

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Discovering Menorca
16 – 23 April 2004

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Leaders

Robin and Rachel Hamilton	Suffolk
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Our hosts at Matchani Gran

Shaun and Jenny Murphy

The group was joined by John Seymour, historian and Menorcan resident). As with all Honeyguide holidays, £25 of the price of the holiday was put towards a conservation project, in this case for GOB's work in Menorca. The cheque for £305 given to GOB included some donations in memory of Honeyguide leader Graham Hearl, who particularly loved staying at Matchani Gran and led the Menorca holiday several times, as well as holidays in Extremadura and his home base of Mallorca. This donation brings the total to £5250 contributed to GOB by Honeyguide holidays in the Balearics. The total contributed to conservation projects in Europe from all Honeyguide holidays is now £33,330 (at the end of this holiday season). A thank-you letter from GOB appears at the end of this report.

This report was written by Robin and Rachel Hamilton.

Front cover illustration by Will Woodrow; black-winged stilts by Gary Wright. Other illustrations by Rob Hume.

Note for web version of this report: there is also a plant list available on request from the Honeyguide office.

Friday April 16: Arrival and Matchani Gran

A Luton Airport dawn provided an incongruous start to the holiday as, bleary but full of anticipation, we foregathered in the departure lounge. Arriving at Mahón, we were surprised to be greeted by sheets of wet tarmac, all too reminiscent of England, but the rain had stopped and the warmth and the smell of the Mediterranean air immediately reminded us that we were a long way from home. Indeed, a black kite was soaring above the airport as we landed and the soon-to-be familiar calls of yellow-legged gulls were all around us. Shaun and Susie greeted us and scooped up our luggage. We soon found our minibuses and followed Shaun on the 10-minute journey to Matchani Gran,

At Matchani Gran we were immediately introduced properly to Shaun and his wife Jenny, our host and hostess, together with the rest of the team: Susie and Terry, and made to feel thoroughly at home, welcome and relaxed, with complimentary drinks from the bar. We were soon all settled into our delightful and well-equipped rooms and then it was time for lunch and our first taste of Jenny's superb cooking.

After lunch, and a brief introduction to each other and to the proposed week's itinerary, we began to explore our surroundings and their natural history. Matchani Gran was formerly a farmhouse, typical of many scattered throughout the southern part of the island. The fields surrounding it are very lightly cultivated, occasionally ploughed and sown with cereal crops or sparsely grazed by a few cattle, donkeys, pigs or sheep. The soil is very thin and the underlying limestone rock is much in evidence, so the effect is an incredibly rich and diverse array of flowers supporting a wonderful variety of birds and insects. The first impact comes from the magnificent displays of the tall stems of pink asphodel scattered throughout the meadows. These provide perches and a feeding sites for many of the characteristic birds; the 'bird of the week', the omnipresent Sardinian warbler, was always to be seen perching on asphodel stems and singing its characteristic scratchy song, showing off his smart black cap and thrusting his little white throat out as he sang. Redstarts, greenfinches, goldfinches and linnets all gave us good views as they called from asphodel stems, Cetti's warblers shouted at us from cover and corn buntings were singing all around us from the tops of bushes and from the wires. The whole ensemble enabled us to tune in to what was to be the characteristic 'soundscape' of the week.

We had an excellent view of a Thekla lark perched on a dry stone wall and watched it in several short song-flights. The first of the week's many woodchat shrikes showed well on the wires and the air was filled, first with swifts and then with swallows, all passing through on migration. Two or three ravens flew over; surprisingly, they are the only corvid on the island. We heard a distant hoopoe calling and a brief snatch of the wild call of a stone-curlew. The ground was damp and humid and the insects were few. We all had a good look at a violet ground beetle, though, and at an oil beetle with its bizarrely distended abdomen and vestigial wings. The rocky outcrops sheltered an amazing array of meadow flowers and cornfield 'weeds'. The charming pale mauve annual daisy, closely related to our common garden daisy, is scattered through the meadow, mixed with other delights: starry clover, tassel hyacinth, the little silver rosettes of *Evax pygmaea*, and a brilliant mixture of both scarlet and blue forms of scarlet pimpernel. Lurking among rocks we found fine specimens of mirror and sawfly orchids, young specimens of tongue orchid and the improbably blue spikes of branched broomrape. Bermuda buttercup is well established here, as it is over much of the island, its garish yellow flowers standing out amongst the softer colours around it. Vic's highlight of the week was bright too: the extraordinarily striking purple viper's bugloss, in a fine patch behind the house.

We gathered with our drinks in the sitting room to discuss the day's observations and were then joined by local historian John Seymour who gave us a short talk, packed with fascinating information and insights, covering the essentials of the island's history and prehistory. This set the scene brilliantly for our exploration of Menorca, ranging as it did, in an amazingly succinct and lucid way, over everything from the nature and origins of the prehistoric stone monuments to be seen all over the island thorough to the evidence of recent invasions and colonisations – not to mention the cricket tournament. By supertime, it was raining again, but Shaun was not deterred and mastered the barbecue to produce a delicious selection of steaks, chicken, chops, prawns – and bananas, all cooked to perfection. Everyone was tired, after a long and extremely full day, and very glad of an early night!

