

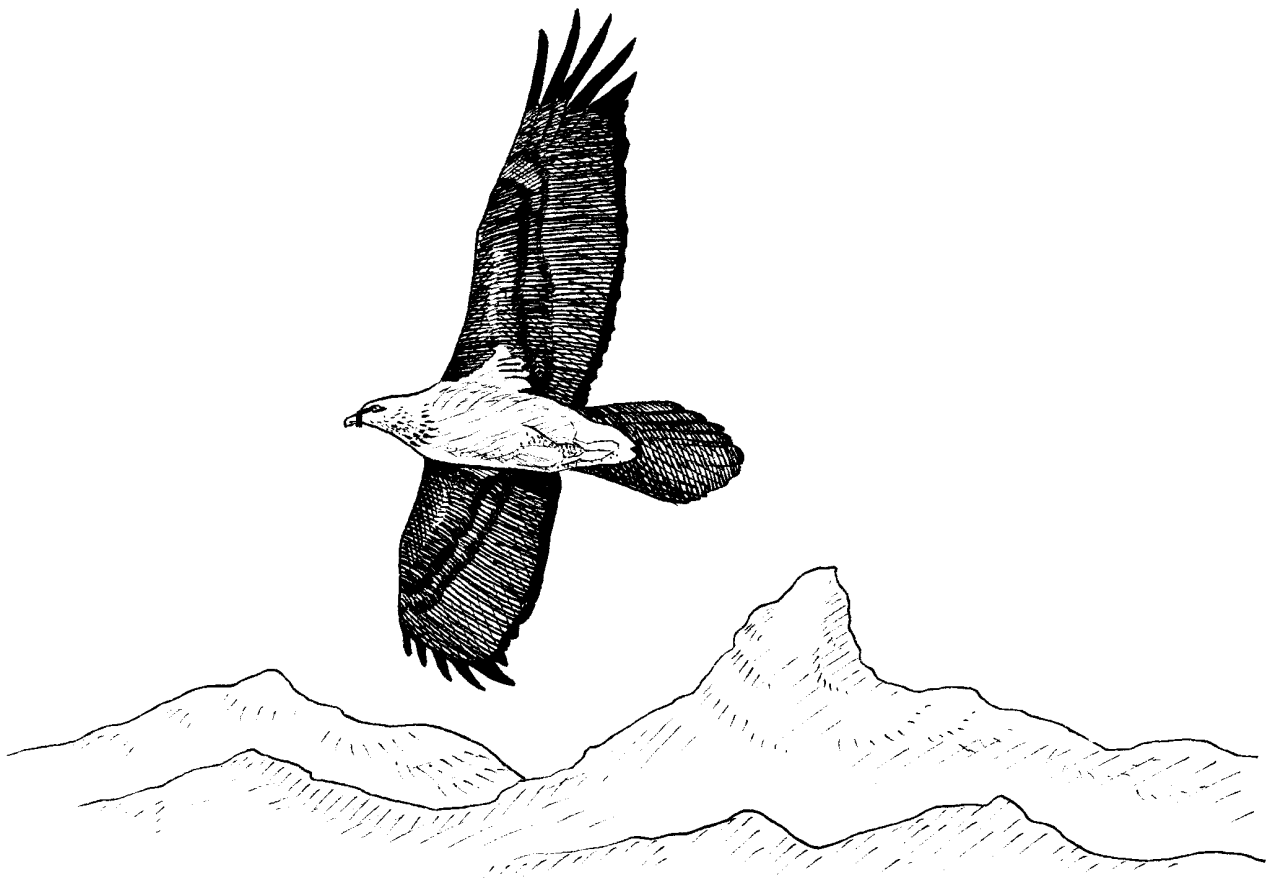
Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Spring in the Spanish Pyrenees
1-10 May 1997

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The group

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Val Osmond

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Sally Kay

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Brian Sexton
Linda Sexton

Jay Turner

Marcella Hume

Leaders: Rob Hume
 Phil Shaw

Report written and illustrated by Rob Hume; bird and butterfly logs contributed by Phil Shaw.

As with all Honeyguide holidays, £25 of the cost of the holiday was put towards a conservation project, in this case for La Sociedad Española de Ornitología (SEO), the Spanish Ornithological Society, and its campaign to save the Steppes. During the holiday, Juan Carlos Cirera Martínez of SEO's Zaragoza office came to Berdún to collect the Honeyguide cheque for £400. This brings the total given to SEO since the first Honeyguide holiday in Spain in 1991 to £3170. A thank-you letter from Juan Carlos appears at the end bird list (see separate PDF).

Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays

Berdún, Spanish Pyrenees

1 to 10 May 1997

'Are you sure?' asked Brian.

