

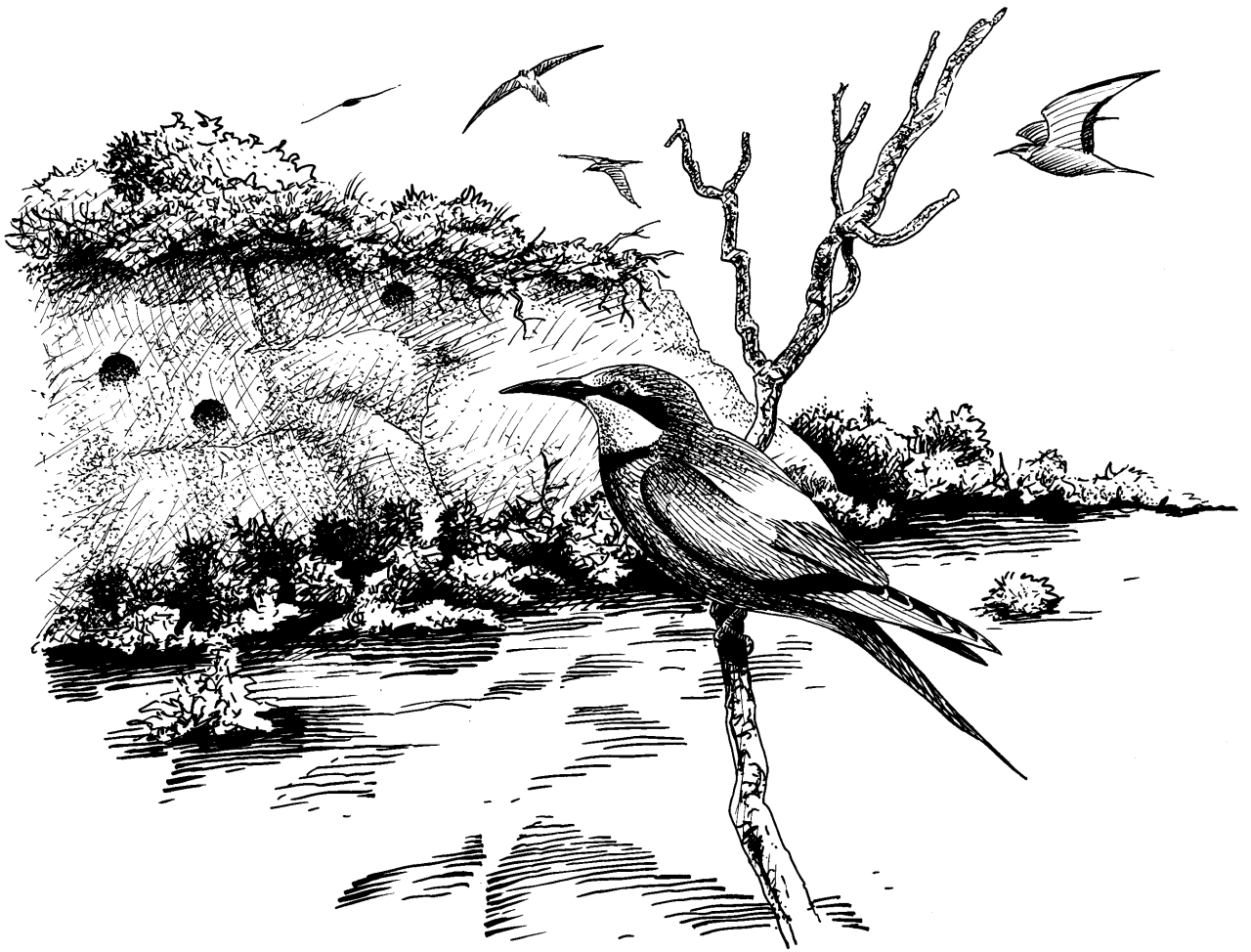
Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Discovering Menorca
12 – 19 May 1995

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The group

Kate Groom
Barbara Gascoigne

Dorothy Vincent

Frances Barker
John Barker

Leader: Chris Durdin

Our hosts at Matchani Gran were Jenny and Shaun Murphy. The group was also joined on 18 May by John Seymour, historian and Menorca resident, and by Santí Catchcot from the Balearic Ornithological Group (GOB) on 16 May.

