

Catalonia - The Eastern Pyrenees

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 - 15 May 2007



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Woodcock Orchid

Report and photos compiled by Steve West



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Introduction:

The first 3 nights were spent in the Monastery of Santa Maria de Bellpuig de les Avellanes near Balaguer. The last 4 nights transferred in the Hotel Roca Blanca in Espot, on the edge of the Aigüestortes National Park.

Both the hotels used for this tour deserve a special mention, as they played an important part in the success of this tour. They gave friendly and helpful service, good food and rooms, and remarkable surroundings, with interesting birding on the very doorstep. They were also extremely well-situated for easy access to each day's outings. We will be looking to repeat use of the same hotels in the years to come. This was the second Naturetrek tour to Catalonia, and incorporated considerable changes of the previous tour. Firstly, the dates of the tour were brought forward by more than two weeks, mainly to counter the hot temperatures of up to 37°C encountered on last year's tour, but also to enjoy the spring (flowers on the plains and birdsong) at its peak. Secondly, the second centre's location was transferred to the eastern edge of the Aigüestortes National Park, after considering that this area offered more suitable possibilities for exploring the surrounding countryside in the Naturetrek style.

In the opinion of the author the changes worked for the best. Although temperatures crept close to 30°C (another uncharacteristic heat wave for the time of year) on the plains we were able to react accordingly and, throughout the trip, we managed to see an excellent variety of birds, plants and habitats. These included the drylands of the plains of Lleida, inland wetlands and riverside woodlands, rocky slopes, oak woods, scrub, gorges and lakes, pinewoods, high mountains, pastures, etc.,

Many flowers and butterflies were also seen, although for want of a specialist in these fields many of them had to go unidentified. That however does not mean that they were not enjoyed. Non-birding highlights included a fine Ocellated Lizard and a Scarce Swallowtail at Mont-roig, an Apollo Butterfly on the edge of the Aigüestortes National Park, and Chamois, Marmot and Fallow Deer on the day we took the taxi into the park itself.

Our encounters with some very special birds are described in the day to day accounts.

Weather:

As mentioned we had temperatures approaching maximums of 30°C in the plains during the first half of the tour. Evenings were pleasantly cool, while early mornings were chilly. The latter half of the tour brought us more mixed weather. At first the days were sunny and warm (some 5°C or 6°C cooler than on the plains), breezy in places, while on day 7 we had a bit of everything: snow, rain and even sunshine in the afternoon!

Day 1

Tuesday 8 May

Barcelona airport, Estany d'Ivars, Os de Balaguer.

Everyone had met up at the pre-arranged point and we were on our way to Lleida by 3:30p.m. In the time left to us before arriving at the hotel we fitted in an interesting visit to the Estany d'Ivars, an inland lake once drained and recently restored. Here the stars of the day were undoubtedly the two **Penduline Tits** that we observed at close range as they were occupied in building a nest in the lower branches of a poplar tree. In addition to these we also saw White Stork, Black Kite, Avocet, Shelduck and Melodious Warbler. Great Reed Warblers could be heard easy enough, but strangely not one could be seen.

From here it was a short drive to our very special accommodation for the next three nights in a monastery just to the north of Balaguer. The birds inhabiting the surrounding area were keen to make their presence felt, as with relatively little effort Spotless Starling (these could be heard from the bathrooms!), Serin, Short-toed Treecreeper, **Golden Oriole** and **Woodchat Shrike** were all soon detected.

Bird of the day: Penduline Tit.

Day 2

Wednesday 9 May

Bellmunt drylands, Gerb and Sant Llorenç de Montgai areas

We set out just before 9 a.m. in the direction of the plains of Lleida, in anticipation of some unseasonably high temperatures. Before long we had turned off the main road onto one of the many dirt tracks that we were to follow in the course of the week.

Our first stop was not for a bird, but rather a flower, although the truth of the matter is that it bore the name of a bird: a small group of Woodcock Orchids were admired and photographed in their prime on a patch of low scrub bursting with colour and scents. **Thekla Larks** were singing, although they would be seen at closer quarters later on, and we were surprised by the sudden appearance (and quick disappearance) of two **Stone Curlews**. This is where Margaret H initiated her quite considerable photographic record of the many flowers she came across on the trip, as always closely accompanied by Ann.