'Yes, we're all here - threats of road closures, railway disruption and airport evacuations on Election Day don't seem to have stopped us. The full 18, bright and early.'

Indeed we were: at Heathrow Terminal 1 after a start at some unearthly hour for many of us, to be absolutely sure the forecast disruption of transport services didn't come between us and a trip to Spain. As it happened, there was no such disruption, but we were soon well out of it, high over Biscay on our way to Bilbao.

'Are you sure?' asked Linda.

'Yes, the small one by the corner, with the driver in a dark blue pullover - José, we always have José. He thinks we're mad but puts up with us.'

The coach was loaded, the 100 peseta coins (or 2p ones - us English must be tight but what a good idea) retrieved from the luggage trolleys, everyone piled in. John Boucher had been waiting a while as the flight was just a little late, but we were quickly rising above Bilbao on the motorway east, and heading for Vitoria and Pamplona. With a fine backdrop of high hills and distant forests, the green landscape, despite the populous nature of the countryside hereabouts, was full of colour and interest on the eastward drive: we stopped briefly to look at a white stork on a church tower nest (with large young already) and then again in the usual spot for John's tours, beneath some high, limestone cliffs, for coffee.

'Dos cafés con leche, por favor.' So was my Spanish vocabulary almost exhausted before we even reached Berdún. 'And, um, one solo, um por favor'. John was at hand for Jay's decaffeinated. All went well. The Spanish would soon improve.

Phil looked resplendent in his Honeyguide sweatshirt: the logo printed in rusty red on a white shirt. Chris Durdin will have to place a bulk order. The rest of us were somewhat mixed, with some slightly uncomfortable clothes for travelling and finding Spain warm and sunny - is it best to be comfortable or should one look smart on these occasions? Of course, most managed both.

Berdún appeared, far to the east, on its narrow hill in the Aragon valley. We were driving along the far reaches of the Embalse de Yesa, a large reservoir that I have rarely seen so full: with people everywhere, for this was a fiesta. John told us that it had rained all autumn, stopped about Christmas, and had been bone dry ever since, so the local crops were already suffering. But Berdún rose above a valley green with barley, as it always used to be in my early visits, with none of the pink alfalfa, yellow rape or blue linseed that had become more common in recent years. It seemed to be 'back to normal', with the wind rippling the fields with waves of silver, and bare rectangles of earth of vivid red.

Berdún itself had changed little: a few more startlingly white walls, a few more new roofs. Later it was obvious that the biggest change, even since last autumn, was the erection of new, bright street lights - not just those of a few years ago on the perimeter road, but along the tiny inner streets as well. The people must be glad they have shutters to block out the light, which must

surely penetrate the thickest curtain. It seemed something of an intrusion, a little unnecessary: but then, we are only momentary visitors.

Our first evening meal at Rincón de Emilio - Emilio's place, across the square - set the standard for all evenings to come. Good food, good service, winks and smiles from Luisa. John and Vivien Boucher sorted us out into the two houses that make up The Painting School, close by in adjacent streets, and everyone found the rooms to their satisfaction: indeed, there was clearly an air of great anticipation and excitement in this very Spanish village, perched on top of its hill and approachable only through its ancient, arched gate above 'the ramp', the landmark that was to become our focus every morning, whether we ventured out on foot, by car or by coach.

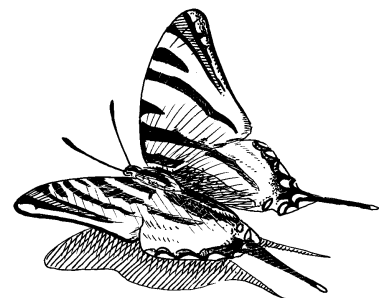
After our meal, some of the group ventured out looking for scops owls. Swifts were calling high overhead, long after dark. But the best sight by far, something of a first for a Berdún trip, was that of Comet Hale Bopp! The comet, such a superb sight over the past few weeks but for most of us spoiled by the typically 'orange' night skies of England, was fading somewhat but still looked good in a clear, unpolluted sky.

Friday 2 May - around Berdún to the rivers Veral and Aragón

First thing next morning, a firecrest entertained a group of us early on; spotless starlings were taking food to their young in the church roof; white wagtails bounced about the village streets. Phil spotted a fox. After breakfast at Emilio's - standard fare of orange, pineapple or peach juice, fresh, tasty bread, little cakes, bits of toast, plastic-wrapped portions of jam and lots of coffee - we gathered in the lounge of the main house for a briefing. And then, we were off - downhill and straight on at the first bend, onto a track that leads to the Rio Veral. It was windy, a little bit cool, then sunny and a little bit hot. Dartford warblers played their part but the predicted crested larks and ciril buntings were more elusive. Bright blue flax dotted the grey marl. Spotless starlings left the church roof and zoomed downhill to feed in the fields. Overhead was a red kite.