Saturday April 17: Son Bou and Torre d'en Gaumes

A little posse of early risers strolled down the drive before breakfast and the highlight was our first nightingale, in full song, but well hidden in the deep cover beside the drive. Distant hoopoes were calling and green- and goldfinches and linnets, corn buntings and house sparrows were all much in evidence.

After a very welcome and delicious breakfast we gathered at the minibuses to prepare for departure and Shaun joined us to discuss the day's dinner menu. As we set off up the long drive, lined with dry stone walls and Aleppo pines and flanked with meadows yellow with crown daisies we scattered collared doves and blackbirds from the driveway and the low pine branches and flushed a couple of kestrels up onto the wires.

Our destination today was on the south coast of the island, Son Bou, a large sand dune and coastal wetland system, wild and unspoilt in spite of its position, sandwiched between the sea and a large holiday development.

We began our exploration at the edge of the sea, looking out at a few Cory's shearwaters, languidly skimming over the waves.

There were two or three shags on the water too; as they flew, one could just make out their light colouring, distinguishing the Mediterranean race, *Phalacrocorax aristotelis desmarestii*. Beside a brackish pool, among an undistinguished collection of mallard-ish ducks, there was an extremely confiding avocet, allowing us to have an exceptionally close encounter, until it was disturbed by a passing holidaymaker. Along the drift-line there was a scattering of the papery sails left by *Velella spirans* the jelly-fish-like 'by-the-wind-sailor', which must have been cast up a week or so earlier; and there were sea balls, the water-worn remains of the rhizomes of *Posidonia oceanica*, or sea grass, a truly marine flowering plant, looking like pieces of worn and broken doormat. The first of the week's Egyptian vultures gave us a good, if rather distant, exhibition against the hillside and reminded everyone to keep a look out for raptors.

We climbed up into the dunes, with their vegetation familiar from sand dunes at home: marram grass, sea holly and sea rocket. The white late summer-flowering sea daffodil *Pancratium maritimum* is very abundant here and must make a wonderful spectacle when it is in flower. The dunes were yellow with sweet scented mounds of dwarf bird's-foot trefoils and medicks.

Facing the marsh, the dunes are scrubby, with bushes of tamarisk, tree mallow, Phoenician juniper and mastic tree. Here we had excellent views of Sardinian warblers, stonechats and woodchat shrikes and our first tawny pipit of the week. Cetti's warblers were much in evidence from their song, though characteristically unwilling to show themselves, and fan-tailed warblers (zitting cisticolas) called from over the reeds. The day was sunny and the temperature rising and butterflies were becoming active; we had some fine views of painted ladies and of the orange continental race of the speckled wood.

We had heard a little grebe as we arrived and had high hopes of the open water and marshland. Persistent scanning revealed only mallard, coot and moorhen, a scattering of little egrets and a grey heron. Some of the group wandered back towards the shore and John found for us a group of five Kentish plovers. As we watched, they were joined by a rarity for the island, two sanderlings, foraging among the rocks. Those who remained watching the reedbeds were rewarded by a fine purple heron, flying slowly for the whole length of the marsh. They then rejoined the others to enjoy the waders on the shore. As we began the return to the minibuses and lunch we were treated to a prolonged but distant view of a booted eagle soaring above the hills behind the village and the tail-enders saw a small group of Audouin's gulls on the beach.

We shared our picnic with a large party of house sparrows under the shade of Aleppo pines and then, after a loo stop, we drove on up the hill for our first visit to one of Menorca's fine prehistoric monuments.

Torre d'en Gaumes is a large complex of stone mounds, roadways and excavations dating from the Bronze Age. We parked the minibuses and almost immediately saw our first reptiles. We were all able to creep quite close to several Moorish geckoes sunning themselves on the dry stone walls and we watched Italian wall lizards crawling among the rocks. The air was full of wave after wave of migrating swifts, swallows and sand and house martins. We scanned the flocks and were rewarded by good views of an alpine swift. Several booted eagles appeared as we climbed, soaring in the thermals and consorting with one another in the spring sunshine. We were able to distinguish well individuals of both the pale and the dark phases. Several male nightingales were holding territories in the scrubby hillsides and again we heard a number of Sardinian warblers and had good views of woodchat shrikes. A calling hoopoe tantalised us for a while and then showed itself briefly in a clearing among the trees.

There were some exciting new plants here too, set off among the rocks. Pale periwinkle looks wonderful, scrambling through dappled shade and the almost orchid-like bellardia, *Bellardia trixago* (foxglove family) is extremely striking amongst rough grasses. Smilax and wild madder scramble through the mastic bushes and prasium, *Prasium majus* (deadnettle family) and a beautiful lemon yellow vetch, *Lathyrus ochrus* among the stones.