The Bellmunt drylands were just over the hill, through small pinewoods and past patches of thyme scrub. A brief stop gave us our first encounter with **Hoopoes** and a Woodchat Shrike, while **Quail** and Little Bustard were both heard calling close by.

A little further on and we stopped to watch the display of a pair of **Montagu's Harriers**, as they soared and dived high in the sky. A **Hobby** was spotted and then the first **Griffon Vultures** of the trip made an appearance. More **Little Bustards** were heard (there are a lot of Little Bustards in these drylands) and after some scanning with the telescope we managed to view a couple of displaying males, which could be seen throwing their heads back onto their puffed up necks before their raspberry calls reached our ears.

We were all keen to get out and walk, especially Heather and Eric who were chomping at the bit. The drylands were brimming with life after this year's generous spring rains: fields of poppies, swishing swathes of wheat, and a multitude of colours in the non-cultivated patches of thyme scrub dotted here and there. As we walked through a narrow field of cut grass butterflies and **Little Bustards** flew up almost from under our feet. Obviously there was still some migration going on, as we also saw **Whinchats** and **Northern Wheatears** as well as a **Honey Buzzard** rising on the first thermals of the morning.

Moving on we passed a **Little Owl** and another **Stone Curlew**, and then stopped to scan for raptors. We didn't have to wait for long, as almost immediately 3 more **Honey Buzzards** were watched at close range as they too searched for the thermals that would help them on their long migratory journey.

But time, like Honey Buzzards, flies when one is enjoying the birding. We had yet to buy supplies for our picnic lunch, so rather reluctantly started making our way to Balaguer.

But always by the scenic route. Following a quiet section of the old road allowed us freedom to stop on the way and admire some more great birds, such as several **Bee-eaters**, **Turtle Doves**, more Black Kites and an **Egyptian Vulture**. The rather elusive Golden Oriole was calling nearby, but could not be seen.

We had our lunch in a poplar wood near Gerb, accompanied by non-stop birdsong and finishing off with some tasty fresh strawberries. We identified over 11 species of bird by their songs or calls alone, although only a small proportion of these allowed themselves to be seen.

Subsequently, at a brief riverside stop, Rupert spotted a **Kingfisher** and we all heard a **Wryneck** calling nearby. By this time however other things like coffee and ice-cream were occupying our thoughts and it was really convenient (or was it good planning?) to find a campsite with a café which offered such goodies in a cool and comfortable environment.

Refreshed, we went straight back to the birds. Steve took us a short way down a path alongside a reservoir, pulled out a metallic device from his pocket, blew in it several times and then told us all where to look to see a really enraged **Firecrest**! Never had the name seemed more appropriate as the bird approached the source of the offending sound with its fiery orange crest raised to its highest and pointed directly at us. It was an unforgettable sight, that tiny bird with an outrageous punk hairdo.

We were then entertained by a Great Crested Grebe which eventually succeeded in swallowing a much larger fish than it ever should have tried to, and a **Purple Heron** typically perched motionless on the edge of the reeds.

Shortly after we added **Alpine Swift** and **Crag Martin** to the trip list while waiting for a much scarcer and more dramatic bird. Time passed and we had almost given up when suddenly Steve called everyone to attention. There in the sky was a pair of **Bonelli's Eagles** flying together between two crags. We all watched as the two magnificent eagles soared and glided in unison and eventually disappeared from view.

More Bee-eaters were seen and admired as we followed a winding track into the wilderness. Suddenly a **Great Spotted Cuckoo** passed in front of the van and as everyone jumped out we were enormously lucky for it to land in a nearby tree in full and glorious view of all. Many minutes were spent admiring that handsome bird, which seemed quite oblivious to our presence. Then another Great Spotted Cuckoo approached, although it was the first bird that let us have more than our fair share of excellent views before we decided to continue on our way.

It was obvious that we were on a high note, seeing that everyone chose the "one more site" rather than the "return to the hotel" option. By now the wind had picked up and the last site was quite exposed but we still managed to see a fine **Black-eared Wheatear** and a couple of **Thekla Larks**. The hoped-for Spectacled Warbler eluded us, although we were not going to let little things like that dampen our spirits after such a wonderful day's birding!

Bird of the day: Great Spotted Cuckoo.

Day 3

Thursday 10 May

Monastery walk, Mont-roig, Ivars de Noguera, Balaguer drylands.