Humphrey began what seemed likely to be a fine week for butterflies, sweeping his net and peering at the identification books: but the weather was later to intervene and these early days proved to be the best. The flowers were on show all the time, of course, but a bit of warm sun on the back while you bend down to examine them does wonders. The bottom of the valley was attractive, as always, but lacked the ring of the oriole's voice: odd, when you tell people how the orioles will be singing from every poplar that they inevitably seem to be absent without leave. Oh well, another time.

A woodchat shrike - a first for some people - put in an all-too-brief appearance. Early spider orchids were still flowering well. Spanish fritillaries - the butterflies - seemed to be the thing on the rough, bare marl tracks and other finds included scarce swallowtails (frequent, *right*), swallowtails, black-veined whites (common), marbled skippers, wood white, southern white admirals and Provence chalkhill blues.



Lunch: red wine. The wine comes free, you pay for your coffee.

'Are you sure?'

'That's right: same thing every night, too, red and white wine with the meal but pay for the con leches and solos.'

A longer afternoon walk: on down to the main valley road and across through the scatter of barns beneath Berdún, over a long bit of flat plain and then into the deep cutting made by the Rio Aragón. Flowers and some butterflies still caught the attention: but look back and there, you see, is the most glorious view of Berdún. Backed by the snowy peaks of the High Pyrenees, the town stands on its remarkable hill, crisp and clear in the sunshine. Photographs. Walk on ten yards and the background is better - another picture. Another ten yards and the foreground improves. Another picture. 'I can just get those poppies in the foreground'; 'Look. if I crouch down I can just squeeze in this patch of yellow and still get the snow at the back.'

Far ahead, on a wire, two spots of rust. 'I can just about make out two blobs but I can hardly say what they are' says Jay.

Bee-eaters. Oh yes, they are bee-eaters all right.

'Are you sure?'

Let's get closer - will they stay? For the first time in 15 years they are actually nesting - or look as if they will - in a sand bank above the Aragon, behind a little, round, stone tower that must once have guarded the bridge. They are glorious. Sometimes a little group of them decorates the top of a dead tree, or adds exquisite colour and form to the silvery shimmer of poplar leaves.

This bit of the valley is always good for red kites and black kites and we were not disappointed; great reed warblers sang secretively beyond the river, while a pair of ravens tended young in a nest in a nearby cliff. Butterflies included Moroccan orange-tip and marbled skippers, while black-veined whites remained the most obvious and scarce swallowtails not infrequent.

After a while some of the group drifted back up the hill, while others waited for a lift from John or Vivien who ferried us back in their cars: a few brave souls walked back all the way. After dinner, most of the group had really excellent views of a pair of scops owls, well-lit by the new street lights.

Saturday 3 May - San Juan de la Peña and Hecho

A coach outing: everybody on? No? One or two missing; now they are here; everybody on? No? Well she was here a minute ago. Ah yes, now we're here - what, someone else missing? Who? Oh - ah, now we're ready. Got everything? Got your lunch boxes? Right. Off we go then. Hot sun.

San Juan de la Peña: away we go, along the Aragón valley, over the Puente la Reina, past Santa Cilia, up and around Santa Cruz. At the exposed corner half way up we stopped to admire the view: right across to the peaks, including the Pic du Midi d'Ossau.

'Lammergeier - two lammergeiers!' It was to become a familiar cry. Two lammergeiers, at the moment quite distant and frustratingly flying against a dark grey cliff, so their dark grey backs were not at all obvious. Now and then, though, we got a glimpse of orange and usually a white head could be watched floating to and fro. It was cool, the air heavy, and the lammergeiers were working unusually hard, flapping frequently to keep themselves going.

'I thought you said they were always gliding and hardly ever flapped?'

Well, yes, but they don't always read the books. Anyway, that wasn't from books so much as past experience - normally they do glide, and hardly ever flap - just that these were moving about in unfavourable conditions. Later we saw them again, and they did glide - on and on. These two were in an area where lammergeiers have long been known - they seem to persist here even in the bad times and now that numbers in the Pyrenees have increased, this spot is no longer the only place to see them but is no less perfect as a backdrop.

At the top of the hill we split into an obvious 'bird and anything else' group and an 'anything else and bird' group, hanging back to look more carefully at flowers. In fact, it was a slight disappointment here - lovely place, shame about the birds, in a way. Humphrey and Sallie wandered off down the road and said we should all have done so, we missed the flower of the day. At the monastery hundreds of people were milling about, so we continued down to the picnic site at the foot of the hill, below the lammergeier cliff. Bread and bits of chicken, tomato and boiled egg, cans of drink, all to the sight of lammergeiers periodically appearing above the skyline and griffon vultures sailing higher overhead.