We reviewed the day's findings over a drink from the bar and then enjoyed a leisurely and excellent dinner. The evening was warm and clear, with no moon, so after dinner we set up our telescopes on the balcony for a little star-gazing. We had good views of the moons of Jupiter and the rings of Saturn. Venus was a very bright crescent with Mars close by and difficult to see and there were some fine shooting stars. Stone-curlews were calling eerily from the dark fields to the south. The nightingale of the morning was silent though and there was no scops owl. Then, just as almost everyone had gone to bed, a scops owl began to call, right outside the house, on the pine tree in the car park. It was a tantalisingly brief encounter and we felt that it could not be far away. While we waited in the hope of hearing it again, we heard tiny scratching sounds from above us in the pine trees and with a torch, we could pick out a black rat, sitting up on a branch, shredding pine cones. Black rats are delightful creatures. They are smaller and have larger eyes and ears than the regular brown rat and are much prettier and more engaging animals. They are also a lot rarer.

Sunday April 18: Es Mercadel Depuradora, Tirant and Cap de Cavalleria

The day dawned dull and unpromising and, apart from a virtuoso display from the nightingales, the now familiar Sardinian and Cetti's warblers and the corn buntings, there was little to keep us from our breakfast.

There is one seriously main road on Menorca. It runs the full length of the island between the two main cities and principal ports – the current capital, Mahón and the former capital, Ciutadella. Before its construction, the island depended upon the road built early in the eighteenth century by the first British governor of the island, Richard Kane. This road remains as a

quiet and picturesque, if rather pot-holed, alternative route. We decided to follow it as we headed west and then north, up towards the coast on the opposite side of the island from the previous day.

The weather was improving and the temperature rising and through the open minibus windows we repeatedly captured the brief snatches of corn bunting song. The route of the Kane Road, the Camí d'en Kane, is ideally positioned to enable one to observe the variation in the landscape between the northern and southern parts of the island. We had become used to the flat limestone plateau of the south: small rocky fields, dry stone walls and the widespread and abundant olive trees. Now, to the north, we were increasingly looking at larger fields, bright green with fertility, (though still walled, for protection against the winds), holm oak much in evidence and, rising out of the green lowlands, a number of distinctive sandstone hills yellow with thorny broom.

The road drops down towards the small town of Es Mercadel, through a shady holm oak wood – with cistus flowering at the roadside – and as we rounded a bend we disturbed a hoopoe foraging in the ditch beside the road. It fluttered in front of us for a few yards and then landed across the road, in full view of everyone in both minibuses. We watched it for many minutes, as it probed crevices in the wall, occasionally pulling out a tasty morsel. One could hardly have wished for a better view. We came out of the wood into a river valley and paused, listening to a quail and fan-tailed warblers and watching distant booted eagles.



Our first scheduled stop was a water treatment plant – *depuradora* – just outside Es Mercadel. It is a series of small, interconnected lagoons and has become well known as a promising site for waders. They were hard to find at first but eventually we had some good views of wood and common sandpipers. A quail was calling very close behind us but defied all attempts to spot it; a tawny pipit performed beautifully, rising several times in song-flight from a wall nearby; a chiffchaff fed obligingly on willow trees close to the path; wave after wave of swallow, swift and house martin flocks came over, spent time feeding over the water while we scanned them unsuccessfully for their more unusual relatives, and then moved on; there were often booted eagles or Egyptian vultures in the air. Then, from the track beside the *depuradora*, John had found a pair of little ringed plovers. They were confident and confiding, running about on the path and feeding and then one of them approached us and settled down in a clump of grass – a little ringed plover on the nest, near enough for us to see the yellow ring round its eye! A memorable moment for us all and another highlight for Vic!

We drove through winding lanes with steep, high verges covered in the rich carmine-coloured Italian sainfoin – bizarrely also known as French honeysuckle – and splashed with the subtle sulphur yellow daisy, *Urospermum dalechampii*.

The magnificent expanse of wetland at Tirant opened up in front of us. We parked the minibuses and scanned the beds of rushes, open water and the little islands covered in tamarisk. The air was full of feeding swifts and hirundines; Cetti's were shouting at us; we could hear – but not see – quail constantly calling; little egrets and grey herons were strutting elegantly and feeding in the shallows. Among the black-winged stilts we were surprised to find a glossy ibis, a rare migrant to Menorca. Snipe, several wood sandpipers and a water rail patrolled the edges of the islands and there was a very good view of a stone-curlew, apparently sitting on a nest, on a dry rocky outcrop on the far shore. As we were leaving, some of the party caught the faint sound of bee-eaters high overhead.

As lunchtime approached we headed north to Cap de Cavallería, the most northerly point on the island. The landscape changes dramatically on the way to the Cap: the soft sandstone becomes mixed with inhospitable shales and occasional outcrops of a limestone rock of an earlier origin than the limestone of the south. We stopped briefly at the excellent new information centre, for various purposes, not all to do with gathering information, and then drove on towards the Cap. The route becomes wilder and wilder and one is very much aware of the bleak conditions that must prevail when the strong, cold, salt-laden northerly winds – the *Tramuntana* – are blowing. The vegetation is extremely specialised; low growing, tough, prickly, all to provide resistance to both grazing and water-loss. A large area is dominated by a magnificent grass, *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* and this provides food and shelter for linnets, wheatears and stonechats. Here is an excellent place to see blue rock thrushes and several of them were displaying and singing from rocky vantage points.

