuing fine weather brought out more takers for the pre-breakfast walk by the day: today it reached eight! We went again down the slopes towards the Veral, and came back with tales of wryneck, rock thrush, a peregrine speeding over, and an outstanding, in every sense, singing nightingale. The only down-side was the arrival of a band of high-level cirrus cloud, we presumed the vanguard of a front bearing less clement weather. Then at breakfast, I came in wearing the fruit of last night's mothing, the giant peacock, as a badge. It behaved itself admirably, such that it took some people several seconds to realise that it was in fact alive. So impressed was everyone that, at its appointed release time, there was a queue for photography.

A short coach journey took us the five kilometres to the start of the Foz de Biniés, through which the walk produced many botanical delights and specialities: the large rosettes of Pyrenean saxifrage on the rocks and 'entrance gates'; the delicate pink flowers of *Petrocoptis*; more vivid pink cushions of rock soapwort; drifts of amethyst Pyrenean hyacinth; the yellow shock of flowers on *Allium moly*; white blossomy shrubs of St Lucie's cherry. To me though, best of all was a flowering plant of *Ramonda*, its purple spike emerging from its furry leaf rosette. I've seen the same rosette on all my previous visits, almost an old friend, but never previously has it been in flower. The weather was generally cloudy, so the vultures were not performing too well – in fact, we seemed to be performing for them as they stared down from their perches on the canyon walls. That is until mid-morning in a sunny slot when we were faced with the incredible sight of in excess of a hundred at a glance, spiralling up into the distant skies. The same sunshine mobilised a few insects, including a hummingbird hawk-moth which was temporarily restrained for more detailed examination, a Spanish festoon and a large, black, lumbering longhorn beetle *Lamia textor* crossing the road. Grey wagtails were present all along the river, but elusive, and a pair of dippers even more so, while a viperine snake allowed a particularly good view on the road – it was dead!

Lunch was taken in the top meadow, Viv delivering tablecloth, wine, water, salads and warm *tortillas* from Emilio. A more pleasant setting could hardly be imagined, until someone located a tick (leading to the usual, but necessary, warnings about Lyme disease) and the rain started to fall. But our spirits were not dampened, and afterwards, most opted to be dropped below Biniés village for the walk back to Berdún. The rest went the whole

way by bus, and had an afternoon off.

The walkers were, in fact, remarkably lucky with the weather, only a few light showers to contend with. And the rewards were ample: bee, sombre bee, early-spider, lady, burnt-tip, monkey and woodcock orchids were only the beginning. A field cricket was watched at close quarters, rather than diving down its hole as is usual; and the 'burnet with a fur collar' *Zygaena lavanduli* added an exotic touch to the insectscape. Among the riverside poplars, golden orioles of both sexes were heard to advantage, but remained amazingly invisible, overhead a couple of honey buzzards drifted past, and a short-toed eagle was watched hunting for several minutes. Two pied flycatchers, including a splendid male, were around the wood edge, and both spotted flycatcher and tawny pipit by the river itself.

And then the last slog up the hill... By now it was raining – lovely cooling rain – which remained almost until dark, and certainly put the dampers on scops owl activity for the night.

Thursday 10 May: High Pyrenees, Portalet to Formigal

A mild start was rather subdued by low clouds, threatening rain, and there were only three takers for a pre-breakfast pied flycatcher, willow warbler and Egyptian locust. But nobody missed out on the giant peacock and Spanish moon moths, two large and dramatic species which were found in a single doorway before being presented to the masses over breakfast. Then it was to the hills, for our high mountain day. Our original plan, to visit the remote valley of Aisa had to be changed as a result of subsidence on the road; the fallback, to Puerto de Portalet, a minor crossing point into France, also seemed unlikely in view of the cloud. But peering into the distance, through the low cloud over Berdún, it seemed the montane cloud base was at around 2000 metres, well above where we wanted to be. So, fingers crossed...