Next was Hecho valley, the approach to the wonderful Selva de Oza, a magnificent pine and beech forest. We drove well up the valley until the Barranco del Infierno gorge, where we got out and walked. A wallcreeper site: they bred last year, would they be back?

There was no sign but we didn't give it long enough, perhaps - later, as we were all walking above the gorge, a wallcreeper did indeed appear high over the valley, flying downstream, but it was a mere glimpse. Better was a lammergeier - over the peak to the right with a score or two of griffons. In fact, there were eventually two adult lammergeiers and an immature (a dull, dark one) around, despite a deterioration in the weather, with a little rain coming on.

Sunday 4 May - Fago and Zuriza

Warmth, and sunshine: glorious, after overnight rain. This was the life. Everything looked clean, fresh, full of colour and vibrancy. Off we set, after breakfast, with our coach driver for the day, Fernando, heading a little west then quickly turning north from the Aragon valley via Majones and Villareal, to the splendid gorge south of Fago.

This is a great little valley and the gorge itself most attractive. On the roadside where we parked the coach a small strip of damp ground was attracting house martins and crag martins, both nesting in the nearby cliffs and eager to collect pellets of mud. We watched them at extreme close range; while overhead, far up above us, were alpine swifts and choughs, sometimes disturbed by the threatening presence of a hobby.

Up in the blue sky it was never a dull moment: griffons on the move, the hobby and swifts, now and then a kite: and some small parties of honey buzzards, circling and spiralling upwards on their way north. With the second of these was a black stork, a real find: for a moment it twisted and turned in a rapid chase with the honey buzzards. Two short-toed eagles also put in a brief appearance.

Phil made judicious use of his CD player and attracted a couple of Bonelli's warblers, with an almost instant reaction, as well as repeating the feat with subalpine warblers near the tunnel. A griffon vulture on a ledge - so close we didn't notice it for some time - gave exciting views for everyone through the telescopes.

The butterfly contingent did well here: green-underwing blue, small blue, common blue, adonis blue, scarce swallowtail, Glanville fritillaries, Spanish fritillaries - amongst others.

Fago is a peculiar little place: we drove through, admiring the strange, small squares and small streets and odd mixture of apparent poverty and over-the-top 'doing up' of some of the houses. It is way out in the middle of nowhere but there always seems something going on. Gradually we climbed through a lovely green landscape of well-wooded hills, then dropped down again into the small town of Anso, itself an interesting and attractive place. The best thing about Anso was the Hostal and its excellent coffee (actually there are several there, all with excellent coffee) and we sat outside in hot sunshine enjoying the last of the morning.

North of Anso, on the road to Zuriza, we stopped close to the river for lunch. After that we moved north and paused again at a likely-looking spot with great cliffs on either side and a rushing river tumbling through the woodland at the roadside. A short-toed eagle came over: a good moment. Then a lammergeier appeared: then it became obvious there were two. After that, we had a sky full of vultures, two eagles, and the lammergeiers, each trying to out do the other in terms of the excellence of the views. They really performed, flying across the valley, floating about over the slopes, heads turning left and right as they looked for food, with scarcely a wingbeat. They were close, close enough to see the strange 'beards' at the base of the bill and the dark streaks on their deep orange chests. One was rakish, long-tailed and slim-winged and extremely elegant: the other, huge, shorter-tailed and broader-winged, less elegant, maybe, but so impressive. Presumably the big one was the female.

After that it was difficult to see how we could get anything better all week. Lammergeiers are doing well in the Pyrenees, especially with supplementary feeding in winter, but however common they may become they will never lose their appeal - few birds have such stunning presence, real charisma.

It was such a gorgeous day that we just kept going, west from Zuriza over a very minor road that had been made up recently and was actually extremely good for the coach; then on the main road north of Roncal up to the alpine meadows of Belagua. We drove on up almost to the French border, then turned back and stopped at a couple of good spots on the way down. The first had masses of Pyrenean trumpet gentians and spring gentians - stunners - and swathes of birdseye primrose. Views around the snowy peaks were magnificent, although the immediate surroundings are more gentle, grassy slopes and flats.

There were 19 alpine choughs, ravens, water pipits and wheatears but not too many birds: this was more a place for the flowers and a few butterflies. The lower stop produced many elder-flowered orchids, good displays of large-flowered butterworts and various other goodies as well as great drifts of 'ordinary' buttercups and daisies of the richest colours. A cowslip/oxlip controversy hanging over from the day before kept running.