As always, this holiday contributed to the protection of the wildlife that we enjoyed by way of a donation to GOB. A thank you letter from GOB appears at the end of this report. This holiday's contribution of £125, made up of £25 per person in the group, was part of a total of £700 given to GOB through three Honeyguide holidays to the Balearics in 1995, and £1,970 since the first Balearic Honeyguide holiday in 1992. Over £7,905 has been given to conservation projects in Europe since Honeyguide started in 1991.

Illustrations by Rob Hume. Cover: bee-eaters.

Friday 12 May – Mahón, Cova d'en Xoroi

Suitcases were claimed at Mahón airport and the group was met by Shaun Murphy and taken the short trip to our base in the spacious old farmhouse of Matchani Gran. All but one suitcase, that is. It was only an hour that I spent waiting for it to arrive on the charter flight that followed our scheduled flight from Luton, but it felt longer. But we were soon all safely gathered and ready for a light lunch before our first wildlife exploration.

In view of the wind and erratic rain, neither of which last into what was otherwise a warm and sunny week, the best option was to find a sheltered cove on Menorca's south coast. The minibus was parked as the track deteriorated, happily at an ideal distance to walk to the charming inlet of Cova d'en Xoroi. Sardinian warblers soon appeared; a woodchat shrike on a wire, corn buntings and yellow-legged gulls too. Wild gladiolus and pyramidal orchids were by the path as we descended to the tiny cove. Great robust tufts of grass were identified as *Ampelodesmos*.

Later, Shaun recalled how puzzled he was to see the previous group studying a distant dot on a rock through telescopes. We hardly needed binoculars for the slaty-blue blue rock thrush at the cove today. The nest was hidden, perhaps 30 feet up in a crevice above the gentle swell of the Mediterranean, but we watched it as it flew to and fro, to the nest with food, and away with faecal sacks.

Supper was the first of many generous feasts at Matchani Gran, with wine and puddings in equally generous supply.

Saturday 13 May – Torre d'en Gaumés, Son Bou

There was a tawny pipit in a field by Matchani Gran before breakfast, a quail was heard and a turtle dove seen. Two hoopoes appeared at breakfast; rarely a day passed when they didn't. The shearing of the Matchani Gran sheep provided a diversion before we gathered ourselves to leave. We had hardly left the avenue of pine trees along Matchani Gran's drive and there were two red kites, then a dark-phase booted eagle as we were briefly held by the traffic lights at the roadworks for the Alaiyor bypass.

Combining history and wildlife is easy on Menorca. The countryside is sprinkled with prehistoric *talaiots* – towers – and *taulas*, T-shapes of two massive stones. Just a few kilometres away we stopped at the prehistoric Torre d'en Gaumés, the largest of the remains left by Menorca's ancient stonemasons. This area is typical of much of the southern half of the island, with tiny fields divided by walls made from stones removed from the fields. Plants here included blue chicory and the blue version of scarlet pimpernel, plus the robust fleshy leaves from the enormous bulbs of sea squills which throw up their tall white flower spikes in autumn. Goldfinches and the usual Sardinian warblers were much in evidence.

Son Bou is a large reedbed which runs behind the fixed dunes. A little stint fed close to us by the edge of a small open pool. For the herons here it is generally a question of watching as they fly over the reeds, which is exactly what a little bittern did, but rather too quickly for most to see. But little egrets were easier to see, and tiny fan-tailed warblers were doing their usual 'zip. .zip. .zip' display flight.

Lunch was overlooking the reeds, from where the first interruption was a purple heron. The second was signalled by noisy yellow-legged gulls; a glance upwards, and there was a soaring osprey.

On the richly vegetated dunes there were small-flowered tongue orchids, sea bindweed, sea holly, sea rocket and the leaves of sea daffodil (another autumn flower). The flora where the dunes met the wet edge of the reeds was rich too; bug orchid, greater birdsfoot trefoil and, most striking of all, brilliant patches of the bright red French honeysuckle (or Italian sainfoin, a better name perhaps for this pea flower), which we also saw on many a Menorcan roadside. The finale arrived before returning to the minibus. Six brilliant bee-eaters, flying around, then perched on reeds, patient while we watched through the telescope.

Next was Mount Toro, the island's highest point, where many go to admire the view. There we looked down on booted eagles and the whole of Menorca, north, south, east and west. There is a restaurant, shop and church; the last, perhaps fire-conscious, had replaced traditional candles to buy and light with a slot meter to power one of a grid of little electric candles.

