

Wildlife Photography - in the Spanish Pyrenees

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 - 29 February 2016



Griffon Vulture



Anso Valley



Chamois



Snow-shoe hike

Report compiled by Peter & Melanie Rich
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Tour Participants: Sergio Padura (leaders) with five Naturetrek clients

Introduction

Day 1

Thursday 25th February

Flight from the UK to Bilbao, and then onward travel to Berdun.

Day 2

Friday 26th February

Today was the first day in the field, although we had already met yesterday at dinner and talked a little about what we would do in the next few days of Winter Photography in the Pyrenees. On the whole, the plan for these days was largely influenced by the wintry weather, heavy snow and degree of cloud cover.

So, on this cloudy morning, we headed up to the Valley of Aisa. We passed the village of Jasa and then ascended towards the ridge, from where we could see the Aisa valley shrouded in clouds. We stopped for some initial photos. We descended into the Aisa valley and immediately went up the road to the top of the valley. First we made a stop at the waterfall of Sibiscal, one of the most beautiful of many in this valley. We arrived at Abi beech forest where, after crossing the river, we walked along a track to reach the top of a waterfall. It was sleeting but the group remained lively, stopping frequently to take pictures of every detail.

We returned on the same track towards the picnic area. The weather did not allow a clear view of the mountains, which were permanently covered by clouds and fog. Fortunately the picnic area is covered and the soup we had with us warmed us up as we enjoyed a leisurely picnic. Finally the sky opened up a bit and we were able to see the first vultures.

After lunch we walked on a little to the alpine Napazal plateau. During the ascent we saw the first Chamois. On reaching the Napazal valley, a flock of Alpine Choughs caught the group's attention. The weather was a little clearer and the fallen sleet had left an almost white landscape. We crossed the river with some difficulties and soon saw a first Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture) in the distance, and also a female Chamois with her calf from the previous spring. As we continued walking we managed to see two more Lammergeiers, some more Alpine Choughs and a fourth and then a fifth Lammergeier.

The clouds were becoming darker from the south and we decided to go down. But it was only for a moment, after which they seemed to clear a little; we even saw a ray of sunshine which provided some very beautiful, photogenic moments. We returned to see the Lammergeier, and a Peregrine Falcon was spotted frightening a flock of choughs. The first daffodils had also flowered, in this crazy winter.

We descended slowly to the car and returned to Casa Sarasa where, after freshening up, we met (as we did on each of the days) to view the photographs taken and comment on some of the technical aspects which arose. Pete and Mel provided a delicious 3-course meal of green braised asparagus, beef stew and mash and layered apple cake and cream, washed down with generous amounts of red wine, which all helped to restore spirit and mind.

It had been a magnificent first day. It was very wintery but, despite the poor visibility, we had seen more wildlife than expected.

Day 3

Saturday 27th February

Today we expected a day with a lot of snow, and it did not disappoint. The morning was rainy, and the forecast announced it would be like this all day. It had snowed in the mountains but in the valleys we had rain. Nevertheless, we kept to the plan. First we had a talk about technical aspects of photography and then drove to Hecho to pick up the snowshoes we were expecting to use in the Oza Forest, in the upper part of the Hecho valley.

As we went up the road, the rain soon turned to snow. In the area of Boca del Infierno the road was almost covered by the snow. Luckily, we had winter tyres and the snowplough was hard at work, enabling us to get to Selva de Oza, where it was snowing very hard. We had the place to ourselves, just a crazy group of Naturetrekkers enjoying a snowy day! We put on the snowshoes and took a walk. The resulting images were more typical of Finland than Spain! Despite the heavy snowfall we took many photos. As an initial snowshoeing experience, it went very well and we all realized that it constitutes good exercise!