Higher and ever higher, towards Formigal, then Portalet, was like going back in time. Early summer in the lowlands, to the first inkling of spring at five thousand feet. Here, patchy snow beds lay around the border crossing, and evidently the complete blanket of snow had only just receded. After a coffee stop, we needed to go no farther than the car park to find high-altitude wildlife: a few urgent, migrant swallows, cutting through the pass; the weird trills and clicks of alpine choughs, mixed with the more familiar red-billed choughs; the even more weird sound of territorial marmots. And there they were, big bundles of fur atop rocky hillocks, producing a noise more like an oystercatcher than any mammal. The same rocks were the haunt of wheatear and the ubiquitous black redstart, while the intervening grassy areas, especially the melting edge of snow beds, were much favoured by water pipits. Best of all, a short walk behind the cafe produced a party of seven snowfinches, feeding in the turf a short distance from us, apparently oblivious to our admiration and surprise at finding them at such a low altitude for the time of year.

All around us, spring was getting under way, plants bursting into flower following the retreat of the snow. Cushions of purple mountain saxifrage - though sadly finished flowering - nestled in crevices on the cliffs, while wild daffodil and the first few spring gentians studded the turf. Green hellebore and oxlip were flowering in the lee of big boulders, and Pyrenean violet and buttercup already blooming in the areas from which snow had only just retreated.

Lunch was taken in the coach, as it was rather cold and there was indeed a little rain in the air. But generally our earlier faith in the weather was well justified. The break also gave our only opportunity for retail therapy, along with the remarkable sight of alpine choughs foraging in the waste bins. Jesus caught a large crane-fly, but rather than show it around, he proceeded to set light to it! Clearly, from his gesticulation, he felt he had done us a favour, because 'they have a nasty bite'!!

After lunch, it had warmed and brightened up. It was time to head downhill, and most opted to walk the five kilometres down to Formigal. A blue and green Iberian rock lizard was catching a few rays on a rock, and marmots appeared to be on every grassy knoll and jumble of boulders. A commotion across the valley came to our notice, a raucous gathering of red-billed choughs, six in all. One of them was clearly unpopular – it was suggested it may have been French! – and it was repeatedly attacked, pecked and beaten with the wings of the other five. It seemed it was to the death, until at the last moment, the object of hate limped to freedom. Further down, spring was a couple of weeks more advanced, and both spring and trumpet gentians glowed from the turf, amongst elder-flowered orchids in both colour forms. Several rock thrushes of both sexes (though surprisingly no blue rock thrushes) were seen, one male in particular performing the most wonderful display and song flight in a ravine below us. A startling vision in orange, blue and white, it looped and floated in the air, producing a fluty warble while raising its white rump feathers to maximise their impact.

Down again, the patches of wild daffodils, marsh marigolds, oxlips and bird's-eye primroses introduced further splashes of colour. But not, thankfully enough to keep all eyes on the deck, as drifting over the far mountainside was the unmistakable silhouette of a lammergeier. Not one, but two – no, three! All together, quartering the



screens. And then as if to underline their almost mythical grandeur, one did what all the books say, but none of us had witnessed personally, it dropped a bone onto a rock. A supernova in a day of stars!

Naturally we were late getting down, being seriously waylaid by the natural spectacles, and in the end, Jesus gave up waiting and came to look for us in the coach, eventually finding us a few hundred metres from the designated meeting point. Back down in the valley, it was still raining, but that could not dampen our elation and thrill at our true Pyrenean experience.

By nightfall, it was dry but humid, and very mild. The bats were out and about again in force, though just what they were catching was not apparent - there seemed to be many fewer moths than we might have expected. So too were the scops owls rather quiet, but we managed to get excellent views again.