We found a sheltered spot for lunch at the edge of the limestone cliffs where there are good views over the sea but the only sea birds today were yellow-legged gulls and a small party of shags. Egyptian vultures were taking advantage of the up-draughts over the cliffs and were wonderful to watch. And Peter was rewarded for his efforts in helping to carry the lunch boxes by a fine view of a hobby chasing a party of swallows.

After lunch, we potted amongst the rocks looking for some of the botanical treasures: the spectacular Dragon arum, a Balearic endemic, with its huge greenish-purple spathe, the compact cushions of the plants of the *socarrells* (the Menorcan name for the highly adapted cushion forming species), tiny sea lavenders, fleshy, dwarf, pink-flowered daisy *Senecio rodriguezii* and the fine twisted leaves of the *Romulea*, now in fruit.

Monday April 19: Ciutadella, Naveta d'es Tudons and the Algendar Gorge

The day began rather unpromisingly and the early walk was curtailed by rain, but not before we had listened to a quail calling and had a good view of a stone curlew wheeling over the field behind the farmhouse.

On the first two days we had seen the south and north sides of the island. Tuesday is market day and a trip to Mahon was scheduled, so it seemed appropriate that on Monday we should travel west to visit Ciutadella, the former capital of Menorca. This involves making use of the main road for almost its entire length but that, in itself, gives an excellent overview of the island.

We parked in the central square and dispersed for sightseeing: the harbour, the cathedral, cafés and shops. In the pines above the car park some of us were treated to exceptionally good views of a wood warbler feeding among the branches. It was close above our heads and moved, unconcerned, from tree to tree, presumably replenishing its resources after a long flight.

Returning from Ciutadella, we stopped at the Naveta d'es Tudons, a beautifully restored stone monument that takes the form of an upturned boat. You reach the monument across an arable field, which is spectacular with the weeds of cultivation: a mind-boggling array of clovers and vetches, poppies and catchflies, daisies and marigolds. There were fine displays of mirror, sawfly and bumblebee orchids, cistuses and rock roses and their tiny relation, thyme-leaved fumana. We watched a pair of woodchat shrikes flying to and fro, from prime positions near the tops of the bushes. A hobby flew over as the first group reached the naveta and later everyone was able to watch both a red kite and a booted eagle flying low and close over the fields. As we turned to go back to the buses, we could hear bee-eaters again and a few of the group caught a brief sight of them in the distance.

We found our way up to a *mirador*, a viewpoint above Cala Galdana for lunch. It was very warm, bright and sunny and a fine selection of sunhats appeared. There were Mediterranean shags resting on the cliffs within easy view but the lunchtime spectacle was a pair of peregrines that flew across in front of us soaring and stooping, and treated us to a wonderful and prolonged display.

The limestone plateau of the southern part of Menorca is incised by a series of gorges, or *barrancas* where ancient watercourses have cut deep ravines in the rock. Today, the streams in the bottoms of the gorges are small and peaceful but the landscape is very spectacular. One of the most famous of these ravines is the Algendar Gorge that runs down into Cala Galdana. The humidity and shelter in the *barrancas* enables a very different ecosystem to develop from that on the limestone plateau and the characteristic vegetation of the lower slopes is holm oak and pine woodland. It is in the cliffs of the Algendar Gorge that we find one of the main breeding sites on Menorca for Egyptian vulture, booted eagle (both pictured, right) and peregrine.

We followed the path beside the stream along the foot of the cliff. It was warm and the butterflies were out and about; we saw a solitary Cleopatra, but southern speckled woods, large whites and clouded yellows were all abundant in the stream-side meadows and we had a good view of an Egyptian locust resting on a dead twig.

The damp woodland floor produced a flora unlike anything we had seen before on the island. The Italian arum was of a spectacular size and, in the shade, apparently lacked its creamy veins. We saw the first ivy of the week here (it is not particularly abundant on the island!) and both navelwort and pellitory-of-the-wall were almost unrecognisable as they were so large. The stinging nettles, though still stinging, are not *Urtica dioica* but *U. membranacea*, and have more striking and prominent flowering tassels. On some of the rock faces and cliffs we found the rock samphire – no relation to marsh samphire but, similarly, considered by some to be a culinary delicacy.

There were birds from every habitat to be seen along the gorge. We began with a good view of a grey heron and a little egret in the reeds at the entrance to the gorge. The reed beds were alive with Cetti's warblers and, farther up, clouds of swifts and hirundines were feeding over them. This time we added sand martin to our list and then had a very good view of a red-rumped swallow feeding with the others and well-placed for comparison. There were firecrests and great tits singing and calling from the woods and, rounding a corner, we came upon a fine female pied flycatcher; she caught a few flies and then disappeared. Hoopoes were calling intermittently and we had a few brief glimpses of them in the more open glades on the south-facing slopes. There were ravens about and as we went deeper into the gorge, we became more and more aware of the presence of Egyptian vultures and booted eagles. Sadly though, there were no vultures in evidence on their breeding ledges. The last treat was a pair of blackcaps, the male singing and the female enabling several people to follow it through the bushes and have a very good view.



Tuesday April 20: Mahón, S'Albufera Es Grau, and Es Castell

It was a warm, Mediterranean morning and there were four or five fine redstarts to be seen foraging for insects in the stone walls along the drive. For a while they were joined by male pied flycatcher as well. Stone-curlews were calling around us and, as we gathered after breakfast to select our menu for the evening meal, we noticed that a goldfinch had just begun to weave its tiny and intricate nest at the end of an Aleppo pine branch above our heads.