After a really glorious day there was a little rain in the evening but it did nothing to dampen our spirits. Evening meals in the restaurant above Emilio's bar became noisy affairs - was it the low ceiling, the group, the wine? - and this was no exception. Convivial, I think.

Monday 5 May - Riglos and Loarre

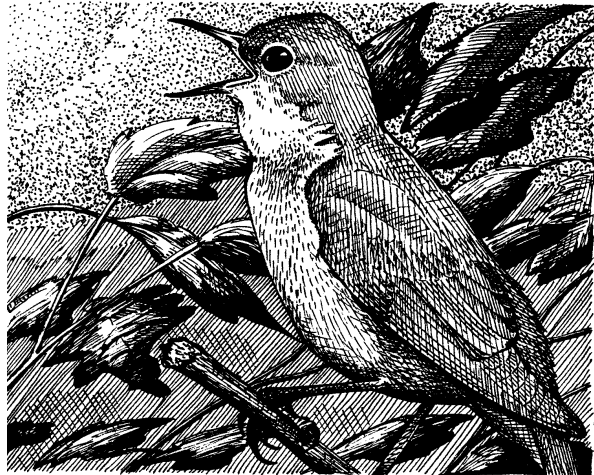
Riglos is a famous southern-Pyrenees site that has become a bit crowded and disturbed of late, especially with great encampments of rock climbers and various army exercises. But you have to go, so we did.

But first, the morning. Berdún is a place for extraordinarily beautiful mornings and this was one of the finest. It had rained overnight and everything was damp, softened and all the more attractive for it. The cloudscapes were terrific, and banks of mist hung low over the Aragon to the west, while one or two villages perched on hillsides seemed to have a monopoly on patches of early morning sun. One flat green field of barley transformed itself into a patch of blue mist, which just as quickly shrank to a thin circle and disappeared. Small fields of barley, outlined by steep, dark banks, are scattered everywhere, all at different levels, and the sun caught each in turn, turning dull green to patches of silvery-yellow one by one. To the west, the rectangles of bare earth looked soft, pinky-red; to the east, into the low sun, they were black.

It was a sunny day, for the most part, and we expected plenty of people, but it was remarkably quiet. First we stopped to look at the cliffs from the main road, before turning off to Agüero, a sort of mini Riglos, in many ways a more attractive little town but with smaller (and entirely undisturbed) cliffs. Our circular walk took us over some short, heathy vegetation, past orchards of walnuts and the odd olive, and back through the village at the foot of the beetling cliffs. Blue rock thrushes attracted our attention and our luck was really in when they were joined by a superb black wheatear, one of the area's special birds. Nightingales sang everywhere and rock sparrows twanged from wires above the road.

Below the village were a couple of golden orioles and a strange and exciting orchid found by Winifred: sadly, when she took the orchid experts to look at it, it had been eaten by a passing sheep. . . It went unidentified, but we can be sure, though, that it was exceedingly rare.

Riglos station is a handy spot for lunch. Short-toed treecreeper, serins, Sardinian warbler and a singing woodlark accompanied lunch, together with more nightingales. At Riglos itself, there were yet more nightingales: indeed, this was a day of days for singing nightingales, with more than ever and surely the best and loudest of their kind singing from the groves of olives, walnuts and fig trees. The place is a delight with all of these many and varied trees, great views over low, wide, green valleys opening out to the south and the extraordinary, gigantic Mallos de Riglos, vast orange cliffs that rise above the town and sway over it in impossible overhangs. Griffon vultures sailed around the cliff tops, while a lammergeier put in a brief appearance and a peregrine appeared a couple of times. Choughs called, crag martins sailed by very close, but there were no black wheatears: we had been lucky with the one earlier in the day.



Riglos was excellent: we just had time, though, for yet more excitement and drove to the fantastic Castillo de Loarre. This is an extraordinary medieval castle perched on an outcrop of rocks high above the valley. The road up to it, to Brian and Linda's delight, was painted with names of top riders in the continental cycle tours - this must make quite a special hillclimbing stage.

The castle, though, was closed: it is always closed on Mondays and this was poor planning. But it still looked good from outside and we managed some birds. Two Egyptian vultures sat immobile on a rock. Black redstarts flitted about the castle walls. Phil saw a black wheatear: we

all saw a hoopoe, some with very good views. It was a good place to finish the afternoon: the views south to Huesca and across to the far distant Ebro valley are spectacular. Unfortunately, it also became colder, very windy and evidently there was rain around: not a good sign.

Tuesday 6 May - local walks

Rain and strong winds overnight calmed down to a fine early morning, but it quickly changed back to dull, overcast and rainy. Phil found 50-odd griffon vultures lined up on the slopes between our village and Binies, gathered around a sheep carcasse that had been slung over the hillside.