Friday 11 May: Arbayún and Lumbier gorges

It was a clear dawn, with rolls of mist hanging in the valleys below. As we headed down the slopes, a male rock thrush left its pylon perch and proceeded to give us another series of display flights, this time viewed from below, as a great spotted woodpecker flew up the hillside. Another star performer was a singing male nightingale atop a bush, but the less said about one particular spotless starling the better, mimicking wryneck, quail and domestic chicken! As the first sun struck the slopes, the shrubby rest-harrow, now much further out than at the start of the week, glowed with an almost indescribable warmth.

Heading west, we passed the Lumbier vulture restaurant, where there were some sixty griffons, albeit almost hidden from the watchpoint. Then on and up, through remnant patches of holm oak woodland – possibly the climax woodland type on the marl – to the precipitous gorge of Arbayún. Viewing is easy here: a platform has been erected over the edge of the gorge giving splendid views of the griffon vulture breeding cliffs. Being a hot day, many griffons were already aloft, sweeping past us and giving excellent views. Two Egyptian vultures, a sparrowhawk and booted eagle joined them, while parties of Alpine swifts were passing through almost continuously, and a distant blue rock thrush gave a typical rock face view.

Back to Lumbier, specifically the Foz, before lunch. A golden oriole was calling continuously, and seen briefly, in the poplar plantation by the river, and a scarce swallowtail investigated the numerous nectar-bearing flowers. The river was full of fish, and the cliff clefts full of rock doves, at least most of which looked to be pretty much of the wild type. Passing through the first tunnel into the gorge, we entered a world of birds. Crag martins were

hanging from ‘invisible strings’ and on the ground collecting mud for their nests, at least one of which was deep in the tunnel itself. Groups of choughs and jackdaws hurtled around, one group of forty or more being noisily annoyed by a kestrel. An Iberian chiffchaff was in full and distinctive song nearby, with several others farther down the valley, and of course griffons were everywhere – flying, sitting on nest ledges, and watching us watching them from the highest pinnacles. But best of all, three male blue rock thrushes were engaged in display song flights, crossing and recrossing between the walls of the gorge. High in the sky, Alpine swifts were ever-present and in huge numbers, while at ground level two Moroccan orange tips and a Devil’s coach-horse beetle kept us guessing as to the best place to be looking.

Then back to the new car park and picnic site, complete again with new interpretation boards, for lunch, which was enlivened by butterflies, including brimstone, clouded yellow and black-veined white. After a water refill – by now it was very hot, and likely to become seriously so in the enclosed gorge – we went back into the inferno and continued down. Wild jasmine, a Mediterranean plant, was in full, though sadly not fragrant, flower, an indication of the warmth in this sheltered gorge. In contrast, dogwood (with its persistent sclerenchyma) and spindle (its new shoots eaten and covered in the silken trappings of the small ermine moth *Yponomeuta cagnarella*) indicated the limy nature of the soil. In the heat of the day, bird activity was lower, but the butterflies made up for it, including Spanish festoon, wood white, panoptes blue and a show-stopping male Cleopatra.

And then through the second tunnel, into the suntrap beyond, the temperature went up another few degrees again, and more Mediterranean species put in an appearance. Etruscan honeysuckle in full flower and pitch trefoil, its leaves pungent as ever, were flowering in the verges along with *Helichrysum* and *Coris*, and a single example of yellow bee-orchid, among the more numerous early spider-orchids. The slopes were most attractive, blue and pale pink under swathes of beautiful and Pyrenean flax, highlighted by a dancing display of butterflies and moths. Marbled whites were especially numerous, as were Moroccan orange tips, but the only birds of note on the long hot trek were a perching cuckoo, and a black kite in a mid-air tussle with a booted eagle.

But perhaps the most welcome sight was the bar at the end of the walk, supplier of much needed cold beer and ice creams. It had been a tiring afternoon, so there was no real desire to stop and examine the lifeless waters of Yesa. Instead, as we surmounted the final hill on the approach to Berdún, Will managed to get Jesus to stop for a photo shoot. Apparently his request back-translated as wanting to stop ‘to touch some photographics’, but the message certainly got through!