Given the increasing snowfall, we decided to avoid complications and drove down a few kilometres in the van to a covered picnic area where we enjoyed our cups of hot soup and watched the snow fall before continuing on our journey. After lunch, we walked up the road to the gorge: it was spectacular in the snow and we took many photos. We took a long walk through the gorge. Unfortunately the beauty of the snow also meant the wildlife was not visible. We returned to Berdun where some of us went out again on a birdwatching walk.

A very energetic and special day was rounded off with a dinner of chorizo and tomato pasta, followed by roasted chicken with a carrot and dill side dish and brownies and cream.

Day 4

Sunday 28th February

Today the weather looked a little better. Berdun and its surroundings awoke to a mantle of snow. The forecast said that the day would be a little better than Saturday but windier - another wintery day.

Our destination was the Anso Valley. Before reaching Anso, we stopped near the cliffs of a small gorge where there were vultures drying their feathers in the sun after rigours of the previous day; crows and kites did the same. We continued to the top of the valley towards Linza, stopping a moment to view the landscape of Trasveral and Ezcaurri peaks, but they were shrouded in cloud. On reaching the shelter of Linza, we put on our snowshoes again and went for a walk through the beech forest. Occasionally a gust of wind lifted the snow and, although visibility was poor, the play on light made for some spectacular photo opportunities. Strolling through the forest after a heavy snowfall was a privilege, and the bad weather of recent days was an incentive rather than a drawback.

We returned to the shelter to have lunch and relax. By the time we had finished our picnic the weather had improved, the snow had stopped and, despite being a bit windier, the sun at last made an occasional appearance. As we were leaving the car park, we saw a Lammergeier flying low through the valley, and we were able to take

some pictures of it. We stopped at Zuriza to walk a little and photograph the Alano range and Ezkaurri peak. The snowy landscape and wind were spectacular. The wildlife was also encouraged by the sun so we were able to see more birds.

We came back to stop at Trasveral again, now in full sunshine; the wind was getting stronger and the sky was blue and areas of light dappled the vertical mountain walls. We saw Golden Eagles, vultures, and Black Kites on migration. The day was much improved and we ended the day by taking some fabulous pictures of the Western valleys park from the Santa Barbara Pass. The wind was strong and chilly but another delicious dinner (pesto rice, lamb chops with mushrooms, and pears in wine dipped in a chocolate and stilton sauce) helped us recover from the day's efforts.

Day 5

Monday 29th February

This, sadly, was our final day. However, we had all day to enjoy, as the flight left from Bilbao at 9.55pm, allowing us a more relaxing start. After leaving Casa Sarasa a little later than usual we headed for the Lumbier gorge.

It was quite a sunny day in Berdún, but the wind was very strong. Arriving at Lumbier the sky was cloudy but the wind was not too bad. Formed by the Irati river, the Foz de Lumbier is 2.5km-long gorge, and its walls provide ideal nesting sites for Griffon Vultures. We walked along what used to be a railway line before passing through two tunnels. The vultures were in full breeding mode and were building their nests and carrying branches in their beaks.

For our midday picnic we went searching for a place to shelter from the wind and found it at Javier, next to the castle. From there we drove to Pamplona where we walked along the route run by the bulls during the world-famous San Fermin fiesta in July. Finally, before leaving for Bilbao, we had tea in the elegant Café Iruña, Hemingway's favourite haunt between 1923 and 1959 - a farewell in style!

These four intense days of pure winter and snow sometimes made conditions difficult but at the same time provided spectacular backdrops for the main objective of the trip – Winter Photography in the Pyrenees.

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name
1	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
2	Cattle Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
4	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
5	Eurasian Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>
6	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
7	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
8	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
9	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
10	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
11	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
12	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
13	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>
14	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>
15	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
16	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
17	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>
18	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
19	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
20	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
21	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
22	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>
23	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
24	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
25	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
26	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
27	European Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
28	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
29	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
30	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
31	Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
32	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
33	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
34	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>
35	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
36	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
37	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
38	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
39	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
40	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>

Mammals

1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
2	Pyrenean Chamois (Izard)	<i>Rupicapra pyrenaica</i>