The new morning was greeted by a keen party of naturalists out on a pre-breakfast walk near the monastery. A **Golden Oriole** was spotted soon enough but proved difficult to relocate. Then we coaxed a displaying **Subalpine Warbler** out into the open and some of the group caught brief glimpses of a **Sardinian Warbler**.

As the sun began to take the chill off the morning we contemplated a beautiful field of poppies resplendent in the sunshine. Out came the cameras. Then we all heard a **Grasshopper Warbler** singing from cover nearby. This species is a scarce migrant at this time of year and can turn up almost anywhere, and would certainly remain undetected if it didn't break into song. After **Corn Bunting** and **Cirl Bunting** we had worked up an appetite so headed back to the monastery for breakfast. However, before we reached our destination we heard another bird singing, concealed in a nearby thicket. A Reed Warbler? Here? But what else could it be? That evening the bird was tentatively noted down as a Reed Warbler, although Steve made a mental note to check on warbler songs after the trip.

After breakfast we drove along another track which took us to the foot of the spectacular rock face of Mont-roig. We spent the rest of the morning here occupied with an easy-going but action-packed walk, taking in the splendid views of the plains to the south, and the wealth of birds, plants and butterflies that this site has to offer. In the course of the morning we saw Subalpine Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, 2 **Peregrine Falcons**, several **Red-billed Choughs**, 3 **Egyptian Vultures**, Griffon Vultures, Black Kites, 2 **Rock Thrushes**, several **Blue Rock Thrushes** displaying, one **Black Wheatear**, numerous noisy **Rock Sparrows**, Alpine Swifts and more. Non-birding highlights included more Woodcock Orchids, a Scarce Swallowtail butterfly and an impressive Ocellated Lizard. What a place!

Lunch was had on the banks of the River Noguera Ribagorçana. It was hot, but even so before retiring to the hotel for a midday siesta we managed to find Penduline Tit, **Great Reed Warbler**, and a Cetti's Warbler.

Our late afternoon destination was the Balaguer drylands. On arrival we were greeted with the song flights of no less than a dozen **Calandra Larks**! Truly impressive! A Montagu's Harrier sailed by in the distance before we reached an abandoned farm building where a pair of **Rollers** seemed to have taken up residence. We all enjoyed these colourful birds from a certain distance before reluctantly moving on. We saw Hobby, Little Owl and Stock Dove and then we tracked down one of our main objectives: a small group of **Lesser Kestrels**. These smart little falcons gave a good show, flying around and over our heads while emitting their characteristic calls.

The end of the birding day was near, but would not finish before giving us very good views of **Little Bustards** and male and female **Montagu's Harriers**. Then came the last bird of the day but, as they say, by no means the least. A **Tawny Pipit** flew up from the track. We got out of the minibus and relocated the bird. The light was perfect and the pipit stayed calm and still for long enough for us to get excellent views. Although Roller was voted bird of the day this handsome and cooperative Tawny Pipit came a close second.

Bird of the day: Roller.

Day 4

Friday 11 May

Montsec, Cellers, Espot.

The time had come for us to say our farewells to the staff at the monastery and to head for the high mountains. However, there was no rush, and so when Jaume the hotel manager kindly offered to show us a

quartz deposit and a raptors nest we had no reason to decline. We followed him into a shady Kermes oak wood and had already located singing **Bonelli's Warblers** before reaching the nest. The raptor was not there but from Jaume's description it was probably a Buzzard. Then we searched for quartz crystals, and Jaume's more experienced eyes found the best, one of which he gave to us "to bring us luck" (now if Steve is not superstitious why has he still got the crystal?).

We drove to Àger to do a spot of shopping and then took the track to cross over the Montsec range. A lot of work was being done on the track, and this seemed to have affected the birds, or was it perhaps the wind? Either way we managed to see a male **Rock Thrush**, a superb displaying **Dartford Warbler**, Griffon Vultures, a **Rock Bunting**, and some fossils.

A male **Marsh Harrier** was watched hunting near the summit before we descended towards our lunch stop. It was a carefully selected picnic site, equipped with rock tables and chairs, oak tree shade, bush toilets and singing Ortolan Buntings. One **Ortolan Bunting** was eagerly watched as it sang from a nearby tree and then launched itself to fly in a circle around the onlookers! Other birds seen or heard here included a flock of Red-billed Choughs, Bonelli's Warblers and a Wryneck.