Our final evening meeting looked back at the week, and by general consensus it was highly successful. The total number of birds – 111 species – was perhaps a little lower than might have been expected, but that is mostly due to species missing as a result of the very windy first day. But in terms of quality, in every respect, whether birds, plants, butterflies or moths, it was a superb week, one which will leave long-lasting memories. Our final dinner came, as is traditional, with champagne, before we set out for a last night-time stroll around the town. For the first time in the week, it was really warm enough to do so in shirt-sleeves. Two scops owls were viewed at the entrance to their presumed nest hole in a ventilation duct on a house, another giant peacock was below a street light, and the barn owl was seen again to fly out of its church roof roost.

Saturday 12 May: the journey home

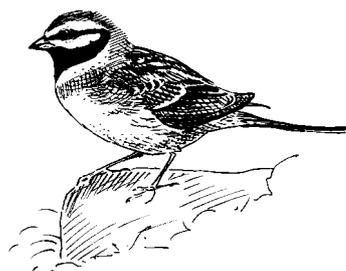
No time to waste – end of holiday fast approaching. As it was a late afternoon flight, we did at least have time to pack in a few more memories. The early morning crew was out again, down the valley: a nightingale was again seen well, along with at least three Sardinian warblers. The calls of golden orioles drifted up from the riverside trees, and Dorothy confirmed her position as super-spotter by locating a male, perched in the open on the top of a tree, at a range of about a kilometre. After breakfast, we organised a tour of the bakery, by which time packing was in order and we finally set off around eleven.

Yesá was not quite birdless, as everyone got to see great crested grebes, little egret and grey heron, and even on our lunch stop at the Hotel Iturrimurri, the interest kept going: two red-backed shrikes were hunting along a nearby hedgeline, and a pleasant accompaniment to *tortilla* doorsteps. Still farther on, three white storks were noted, one on each of two church-top nests and another in flight, and as a final surprise, I spotted a great-spotted cuckoo on a telephone wire. Sadly, it was a leader-only record, as everyone else was asleep! Back at the airport, we saw Robin off on her internal flight, as we were met with news of an hour’s delay. But before long, there we were in a near-empty plane, heading back to the UK and news of sweltering summer weather and a general election.

Bird List

Great crested grebe
Cormorant
Little egret
Grey heron
White stork
Mallard
Honey buzzard
Black kite
Red kite
Lammergier
Egyptian vulture
Griffon vulture
Short-toed eagle
Monagu's harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common buzzard
Booted eagle
Kestrel
Peregrine
Red-legged partridge
Coot
Common sandpiper
Yellow-legged gull
Rock dove
Woodpigeon
Collared dove
Turtle dove
Cuckoo
Barn owl
Scops Owl
Nightjar*
Swift
Alpine swift
Bee-eater
Hoopoe
Green woodpecker
Great spotted woodpecker
Wryneck
Crested lark
Skylark
Sand martin
Crag martin
Swallow
House martin
Tawny pipit
Tree pipit
Water pipit
Meadow pipit*
Yellow wagtail
Grey wagtail
White wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Nightingale
Black redstart
Whinchat
Stonechat

Northern wheatear
Black-eared wheatear
Rock thrush
Blue rock thrush
Blackbird
Song thrush
Mistle thrush
Cetti's warbler
Dartford warbler
Subalpine warbler
Sardinian warbler
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
Golden oriole
Red-backed shrike
Southern grey shrike
Woodchat shrike
Jay
Magpie
Alpine chough
Red-billed chough
Jackdaw
Carrion crow
Raven
Spotless starling
House sparrow
Roch sparrow
Snowfinch*
Chaffinch
Serin
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Bullfinch
Yellowhammer
Cirl bunting
Corn bunting



* - new species for Honeyguide Spanish Pyrenees bird list

Total – 111 species