A local walk was in the offing this morning, followed by an afternoon 'free'. After breakfast we all trooped across the road from Emilio's to visit the Panaderia, the bakery that produces such delicious bread and amazing croissants each morning. The croissants are more like half chickens, spread across a giant wicker basket and brought in still hot from the oven. The oven has been going more or less continuously for 50 years - at least it has never been cold in that time. And each day a little dough is kept to prime the next day's batch: the intriguing thought was raised that in each loaf we eat there might be just a tiny something that is 50 years old. . .

The walk was quite brisk: in moderate weather but without the butterflies because of relative dullness and cold. We went to the Rio Veral, retracing the route of the first morning but going much farther along the track at the bottom of the valley. It became dull and rainy at times, especially towards the end when we were trying hard to spot a golden oriole. Some saw it, others did not, and just got wet.

One of the best birds was a particularly obliging ortolan bunting, singing from the slope above the junction beyond the bridge. Telescope views were really quite unusually good, which is more than can be said for views of cirl buntings which seemed rather elusive all holiday. A wryneck called but was not traced; Cetti's warblers sang loudly and nightingales were everywhere, singing constantly. Other odds and ends were serins, firecrests, crested larks, brief views of Dartford warblers and various big things in the air including Montagu's harrier, short-toed eagle and griffon vultures.

In the afternoon we did our own things: Joyce painted a picture of John's traditional fireplace in the main house, for example. Marcella, Rob, Brian and Jay walked all the way back down to the Veral and turned right this time, along the foot of the valley towards Binies. This was meant to be a reconnaissance for the next day. We carried on into the gorge itself (admiring a few pyramidal, lesser butterfly and lady orchids) and then walked all the way back - 10 miles just about - along the long, straight road between Binies and Berdún across the flat cereal fields. By then it was warm and sunny.

Lady orchid, crested lark and red kite



Wednesday 7 May - Binies gorge

It was a rainy morning: but we had a day scheduled for walking through the Foz de Binies, the local gorge, and so off we went to do it. With no coach, there was not a great deal of choice. John and Vivien ferried us by car a few at a time to the beginning of the gorge, where the Rio Veral emerges as a broad, clear torrent from the canyon opposite the village of Binies on its little hill.

The walk was fascinating with plenty of flowers, but few or no butterflies in quite unseasonably cold and dull weather and a rather limited selection of birds. The gorge is scenically stunning, the river cold, fast, ideal for dippers - and sure enough there was a dipper nest, although not many good views of the occupiers. But it became increasingly dull and gloomy as we walked and there were frequent stops - fortunately, such is the nature of the place that there are many overhangs under which the whole group could shelter from the showers. The gorge gradually narrows and deepens then pops out into a wider, green valley with small meadows and wooded slopes.

Here we were a bit fragmented - well, the group was, not anyone individually - but half of us went on, the pioneering spirit undimmed by the grey clouds. Until a few minutes later, anyway: suddenly, from the south-west, a darker, leaden-grey cloud crossed the hills and approached at speed with what was evidently quite a storm of rain beneath it. We wisely turned back: but not soon enough, for we were quickly engulfed by a sudden wind and a torrential storm of hail. The cold, stinging hail on our faces and the wind tearing at hoods and hats was hardly what one might expect of May in Spain and it was with some relief that we reached a bit of shelter again in the gorge, under a great rock overhang, from which we watched the hail pass over and ducked the flashes of lightning and crashing thunder.

Fortunately for us this was not altogether localised and a few miles away in Berdún Vivien was experiencing much the same conditions: to our great relief she embarked on a mercy mission and came to take us all away back to the warmth and dryness of our rooms. The colder, wetter ones went first: some walked the whole length of the gorge and on to Binies and beyond before finally being picked up, but it was a miserable afternoon and by then another great storm threatened, so discretion was advisable.

It was a great shame for this can be one of the best days of the holiday here. Instead, it turned into a cold, often wet, evening and finally, at about scops owl time, we could scarcely believe it when we looked outside and found it was snowing. Not just up on the hills, but down in the town, great, heavy snowflakes in quite a decent snowstorm. It seemed most peculiar.

Thursday 8 May - Lumbier gorge

Some Berdún roofs were white: well, sprinkled with white at least. It was astonishing: and so cold. For early May this was pretty remarkable.

The hills all around were deep in grey cloud: not a hint of a break, except maybe a slight gleam somewhere to the south. As we drove west along the Aragon, the middles of the foothills to the north were revealed and the whole place was a winter wonderland of snow, just like a Christmas card: binoculars brought up a marvellous view of trees and shrubs all covered with a tracery of fresh white snow. Griffons emerged, to circle around dismally, then rise up out of sight into the cloud: it really was quite a sight. All told, there were perhaps 75 of them.