Returning home, we stopped at Alaiyó to visit the supermarket, puzzled over a tree in the garden below the street, and concluded it was a loquat.

Booted eagle



Sunday 14 May – Favoritx, Mongrofre Nou and Fornells

The final part of the drive to the lighthouse on the eastern cape of Favoritx is through a strange, moonscape-like area of grey slate. The pool there had a family of Kentish plovers, and we wondered how long the fast running youngsters might avoid the attentions of the yellow-legged gulls.

With no shearwaters at sea here, we went a little further north to the splendid little wetland at Mongrofre Nou. An osprey, then two, later three; four black-winged stilts, little egret, four little ringed plovers and a wood sandpiper were soon found. And what were those large pale lumps? Eventually they stirred enough to be recognisable as greater flamingos. Turning back towards the minibus, an osprey fished as we watched, eventually settling on a distant rock with its catch. As Frances remarked later in the week, then under Egyptian vultures, we were certainly getting the quality views.

We took tea in the pretty harbour town of Fornells. After returning to Matchani Gran to wash and change, one of Jenny's twice-weekly nights off from cooking gave us the opportunity for an evening on the town, namely Es Castell (also known as Villacarlos). In the old town square there were Indian bead trees and hundreds of swifts buzzing around the eaves. After eating at the Restaurant España, we returned to the square where in the moonlight a barn owl was twice glimpsed. Then, for completeness, we stopped briefly to hear the ringing 'piu..piu..piu' of a scops owl as we returned through Mahón.

Monday 15 May – Monte Agueda, Punta Nati and Ciutadella

The Roman road starts at an old school and winds up the hill to the top of Menorca's second highest hill. It is reputed to be a good place to see the two-tailed pasha, but there was no sign of this large and distinctive butterfly as we passed through scrub of Mediterranean buckthorn, lentisc, tree heath and narrow-leaved cistus. Our first Egyptian vultures appeared, and ravens too. At the top there was no two-tailed pasha, but a swallowtail butterfly was caught, rather remarkably for this fast flyer. The pasha did appear though – back at the start of the walk as we started our generous picnic. Other appearances of note at this stage were Dorothy's scarf, a team effort created against sunburn, and Barbara watched as nurse Kate strapped not her, this time, but a bandage for my twisted knee.

Punta Nati is the point at the north-east tip of the island, and involves driving past a rubbish dump full of gulls and ravens. It was a hot day, though windy out here, but from a relatively sheltered spot behind the lighthouse Cory's shearwaters could be seen drifting past.

Afternoon tea was in the main square of the old capital of Ciutadella.

Tuesday 16 May – Son Bou, Mahón, Punta Prima and Cala Mesquida

An earlier start than usual to return to Son Bou. Looking over the marsh from the north side there were fan-tailed and Cetti's warblers and we heard a great reed warbler. On the east side, by the car park where we had started the other day, a common sandpiper had replaced the little stint. No sign of the little bittern, but at sea an osprey flew past and there were many Cory's shearwaters and yellow-legged gulls.

After a late breakfast back at base, a visit to Mahón on market day was next on the agenda. I failed to bargain successfully in Spanish for socks and lost and found my hat within the space of an hour; others were more usefully employed buying souvenirs and writing postcards. We walked through the city and found a pavement café for lunch.

While some took a siesta, Dorothy and I took a short drive to Punta Prima. A few yards east from this quiet resort is low coastal scrub overlooking the uninhabited – by people – Illa de L'aire (literally island of air). A turnstone and three ringed plovers were new for the week, but more notably an Audouin's gull flew past and a tawny pipit offered super views.

The others rested and gathered up, another short drive to Cala Mesquada, just north of Mahón. Gulls and little egrets were in the harbour, and inland we found apple-of-Sodom and curry plant.

That evening we were joined by Santí Catchcot from the Balearic Ornithological Group (GOB). As well as giving him the Honeyguide cheque, we found out a lot about the island's wildlife, especially the mixed fortunes of birds of prey. For ospreys it is good news. One pair in 1981 have increased to seven resident pairs in 1995. This has been achieved by protection by GOB wardens, despite the threats of disturbance and urbanisation of the coast. For red kites, however, the trend is downwards, from 100 pairs ten years ago to ten pairs now. Last year's group had helped to fund research into their decline, and in the past year GOB had found that poisoning was the problem. The kites – some had been found dead – are probably not the targets, which are more likely to be feral cats or rats. But the indiscriminate use of poisons has had this drastic impact, much as it has in some places, past and present, in the UK.