Refreshments were taken at a lakeside café where we relaxed and enjoyed the view while trying to calculate how long it would take for the hotel pool to be filled by the hosepipe they were using. After a brief stop at Collegats to admire the gorge we drove on to the village of Espot where we would be staying for the next four nights. Some free time was given to the group, many of whom chose to spend it birding!

Bird of the day: Ortolan Bunting.

Day 5

Saturday 12 May

Aigüestortes National Park, Superespot.

Early risers Richard, Rupert and Margaret D came to breakfast enthused by the great show that the village's **Dippers** had put on for them. After breakfast we all squeezed into the official 4 x 4 taxi that would take us into the National Park and undertook the head-rubbing ride as far as the frozen snow would allow us to get. Fallow deer and a single **Chamois** were seen on the way.

We were dropped off by a lakeside, enveloped in some of the purest Pyrenean scenery there was. All the available cameras were whipped out and then we decided to split the group, with Ann and Rupert walking down and the rest of us making our way up to the Amitges refuge. **Water Pipit**, Black Redstart, Northern Wheatear, Grey Wagtail and **Crested Tit** were seen on the way, and **Alpine Chough**, Griffon Vulture and Honey Buzzard flew over the highest peaks. 2 or 3 **Alpine Marmots** were watched as they sunned themselves on a boulder-strewn slope.

The bad news was that the refuge was closed, and that there would be no teas or coffees! However, it was a beautiful day, ideal for walking. We had our lunch in the shade and then descended, following the course of a rushing mountain stream and a splendid waterfall, and seeing a beautiful **Camberwell Beauty** on the way. On the shores of Lake Maurici we met up with Rupert and Ann, who reported having seen Crested Tit and at least 100 Small Tortoiseshell butterflies on migration over the mountains.

The taxi arrived at the pre-arranged time and took us back to the village. After a break most of the group signed up for a short ride and walk beyond the ski slope of Superespot.

In the same way as the taxi had done in the morning we stopped where the snow would not let us past. A walk in strong gusts around the tree line revealed a number of interesting birds such as Rock Thrush, **Tree Pipit** and **Ring Ouzel** (all singing), Griffon Vultures and a small group of **Citril Finches**. Satisfied, we returned to the hotel.

After a hearty evening meal we had arranged to look for one more bird, the **Scop's Owl** that had been singing outside the hotel the previous night. It didn't make us wait for long, for soon the male was calling and was shortly answered by the female: a perfect duetting pair! Fortunately, one of the pair flew into view and then perched in the gable of a building under construction for close to five minutes, affording marvellous views to all present. Savouring this observation more than any After Eight mint imaginable we retired to our rooms to dream about the next day's birds.

Bird of the day: Scop's Owl.

Day 6

Sunday 13 May

Esport and the eastern fringe of the National Park.

Out on the church roof a **Rock Sparrow** chirped away while we finished our tasty breakfast. It was a beautiful day for a walk in the country, so we were in the right place!

After a brief visit to the Dippers we started the day with a gentle stroll up to a tiny mountain village, observing a pair of **Red-backed Shrikes** and several **Rock Buntings** on the way, as well as a very attractive **Apollo Butterfly**.

From here we drove into an extensive pine forest, stopping along the way to look for some forest birds. Apart from the ubiquitous Coal Tit, we detected Crested Tit and Short-toed Treecreeper but one had to be quick off the mark to actually get a glimpse of these birds. **Crossbills** were heard calling too, but try as we might we could not see them. Then suddenly no fewer than 6 Crossbills flew out of a tree right in front of our noses!

We parked the van at the end of the track and walked back into the forest. Everyone gathered round Steve as he tried 'pishing' to a hidden Goldcrest, but instead of enticing the Goldcrest out into the open we accidentally flushed a female **Capercaillie** which had obviously been sitting concealed in the adjacent tree for at least 5 minutes! We all saw the back of the Capercaillie as it flew hurriedly down the slope to land on the forest floor somewhere out of sight.

Feeling quite pleased with ourselves we returned to the car park to prepare for lunch and saw several **Citril Finches** and Griffon Vultures. We were focused on the sky now, which was a good thing, as at last we set eyes on the coveted **Lammergeier**. And there was not one but rather two birds, turning, flipping over and gliding while all the time letting themselves be blown by the wind to cross the valley at record speed.

With lunch over we walked to the mountain refuge for teas and coffees and...it was closed. One could die of thirst out here! We took a walk up to the viewing area, noting more Citril Finches on the way, and enjoyed the rather brisk breeze blowing over the pass. A **Ring Ouzel** showed itself very well on the way down, much to our delight.