We stopped at a long bridge over the Aragon before the reservoir and were greeted here with another incongruous sight: it was absolutely freezing, there was low cloud and snow all around

and there, on a treetop above the riverbed, was a group of bee-eaters! And just beside the river, a cluster of orchids, stately military orchids and some white helleborines. A short-toed treecreeper gave brief glimpses; some people saw a Cetti's warbler. Black and red kites put on a good show: but was it cold.

A few miles onwards and we reached the deserted, sad remains of Ruesta. Quite a place it must have been, once: to the west of the road a large village with its fortified tower and church, on the other side a pretty little street which must once have been absolutely delightful. Now it is in the last stages of decay, occupied only by white wagtails, black redstarts and a blue rock thrush or two. Cuckoos called; golden orioles whistled somewhere far away in the valley.

It was much brighter, even a little warmer, by the time we drove up to Sos del Rey Catolico. Here most of us piled out at the southern end while the coach took the others on to the big Parador at the other end of town. The walkers ambled through the streets and found the whole place sheer magic: it really is a town worth visiting, with endless opportunities for the photographer: full of old buildings, huge balconies, narrow streets, colourful roses and geranium pots by the score. At the Parador we regrouped, for a late coffee stop in the fourth-floor bar.

Shortly after leaving Sos, we stopped beside a canal across a large, flat, agricultural region. Each side was a strip of trees, in which there was a golden oriole and some entertaining and obliging woodchat shrikes. Here we had lunch and as we ate, so the hills to the north cleared a little and we could see the distinctive curved limestone cliff above Lumbier begin to catch the sun. That was our next objective: Lumbier gorge.

Mind you, it was not hot. The gorge was distinctly cold and even in the sun it barely warmed up. At the far end, too, we were caught in some showers. Yet the vultures were out in force: some dozens, eventually a couple of hundred, griffons and a long, if increasingly distant, view of a splendid lammergeier. A few Egyptian vultures performed, too and we had the 'usual' excellent views of kites, a couple of bee-eaters over a slope (close to some beehives) beyond the gorge and odd glimpses of serins, subalpine and Sardinian warblers and so on. The gorge itself - not seen from the top but from inside, as you walk through along a disused railway line (therefore comfortably wide and flat) - is excellent, very impressive, but tends to leave you with a back ache after staring up all afternoon at passing vultures. Not that they are at all distant, the views are very close, but they do tend to be right over the top!

In the evening we were entertained by the visit of Juan Carlos Cirera Martinez from SEO, the Spanish Ornithological Society, who told us all about the sterling work being carried out at Belchite in the Ebro valley, a remnant of the Spanish steppes. He showed us picture of a notice at the site, which included a credit to Honeyguide for financial support, and we were pleased to hand over a little more in the form of a cheque for £400. This is one of the features of Honeyguide: not only supporting the local economy and staying in traditional accommodation but putting something into conservation, too.

The final feature of the night was the scops owl excursion: stunning views, some of the best imaginable in the street lights.

Friday 9 May - High Pyrenees

It was, we said, the tops or bust. The weather looked uncertain. Things were improving but maybe not to the north. Although the sky looked dull and grey, rather than heavy with low, threatening cloud and only the highest peaks were hidden. The rest just looked dismal. But to

the south there was blue sky and brightness, a promise of better things. From the town wall we heard a quail: not many years ago it was possible to hear half a dozen or a dozen from there.

We headed east, past Santa Cilia and on through Jaca under the gaze of Sierra Oroel, the big, pointed peak to the south: as you pass by to the north, so the point becomes a long wall of sheer cliff. The road turned north through the higher peaks, on to El Formigal and through to Col de Pourtalet. At the end of a long tunnel a warning sign to drivers to switch off their lights was interpreted by Linda as 'Have you seen the comet?'

Sadly, Pic du Midi d'Ossau was thoroughly swathed in cloud and never cleared, but remarkably it was warm, still and soon become quite sunny. At the top we drove a few feet into France and walked a few yards farther: as someone said, you get a good feel for a country if you do it on foot. Then it was in to the nearest cafe for coffee and KitKats. A chamois (or isard, in the Pyrenees) appeared briefly, and two golden eagles sailed by high up to the east, but not many of us saw them.

There was much fresh snow about and in any case we were not the group to go climbing far into the hills: flowers were enjoyed closer to the road, and elder-flowered orchids, Pyrenean trumpet gentians, spring gentians, rock jasmine and Pyrenean fritillaries were quickly found. Several people watched a super male rock thrush and the rest of us caught up with the species a little later, as we paused at Formigal for lunch. There, we also saw more orchids and gentians, a fine alpine pasque flower and a distant lammergeier.