We set off for Mahón for a morning of marketing and sightseeing. A glass-bottomed boat runs tours around the famous harbour and we had booked the party on the 11 o'clock trip. With a tour lasting over an hour and a trilingual commentary it proved to be a perfect way to gain an insight into the significance of this spectacular natural harbour. It was good for wildlife too. We got very close to some Mediterranean shags; a booted eagle flew over one of the military buildings, there were rock doves on one of the cliffs and blue rock thrushes on another. The boat slowed down near the harbour mouth where the water is shallower and we were advised to go below to look through the glass bottom. We were drifting over *Posidonia* beds, with the dark shapes of black sea urchins and sea anemones, shoals of fish of various sizes and a large number of a very striking, larger fish with a deep body and a dark band behind its head and another in front of its tail. The European Sea Fish Field Guide is little help but Alan Davidson's 'Mediterranean Seafood' shows it clearly as the banded bream, *Diplodus vulgaris*! ('Excellent grilled or baked!')

We had scrounged some bread from Jenny and when we arrived back at the quayside we offered it to the flotilla of Audouin's gulls (*right*) bobbing some distance out on the water. They responded very obligingly and came in considerable numbers, only just shy of taking it from the hand. It was a curious way to see one of Europe's rarest gulls!

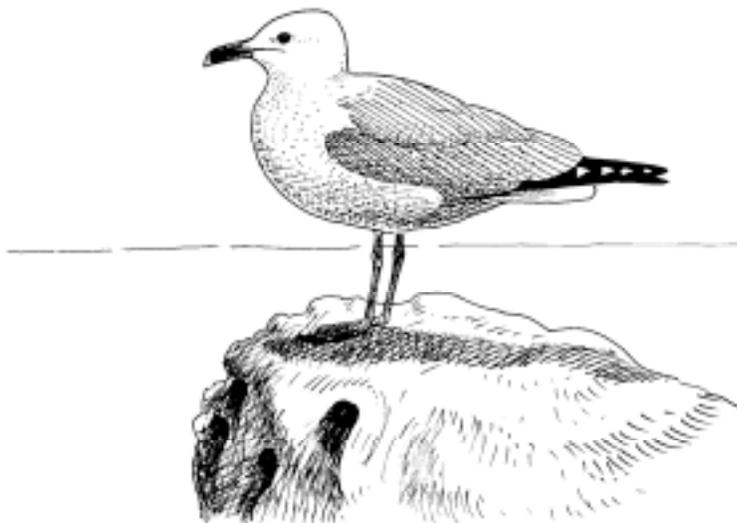
On the way home for lunch we stopped at the local pottery, run by a friend of Shaun's, to enable everyone to stock up on presents and mementoes.

We had a delicious lunch back at Matchani Gran – another of Jenny's perfect quiches – and we then drove up to the north east of the island to the coastal nature reserve at Es Grau.

The reserve was created to protect a beautiful coastal inlet, with saltmarsh, lakes and woodland, from the advances of development. The area is well signed and serviced by some excellent access. The track runs past a small brackish lagoon where a very self-assured black-winged stilt posed for binoculars and cameras. Farther off there was a little egret strutting along a creek in the saltmarsh and a grey heron keeping an eye out for its next meal. While we were looking at that, a black tern flew over the creek and we watched its elegant flight for several minutes, dipping and flying to and fro over the water. An extensive boardwalk across the saltmarsh enables visitors to get very close to an extremely fragile habitat without damaging it and we were able to look at shrubby glasswort and sea purslane, annual glasswort (marsh samphire), sea wormwood and rosy garlic, all without causing harm. Dragon- and damselflies were active and we identified a lesser emperor dragonfly and a blue-tailed damselfly. The boardwalk led us to a rocky hill leading up to a viewpoint and the first to arrive were able to watch a purple heron flying unhurriedly past. The air was rich with the scent of thorny broom and the hillside was spectacular with cistus and the shrubby spurge *Euphorbia dendroides*. We could look out over the lake with shags, moorhen, coot and mallard. The boardwalk led us back to a sandy track through Aleppo pine woodland. The woodland ground flora was a curious mixture of maritime and non-maritime species: butcher's broom and honeysuckle, the salt marsh sedge *Carex extensa*, shrubby glasswort winding 2 metres up among the tree trunks. We heard, but could not see, the elusive little firecrest. Turtle doves, chiffchaffs and willow warblers were singing too and we saw redstart and great tit. There was speculation as to what the target was for the supply of nest boxes hanging down from the pine branches, and from what predator these precautions were a defence. We came out of the wood onto a sandy hillside, brightly colourful from the pink and white *Cistus* and yellow *Lotus* which itself was humming with bees. It was another good site for butterflies: Cleopatra, painted lady and southern speckled wood again, red admiral, green hairstreak and two blues – a common blue and Lang's short tailed blue. There were magnificent patches of sawfly and bumblebee orchids. At the top, the view opened out over the water again and we scanned it for a while in the hot sun... just a few mallard, moorhen and coot with the grey heron and the ubiquitous yellow-legged gulls.