Wednesday 17 May – Fornells Salinas, Cap de Cavallería

Terrapins were the first surprise in a puddle near the salt pans near Fornells. Another surprise was two sea planes, practising collecting sea water to put out fires, we thought. Bee-eaters were more expected, as always a treat, and a tawny pipit sat helpfully still.

There was a new road being built alongside the dirt track to the cape at Cavallería, but it seemed unlikely this would ever be busy with visitors in spring. We paused a while by a low sand cliff where bee-eaters were present, presumably nesting. Lunch was with the hermit crabs by a calm inlet, where a tawny pipit incessantly called 'cherie'.

By the lighthouse, it was clear that earlier attempts to turn swifts into pallid swifts were wasted: here they are in hundreds, and seen well their paleness is obvious.

Late that afternoon there was a young ladder snake in the parking area back at Matchani Gran. The meal was again in the Restaurant España in Es Castell, with the after dark interest provided not by owls this time but by Jupiter and three of its moons through the telescope.

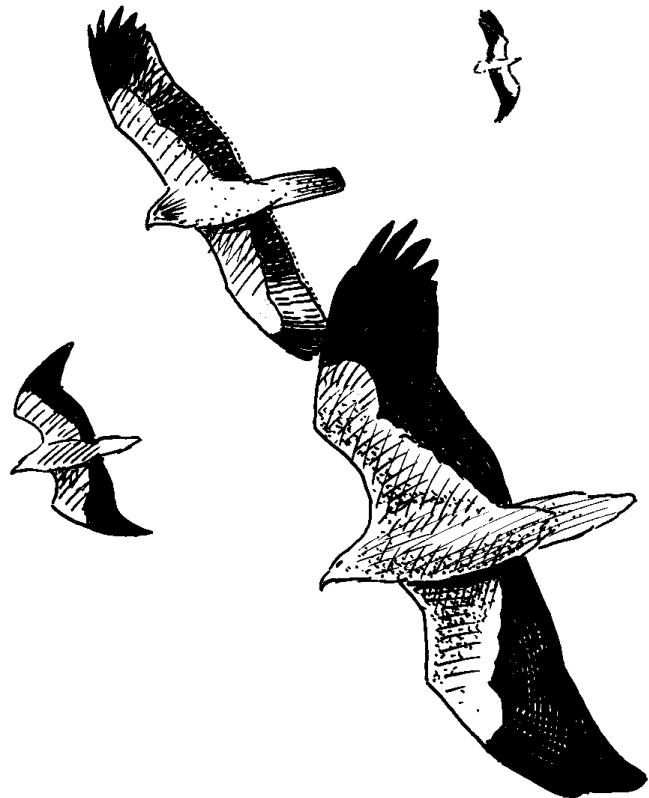
Thursday 18 May – Algendar Gorge

In Mahón harbour there were at least three Audouin's gulls, seen well by all. Also noted were thousands of swifts – none pallid – and the Black Prince cruise ship.

Algendar Gorge starts close to Cala de Santa Galdana towards the south-west corner of the island. A sheltered, woody gorge in general, it has an open valley floor near the bottom and some crags further up, but everywhere on the gentle scale typical of Menorca. Perhaps the varieties of geraniums are forgettable – cut-leaved, long- stalked and round-leaved – but six Egyptian vultures were memorable indeed. They were seen close to, soaring round us, adults and juveniles, and with necks straining could be seen on a rock just a few tens of feet above us where they appeared to be nesting. A singing bird nearly caught us out when the rich warble of a blackcap changed into the by now familiar nightingale song, the latter an accomplished mimic when it so chooses. A singing robin stayed as a robin, and there were no doubts about the yellow bartsia or the Cleopatra butterfly temporarily in the butterfly box. Also on the insect front, an Egyptian grasshopper or locust (either name is used) looked more like the latter.

A last chance to admire the foxglove tree by the road as we headed towards the supermarket at Alaiyor then back to Matchani Gran. In the best opportunity to date to explore the grounds, we found our first wild tortoises and some wild flower identifications were finalised.

Local historian John Seymour joined us to explain something of the complex history of Menorca, and then helped us out with the usual generous supper and the limericks. Frances and John made valiant efforts to empty Shaun's brandy bottle.