The weather was fine and we had a bit of time: having heard from another group earlier that the wallcreepers had been in their regular spot beyond Hecho, and with just enough time to get there, people were offered the choice between going back to pack, or packing everything into the final day and having another go at the gorge. The gorge won, although there was only an hour to spend there when we reached it, not quite enough to ensure an appearance by the 'creepers. Nevertheless, the drive along the Hecho valley was as attractive as ever and it was clear that, since our first visit, the local red-backed shrikes had arrived - we saw six or more of them, all fine males, from the coach.

In the evening, the final meal, with John joining us, was the most enjoyable of all and everyone seemed intent on performing their party pieces. The noise was quite something! Joyce revealed her week-long secret: a poem, the result of much under cover work after hours, read to everyone in the style of Stanley Holloway. This was brilliant: but not to be outdone, Humphrey, in his customary head-of-the-table spot, stood and recited the whole of Holloway's *Albert and the Lion*, beautifully enunciated in good Lancashire, without a break. Brian, deciding he could beat that with Spike Milligan, was less successful, starting somewhere in the middle, forgetting the beginning, then losing the ending somewhere.

'Oh no, here he goes' said Linda. 'He'll be juggling next.'

Brian juggled, briefly, with three crumpled serviettes. Hearing the noise, one of three gentlemen in the corner of the room came across, turned round a chair and sat between us, determined to find out what these strange English people were up to and why. It turned out the three were German pilgrims, cycling west as far as they could get before time beat them, leaving Part 2 for another year. Somehow, we got onto Wordsworth, the World Cup and Herr Klinsmann. Would Klinsmann return to play football in England?

'Whether Klinsmann returns to England,' said our pilgrim, 'affects me about as much as a man leaning his bicycle against the Great Wall of China and seeing it blown over by the wind: that is, not at all.'

Dinner for One was his favourite (or was it least favourite?) English film, apparently rarely seen in England but shown every year, without fail, in Germany at Christmas time. 'It is full of wonderful English things: "Drink up your vine, Mrs Vinterbottom" and such things as that.' We made a mental note to avoid it, should it appear on Channel 5.

Saturday 10 May - Bilbao and home

The three pilgrims were up early. They rode by, bicycle bells ringing, as we piled onto the coach, to a wave and a cheer from all of us. We passed them again a few miles along the road: they had a long ride ahead and we wished them well.

The drive back to Bilbao was without incident and, save for a glimpse of two white storks at the nest, with few birds. The coffee stop was just accessible but, given the state of the roadworks and an impending change to dual carriageway, it seems doubtful whether it will be on the return trip next year.

Bilbao airport gave us a chance to eat a smaller packed lunch and catch up on some English newspapers. Then we were off, to Joyce's delight, flying again: down into England through turbulent cloud into a duller, cooler, damper land (but with no fewer than four Concordes visible, a good record).

THE POEM

A Less Agile Holiday

(with apologies to the author of *Albert and the Lion*)

In Spain there's a village called Berdun
That sits on a hill in the sun
And 'twas there that Rob Hume and his missus
Took a party for birding, for fun.

Some had joined in the party for t'flowers
Moths, beetles and butterflies too
Phil Shaw was our other group leader
If owt needed knowing, he knew.

We stayed in the house of John Boucher
An artist of talent and fame.
When we needed some help with our journey
John and Vivien to our rescue came.

It was called a trip for the 'less agile'
So we formed quite a motley crew,
With tickers, hips, knees needing watching,
But there wasn't much we didn't do.

Each day we made different excursions
'Twas a treat to see so many things
With raptors galore in the thermals
And small birds on hand in the wings.

Butterflies, moths and flowers were lovely,
And many birds quite new to us.
If they thought you were good at the spotting
Then you got a good seat on the bus!

We had amongst us th'intelligentsia,
Who contributed much, truth to tell.
They not only knew all the flora,
But all t'blooming Latin as well.

Mealtimes at Emilio's were special
We gelled as a group right away,
With hilarious fortissimo chatter
Red wine helping things on the way.

We still have our own special memories
To savour when we are at home
Fifty vultures awaiting their breakfast
A huge moth, perhaps, or that storm!

There's one person needing a mention
Who'd a word once in Honeyguide's ear
That a trip for the so-called less agile
Might prove a right gradely idea.

So we'd like to give thanks to our leaders
For their patience and knowledge and fun,
That they chose to share with us this Maytime
In the rain, and the hail, and the sun.

So if ever you want a good reference
For records of what's seen and heard
Come to this little band of enthusiasts
For we surely won't give you the bird!

Joyce Ball May 1997

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Most of all, however, we want to thank all the members of the group, for having such a good time, for sharing such a good time and for being so enthusiastic throughout, whatever the weather.