It was still hot when we arrived home and three intrepid bathers, Edna, John and Vic, braved the pool, so earning themselves (and probably needing) extremely generous shots of brandy. The less energetic scanned the flocks of swifts overhead and were rewarded with another alpine swift.

The Honeyguide holidays in Menorca support the work of GOB, (*Grup Balear d'Ornitologia i Defensa de la Naturalesa*), and it was hoped that Santi Cachot from GOB would be able to join us and talk about its work. He was not able to do this, however and so after dinner, John talked to the group about this year's donation and briefly outlined the principle behind this aspect of Honeyguide and what it has contributed to elsewhere. Rachel gave a brief summary of GOB, its structure and some of the work that it does.



Wednesday April 21: Monte Toro, Fornells, Sa Roca and Punta Prima

It was a beautiful clear morning and the early walkers took the track through the field anticlockwise round Matchani Gran. A Cetti's warbler was obligingly singing from an exposed branch but the nightingale, also in full song, was staying well hidden. Two distant hoopoes were calling and we heard the rather tentative notes of a willow warbler, not yet in full voice.

After breakfast we gathered in the car park as usual and watched the goldfinch add a long strand of gossamer to its nearly completed nest.

It was a perfect day for Monte Toro, the dominant feature on the island, standing 358m high overlooking the surrounding plateau. It is an ideal vantage point from which to reinforce one's grasp of the local geography. We identified many of the sites we had visited during the week and looked down onto the backs of the whirling swifts and swallows and across at Egyptian vultures, booted eagles and ravens. A blue rock thrush showed itself just below the parapet and, while we were watching that, a young male ring ouzel appeared below the wall, foraging among the dead leaves.

After a browse around the gift shop and a cup of coffee at the monastery at Monte Toro, we drove up the Fornells peninsular to the Moorish tower, still hoping for some good views of more of the island's seabirds. We were again disappointed: yet again, shags and yellow-legged gulls. The blue rock thrushes were beautiful and we were able to hear their charming little song and we had another good view of a tawny pipit. Fornells, like Cap de Cavalleria is very exposed and consists of highly permeable limestone, so the area is very arid and sparsely vegetated with *socarrells* species. Painted ladies were being buffeted by the blustery wind.

Our next stop was in Sa Roca, an area of Aleppo pine and holm oak woodland below Monte Toro. The woodland understorey consists of tree heath, strawberry tree and three species of Cistus; *Cistus albidus*, the pink-mauve flowered grey-leaved cistus, *Cistus monspeliensis*, which has small white flowers and *Cistus salvifolius*, the sage-leaved cistus, with white flowers, whose name speaks for itself.

There is also a profusion of orchids; splendid sawfly, mirror (*left*) and bumblebee orchids, good spikes of small-flowered tongue orchids and as yet unopened, but already spectacular, violet limodore. Halfway up the path we found a specimen of the cage fungus *Clathrus ruber*, a fragile basket of orange-red foam-like tissue, decaying to a black slime, clearly attractive to flies. Then, under the bushes of purple *Cistus* we found the red parasitic flower *Cytinus ruber* related to the famous giant tropical flower, *Rafflesia*.

Sa Roca is not particularly rich in bird life but we did hear Sardinian warbler and great tit and, almost back at the minibuses, high above the wood, the unmistakable call of a flock of bee-eaters – just caught by some of the group.

The afternoon was still warm and sunny when we arrived home and we decided to review our day's natural history on the terrace by the pool. As we gathered, a hoopoe was calling from a cypress tree beside the pool and we watched him calling and bowing his head rhythmically in time with his 'hoo-poo-poo' song. Shaun brought a little natural history to our meeting for us to look at – a Hermann's tortoise, one of a small population that is established in the 'wild wood' at Matchani Gran. They are shy animals, hard to see in the wild, so we were all very grateful for this brief face-to-face encounter before he was safely returned to the wood.



Tonight was Shaun and Jenny's night off so it was arranged that we should eat at the Bar España, a restaurant in Es Castell, a small town on the edge of Mahón harbour. On the way, we decided to divert to Punta Prima, a straggling holiday resort on the southeast corner of the island. It appeared to offer little of immediate interest to the naturalist, though geographically it contrasted markedly with anything we had seen elsewhere, with rocks shelving down to sea level and a low, flat offshore islet. A shout of 'oystercatcher' from Janet was rather taken for granted but they are in fact a very uncommon visitor to Menorca.

We had an excellent meal, our Spanish was not tested too severely and we had a brief stop to hear stone-curlews at slightly closer range than usual, on the way back round the airport.

Thursday April 22: Montgofre Nou and Cap de Favàritx

It was another promising morning, though the haze had not cleared when the early-risers set off up the drive. We did not get far. The usual songsters were up and about: several Sardinian and Cetti's warblers, a willow warbler, linnets, goldfinches, greenfinches and a woodchat shrike. The nightingale was singing well from his favourite bush and then, to our amazement he emerged from cover and, in full view and in full song, perched on the telegraph wires. He sang his full repertoire and everyone could see his beak and throat working away as these enormous sounds came out. He briefly dropped back into the bush but then returned to his song-post on the wire. Several of us felt that such an unusual and magical sight and sound was the true highlight of our week.