Egyptian vultures with a pale phase booted eagle

Bird list

Cory's shearwater
Shag
Little bittern
Little egret
Grey heron
Purple heron
Greater flamingo
Red kite
Egyptian vulture
Booted eagle
Osprey
Kestrel
Quail (heard)
Water rail (heard)
Coot
Black-winged stilt
Stone-curlew
Little ringed plover
Ringed plover
Kentish plover
Little stint
Redshank
Wood sandpiper
Common sandpiper
Turnstone
Audouin's gull
Lesser black-backed gull
Yellow-legged gull
Rock dove (or feral pigeon)
Woodpigeon
Turtle dove
Cuckoo (heard)
Barn owl
Scops owl
Swift
Pallid swift
Bee-eater
Hoopoe
Short-toed lark
Thekla lark

Butterflies

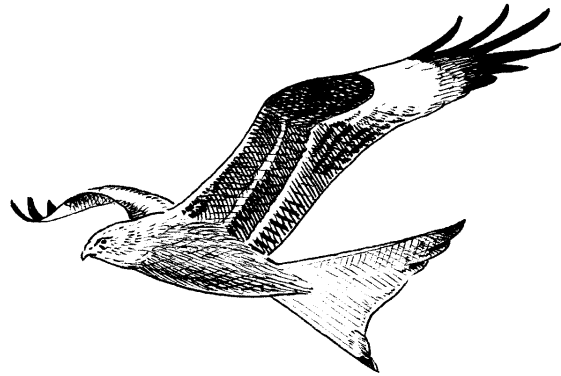
12 May

Holly blue
Speckled wood

13 May

Meadow brown
Wall
Cleopatra
Small copper
Clouded yellow

Swallow
House martin
Tawny pipit
Meadow pipit
Robin (heard)
Nightingale



Stonechat
Blue rock thrush
Blackbird
Cetti's warbler
Fan-tailed warbler
Great reed warbler (heard)
Melodious warbler
Sardinian warbler
Blackcap (heard)
Spotted flycatcher
Great tit
Woodchat shrike
Raven
House sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Corn bunting

14 May

Long-tailed blue
Brown argus
Swallowtail

15 May

Two-tailed pasha
Painted lady

17 May

Large white

Some notable insects

Hummingbird hawkmoth
Egyptian grasshopper/locust
Calopteryx haemorrhoidalis (copper demoiselle)

Mammals

Hedgehog
Rabbit

Reptiles

Tortoise, not separated by species at the time, but Hermann's tortoise is the local species
European pond terrapin
Ladder snake

Plants and flowers

Aleppo pine *Pinus halepensis* Alongside the track into Matchani Gran
Holm oak *Quercus ilex*
Fig *Ficus carica*
Annual nettle *Urtica urens*
Pellitory-of-the-wall *Parietaria judaica*
Hottentot fig *Carpobrotus edulis*
Ramping fumitory *Fumaria capreolata* subsp *capreolata*
Sweet Alison *Lobularia maritima*
Dyer's rocket *Reseda luteola*
Spanish broom *Spartium junceum*
Vicia benghalensis No English name, like a fodder or tufted vetch
Star clover *Trifolium stellatum*
Greater birdsfoot trefoil *Lotus uliginosus* Edge of the reeds at Son Bou
Bladder vetch *Anthyllis tetraphylla*
Italian sainfoin or French honeysuckle *Hedysarum coronarium* Great splashes of red on roadsides
and elsewhere
Round-leaved geranium *Geranium rotundifolium*
Long-stalked cranesbill *Geranium columbinum*
Cut-leaved cranesbill *Geranium dissectum*
Little robin *Geranium purpureum*
Yellow oxalis *Oxalis corniculata*
Euphorbia chamaesyce A spurge in pavement cracks at Matchani Gran
Tree spurge *Euphorbia dendroides*
Euphorbia myrsinites A spurge at Cabo de Cavallería
Fringed rue *Ruta chalepensis* Matchani Gran
Gum mastic or lentisc *Pistacia lentiscus*
Mediterranean buckthorn *Rhamnus alaternus*
Least mallow *Malvus parviflora*
Small tree mallow or Cretan mallow *Lavatera cretica*
Perforate St John's-wort *Hypericum perforatum*
Grey-leaved cistus *Cistus albidus*
Narrow-leaved cistus *Cistus monspeliensis*
Sea holly *Eryngium maritimum*
Field eryngo *Eryngium campestre*
Ivory-fruited hartwort *Tordylium apulum*
Wild carrot *Daucus carota*
Scarlet pimpernel *Anagallis arvensis*
Limonium minutum A sea lavender of rocky places, found at Punta Nati
Yellow-wort *Blackstonia perfoliata*