Some Jays, a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a very brief sighting of a Black Woodpecker were the most notable birds we saw before further aborted attempts to obtain coffees at the nearest available outlets.

We finally hit the jackpot in Esterrí d'Àneu! But Naturetrek tours do not live by coffee alone. Oh no, the best was yet to come. Next Steve drove us to a stand of trees with large tell-tale holes in their trunks. But would the bird be there? The first sighting was of a Green Woodpecker, which admittedly made us all rather uneasy. However, Steve jumped over the stream (only just!) and forced a response from the bird we all wanted to see. And what a response! A huge male **Black Woodpecker** came flying straight towards him at eye level, landed in a tree just behind him and ascended to come within full view of the delighted onlookers. We wanted more, so Steve retreated to the foot of a telegraph pole and repeated the procedure. Once more the Black Woodpecker came rushing to the call of duty, landing on the pole at less than 2 metres above Steve's head. Everyone had superb views of this spectacular bird before it eventually flew off and out of sight.

What a superb day! Lammergeier, Black Woodpecker, Capercaillie, Citril Finch, Ring Ouzel...all rounded off by another viewing session of the local Scop's Owl. Obviously the good luck crystal was working!

Bird of the day: Black Woodpecker

Day 7

Monday 14 May

Port de la Bonaigua Alòs d'Isil.

Raindrops were falling on our heads as we left the hotel, a few at first and then more as we tried to watch the village's resident Dippers. We drove towards the mountain pass of the Port de la Bonaigua, in the hope that by the time we arrived the rain would have stopped or lessened. However, as we gained altitude and passed through a pleasant forest of fir and pine, the light rain turned into quite heavy snow! Considering that discretion was the better part of valour we retreated to a café for teas and coffees and an opportunity to rethink our strategy.

From here we drove up the Isil valley, past small villages, alongside a vigorous river and a green valley skirted by high mountains with an ever increasing dusting of snow. We saw Red-backed Shrike, Rock Bunting, Jay, Yellowhammer, Grey Wagtail, Whinchat, Northern Wheatear, and an ambitious Long-tailed Tit with a very large caterpillar.

On the drive back to Espot there was a frustrating moment as Steve in the front of the vehicle spotted a **Golden Eagle** and two **Lammergeiers** flying over the valley; unfortunately, by the time everybody had left the minibus the birds had disappeared over a mountain ridge.

Lunch was taken back at hotel and by mid-afternoon the worst of the weather had passed by. It being the last afternoon options were aired, and so it was only half the party that continued the birding. Richard, Rupert, Margaret and Steve went to a site where a suspected **Iberian Chiffchaff** was heard on the day of arrival at Espot. Sure enough the bird in question was soon located, singing from the top of a tree. Had the bird not been singing things would have been quite different – it is virtually impossible to distinguish an Iberian Chiffchaff from a Common Chiffchaff in the field except by song. As it was we now had confirmation of a very interesting record, as the Iberian Chiffchaff is considered to be a rare bird in these parts and there is no reliable information that indicates possible breeding anywhere at all in Catalonia.

Another visit to the Black Woodpecker site drew a blank, except for two Red Squirrels, one of which fooled Richard into thinking it was a Black Woodpecker as it poked its head out of a hole!

The last official outing was planned to see raptors, and was quite successful in that we saw Griffon Vulture, Sparrowhawk and a Lammergeier! We celebrated ending the trip with such a high profile bird.

Bird of the day: Iberian Chiffchaff.

Day 8

Tuesday 15 May

Agramunt, Cervera, Barcelona.

We were wrong. Lammergeier was not the last bird of the tour. Not quite. On the way back to Barcelona airport Steve took a wrong turning and pulled off the road to turn around. He couldn't have chosen a better place to do it: 2 **Booted Eagles**, one light phase and one dark phase bird, were patrolling the area and were seen well by all, even by those who had already packed their binoculars! Between Agramunt and Cervera we drove past Hoopoes, Bee-eaters and even a Roller before reaching the main road to Barcelona. We arrived at

the airport in good time for everyone to say the final farewells and to gradually take stock of what a great trip it had been.

Bird of the week: Black Woodpecker.

P.S. Oh yes, by the way, Remember the “Reed Warbler”? Well, it was in fact an Olivaceous Warbler!