For our last full day, we set off for the northeast corner of Menorca and the private reserve at Montgofre Nou. As we left the drive, we startled a male pied flycatcher as it fed along the dry stone wall and we paused on the way beside some lush meadows for a whinchat on the fence, listened to corn bunting and quail and watched a stonechat. The geology of that part of the island is largely sandstone, with some limestone and shale and the soft sandstone has eroded into extraordinary features strangely whirled or honeycombed.

We reach Montgofre Nou down a long, rough track from the road. As we turned in, there were cattle egrets in the fields, among the cattle, showing their heads above the long grass; along the track, we had several views of blue rock thrushes perched up among the rocks. The reserve is an almost land-locked inlet that has been dammed at some time and formed into a series of salt pans, now abandoned. Low scrubby walls and rocky islands separate them and the result is a haven for waders. A marsh harrier floated down the valley above the flocks of swallows and martins and the whiter-than-white of little egrets stood out from the far side of the lagoon. The stars of the show were the black-winged stilts (*below*). There were groups of them wading in the salt pans wherever we looked, feeding, preening and following courting rituals; they were so intent on their own activities that we were largely ignored. On the drier margins, we were also able to watch, and clearly distinguish, both little ringed and ringed plovers as they fed together and ran about at the water's edge. More elusive and distant, we also had good views of green, wood and common sandpipers.



The cistus and shrubby glasswort bushes beside the track were attracting butterflies and other insects and, lurking deep in a bush, Shirley found a splendidly lurid stripeless tree frog.

Driving back along the track we watched blue rock thrushes again, had a good view of a perching fan-tailed warbler on the top of a bush beside the track and then we stopped to watch the cattle egrets. More in the open now, they were accompanied at the feet of the cattle by a flock of yellow wagtails; every cow had a few, flitting about to avoid being kicked: we calculated that there were more than 70.

We turned back onto the road and headed for Cap de Favàritx, a slate grey and bleakly spectacular headland, jutting out to the east. The inhospitable rock is almost devoid of vegetation but scree slopes are clothed in Hottentot fig, just coming into flower, and crevices are home to some of the dainty little cushion species – the pink daisy, *Senecio rodriguezii* and the tiny sea lavender *Limonium minutum* of the *socarrells*. A shallow lagoon had formed from blown spray and, on the far side, scouring the water's edge for food were a pair of Kentish plovers and a curlew sandpiper. From the end of the exposed headland we could see distant shearwaters and a pair of shags were feeding on the sea below us. Then, as we scrambled over the rocks behind the lighthouse, we could see more shearwaters, both Balearic and Cory's flying closer under the cliff and we came across a solitary stone-curlew; it is hard to know who was the more surprised by the encounter.

The first field at the top of the drive is ungrazed and worth a visit and as it was our last evening, we decided on a brief exploration. There were a good collection of the, now familiar, mirror, sawfly and yellow bee orchids but the magnificent heads of Arabian star-of-Bethlehem *Ornithogalum arabicum*, stole the show.

We gathered for our last evening meal and, as usual, conversation turned to the most memorable moments: the scent of spring carried on the broom at Es Grau, the amazing sight of the vivid purple bugloss, the bright eye of the little ringed plover, the avocet - almost close enough to touch - at Son Bou, the bold and extraordinary performance of the early morning nightingale on the wires.

Friday 23 April: Home

The morning began dull and damp, to match our mood. We walked down the drive, in the hope of a repeat of yesterday's nightingale spectacle, but he would not perform. By the time we made our farewells at Matchani Gran and set off for the airport it was actually raining a little. Shaun and Susie safely saw us and our baggage to the airport and then returned to prepare for the next influx, arriving on the same plane. A comfortable flight to Luton brought us back to a bright and sunny England and final warm 'au revoirs'.

Birds	Latin Name	Notes
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	Heard at Son Bou. Seen at Tirant and Montgofre Nou
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	Seen out at sea at Son Bou and closer inshore at Cap de Favàritx
Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>	Less frequent than Cory's. Seen very close at Cap de Favàritx
Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis desmarestii</i>	Individual birds at coastal sites
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Several birds near Montgofre Nou, feeding with cattle in wet fields
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Small numbers at Son Bou, Tirant, Algendar Gorge, Es Grau and Montgofre Nou
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Individual birds at Tirant, Algendar Gorge, Es Grau and Montgofre Nou
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	One at Son Bou
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	One at Tirant
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Wherever fresh water was present
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	Individuals seen on most days
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	Individuals seen at Es Mercadel, Naveta d'es Tudons and Monte Toro
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Son Bou, Cap de Cavallería. Several birds at Algendar Gorge
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	One at Montgofre Nou
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	Numerous sightings every day
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Seen every day
Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	Single birds at Cap de Cavallería and Naveta d'es Tudons,
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	A pair seen displaying from the Mirador at Cala Galdana. Single birds at Algendar Gorge and Montgofre Nou
Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	Frequently heard calling from damp meadows
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>	Heard calling at Son Bou. One seen at Tirant
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	At fresh water; Son Bou, Tirant, Es Grau and Montgofre Nou,
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	Son Bou, Tirant, Es Grau and Montgofre Nou
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	Several at Tirant, Es Grau and Montgofre Nou
Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	One on the shore at Punta Prima
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	One on the beach at Son Bou
Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oediconemus</i>	Several seen and heard around Matchani Gran. One apparently nesting at Tirant and one at Cap Favàritx
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	A pair nesting at Es Mercadel. A few at Montgofre Nou
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	A few at Montgofre Nou
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	Five at Son Bou. Two by the lagoon at Cap Favàritx
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	Two at Son Bou
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	One by the lagoon at Cap Favàritx
Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	One at Tirant
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochrops</i>	A few at Montgofre Nou
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	Odd individuals at Es Mercadel, Tirant and Montgofre Nou
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	Odd individuals at Es Mercadel and Montgofre Nou

Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>	A few at Son Bou. Several at Mahón Harbour
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	Seen at all coastal sites and frequently inland
Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	One at Es Grau
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	Apparently wild birds at Cap de Cavallería and numerous feral birds throughout the island
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	One at Cala Galdana
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Widespread and plentiful near villages
Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	Heard at Es Grau, then a few seen on passage towards the end of the week
Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>	Heard from Matchani Gran
Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	Seen every day throughout the island
Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>	Seen with common swifts, one at Torre d'en Gaumes and one at Matchani Gran
Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	Migrating flocks near Tirant, Naveta d'es Tudons, Sa Roca and Montgofre Nou
Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Individuals seen every day
Thekla Lark	<i>Gallerida theklae</i>	Individuals seen most days
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	A few at Algendar Gorge
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Seen throughout the island in small numbers
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	One with swallows at Algendar Gorge
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	Small numbers at Torre d'en Gaumes, Tirant and Algendar Gorge
Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>	Individuals at Son Bou, Es Mercadel and Fornells
Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	One at Es Mercadel. Over 70 near Montgofre Nou
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	Seen and heard at Matchani Gran
Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>	Widespread and vocal throughout the week
Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	Several migrating birds at Matchani Gran and Es Grau
Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Migrating individuals near Cap de Cavalleria and Cap Favàritx
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	Several at and near Montgofre Nou
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	Individuals seen on most days
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	Widespread in rocky places in the north of the island
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Widespread
Ring Ousel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>	A young male at Monte Toro
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	A pair at Algendar Gorge
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	Widespread and plentiful
Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	Seen and heard on most days
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	Frequently heard in wet places
Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	One heard at Es Grau
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	A few migrating individuals seen and heard singing towards the end of the week
Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>	Migrating individuals at Ciutadella and Es Grau
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Migrating individuals seen and heard throughout the week
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	Heard singing at Algendar Gorge and Es Grau
Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	Several migrating individuals seen at Matchani Gran, Algendar Gorge and Es Grau
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Seen at several wooded localities

Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	Seen all over the island, throughout the week.
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Small numbers seen all over the island
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Near houses all over the island
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Seen and heard at Algendar Gorge, Es Grau and Montgofre Nou
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Widespread and abundant
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Widespread and abundant
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	Widespread and abundant
Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	Seen and heard all over the island

Mammals

Algerian Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus algirus</i>	Dead on road
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	Dead on road
Black Rat	<i>Rattus rattus</i>	Matchani Gran

Butterflies and other insects

Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	Torre d'en Gaumes, Algendar Gorge
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>	Algendar Gorge
Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>	Algendar Gorge, Es Grau, Sa Roca
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	Es Grau
Painted Lady	<i>Cynthia cardui</i>	Son Bou, Cap de Cavalleria, Es Grau
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>	Algendar Gorge, Es Grau
Green Hairstreak	<i>Callophrys rubi</i>	Es Grau
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Syntarucus pirithous</i>	Es Grau
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>	Es Grau
Pine Processionary Moth	<i>Thaumetopoea pityocampa</i>	Es Grau
Mediterranean Demoiselle	<i>Calopteryx heamorrhoidalis</i>	Montgofre Nou
Blue-tailed damselfly	<i>Ishnura elegans</i>	Son Bou, Es Grau
Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>	Es Grau
Violet Carpenter Bee	<i>Xylocopa violacea</i>	Matchani Gran
Oil Beetle	<i>Meloe proscarabaeus</i>	Matchani Gran
Flower Chafer	<i>Oxythyrea funesta</i>	Torre d'en Gaumes, Naveta d'es Tudons
Dung Beetle	<i>Scarabaeus sp</i>	Es Grau
Egyptian Locust	<i>Anacridium aegyptium</i>	Algendar Gorge
Violet ground Beetle	<i>Carabus violaceus</i>	Matchani Gran, Algendar Gorge

Other Invertebrates

By-the-wind Sailor	<i>Velella spirans</i>	Son Bou
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Fish, Reptiles & Amphibians

Eel	<i>Anguilla anguilla</i>	Son Bou
Stripeless Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>	Montgofre Nou
Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>	Tirant, Algendar Gorge
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauretanica</i>	Torre d'en Gaumes
Italian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis sicula</i>	Matchani Gran, Torre d'en Gaumes, Montgofre Nou
Hermann's Tortoise	<i>Testudo hermanni</i>	Matchani Gran