Spiked centaury *Centaureum spicatum*
 Wild madder *Rubia peregrina*
 Sea bindweed *Calystegia soldanella* Son Bou
 Field bindweed *Convolvulus arvensis*
 Mallow-leaved bindweed *Convolvulus althaeoides*
 Heliotrope *Heliotropium europaeum* Matchani Gran
 Pale bugloss *Echium italicum* Looks a bit like a Christmas tree
 Purple vipers bugloss *Echium plantagineum*
 Borage *Borago officinalis*
 Prasium *Prasium majus* A small shrub with shining leaves, Algendar gorge
 ? *Sideritis romana*
Solanum bonariense A cultivated nightshade from S America, in an abandoned garden at
 Cova d'en Xoroi
 Apple of Sodom *Solanum linneanum*
 Nettle-leaved figwort *Scrophularia peregrina*
 French figwort *Scrophularia canina*
 Yellow bartsia *Parentucellia trixago* Algendar gorge
 Bellardia *Bellardia trixago* Matchani Gran
 Sea plantain *Plantago crassifolia* (*P. maritima crassifolia* in Blamey)
Lonicera implexa A honeysuckle, no English name, Cova d'en Xoroi
 Mournful widow *Scabiosa maritima* (= *S. atropurpurea*)
 Annual daisy *Bellis annua* Very similar to our daisy found in lawns, but annual to cope with
 Mediterranean conditions.
Helichrysum italicum
Pallenis spinosa A yellow daisy with spiny bracts
 Lavender cotton *Santolina chamaecyparissus* Cavallería
 Crown daisy *Chrysanthemum coronarium*
 Field marigold *Calendula arvensis*
Galactites tomentosa This thistle is 'a major field weed', says Beckett
Reichardia Reichardia tingitana A short annual hawkbit type with deep purple bases to its rays
 making a circle in the centre of the flower
Launaea cervicornis A spiny dwarf shrub, not in Blamey
 Common asphodel *Asphodelus aestivus*
 Sea squill *Urginea maritima* Leaves and chunky bulbs of this autumn flower
 Tassel hyacinth *Muscari comosum*
 White asparagus *Asparagus albus*
Asparagus stipularis (= *A. horridus*)
 Sarsaparilla or Smilax *Smilax aspera*
 Rose garlic *Allium roseum*
Allium subvillosum Among the prickly pears at Matchani Gran
 Sea daffodil *Pancratium maritimum* leaves only, flowers in autumn
 Gladiolus *Gladiolus illyricus*
 Bug orchid *Orchis coriophora* subsp *fragrans* Son Bou
 Small-flowered tongue orchid *Serapias parviflora* Son Bou

Grasses (very incomplete)

Hare's tail *Lagurus ovatus*
Ampelodesmos mauritanica Big tufts
 Giant reed *Arundo donax*
 Common reed *Phragmites australis*

References: Illustrated Flora of Mallorca by Dr Elspeth Beckett
 Mediterranean Wild Flowers by Marjorie Blamey & Christopher Grey-Wilson
 (HarperCollins)



Grup Balear d'Ornitologia i Defensa de la Naturalesa

DECLARAT D'UTILITAT PUBLICA PEL CONSELL DE MINISTRES DE 19 DE JUNY DE 1985
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MEMBRE DE LA COORDINADORA D'ORGANITZACIONS DE DEFENSA AMBIENTAL (CODA)
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MEMBRE DE L'OFICINA EUROPEA DEL MEDI AMBIENT (BEE)
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GOB de MENORCA
N° Registre 1465
Data 30.05.95
SORTIDA

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27.07.94

Dear Srs.:

I would like to thank you for the donation we received from your group.

This money is a valuable help for our projects for the protection of the environment of the island.

I will be very grateful to you if you can send our thanks to the members of the group who visited Menorca.

Yours sincerely


GRUP BALEAR D'ORNITOLOGIA
I DEFENSA DE LA NATURALES A

Conxa Juanola
President.