



# Honeyguide

## WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Aragón 'Fam' Trip  
22 – 26 November 2017



This is a record of a familiarisation ['fam'] trip to Aragón kindly provided free of charge by the Spanish and Aragón Tourist Boards.

This was the first 'fam' trip organised by the regional government in Aragón. That may seem surprising, given that Honeyguide has been coming to the Spanish Pyrenees in Aragón region since 1991 and that there were RSPB and other groups before then. So elements, at least, are fairly well established on the map of wildlife holiday destinations for some of the tour operators present on this visit and for others.

This initiative reflects several things. Firstly, there is competition in this area of tourism and travel – think of how Extremadura has been marketed in recent years. Secondly, the market segment of birdwatching/wildlife holidays is relatively easy to define and approach. Thirdly, and most impressively, local guides and accommodation providers are working together in a collaboration called *Birding Aragón*. This gives a framework for marketing, including this 'fam'.

From a personal perspective, it was a welcome opportunity to return to the area and see both familiar and new places. Though there have been many Honeyguide wildlife holidays in the Spanish Pyrenees, including in recent years, the most recent of these on which I was personally a leader was in April 2002. It was high time I returned. And the chance to visit Lake Gallocanta, famous in the world of cranes, was too good to miss.

Report by Chris Durdin, Honeyguide Wildlife Holidays.  
General photos by Chris Durdin, bird photos by Richard Campey (RC) [www.onestopnature.co.uk](http://www.onestopnature.co.uk) .

Cover photos, top: Aínsa town, griffon vulture (RC).  
Bottom: Riglos.

Our main local guide, with us for the whole 'fam' trip, was Alberto Marín López [www.senderosordesa.com](http://www.senderosordesa.com). He was knowledgeable, patient and enthusiastic – especially when waxing lyrical on the geology of the Pyrenees – and speaks excellent English. He would make a good guide for any group or individual visiting the area.



Group members at Belchite; our guide Alberto Marín López, with lammergeier puppet.

We met several other birders/local guides and accommodation providers, who were all very good, and some details are noted in the text.

Peter Rich from Casa Sarasa [www.casasarasa.com](http://www.casasarasa.com) became main local guide in Hecho and Biniés Gorges near Berdún, which is slightly west of Alberto's usual patch. Peter already co-leads some Honeyguide groups, the highest recommendation!

My fellow participants: Lara Broom, Naturetrek; Bob Buckler, Wingspan Bird Tours; Richard Campey, First Flight Bird Tours; Ian Cowgill, Lanius Bird Tours; Jo Thomas, Wild About Travel.

Weather/timing: for a 'fam' trip, the timing was good for two reasons. Firstly, it's easier to find time in late autumn than in spring/summer. Secondly, it *should* be a good time to visit Gallocanta – it was just a pity that it was a dry year so there were relatively few cranes. Against that, obviously you don't see the region at its best on cold days in late November. Nonetheless, the landscapes remain impressive and there was still plenty of wildlife to see.

## DAILY DIARY

### 22 November – Zaragoza to Gallocanta

Our late afternoon arrival at Zaragoza meant that there was enough light to see that the landscape was very parched after a hot and dry summer and autumn, and that strong impression remained with us until we were in the high Pyrenees. Our drive took about 1½ hours, including a small diversion through the walled city of Daroca, bringing us to Gallocanta, which we learned means singing (or perhaps crowing) cockerel. Perhaps it should be Grullacanta – singing crane ...

The Hotel Allucant [www.allucant.com](http://www.allucant.com) – Allucant is an old name for the area, we heard – is plainly *the* place to stay for ‘craniacs’ – crane enthusiasts. There were crane pictures everywhere, an exhibition of wildlife photos and an impressive library of wildlife books. A gift of a bar of chocolate with a moulded crane was in each of our rooms. After settling in, time for appetisers, a briefing and a meal. Javier and Litzan were our hosts and they produced data sheets of recent years’ crane counts. There are regularly 20,000 cranes here in November and February, on the cranes’ way to and from Extremadura, and sometimes 50,000+. But the pattern can be less straightforward than this: there are high numbers in mid-winter on some occasions, too. However this year’s drought meant most cranes had already moved on with recent counts down to around 2,000 or 2,500. When I opened my bedroom window, just before 11pm, there was the sound of calling cranes, a good omen for tomorrow’s early start.

*Hotel Allucant notes:* six bedrooms (4 twins, 2 doubles) with en suite facilities, rooms have TV and kettle, no hair dryer, wifi. Several other rooms up a different staircase have shared bathrooms, could suit leaders/drivers for a bigger group.



Hotel Allucant; crane chocolate; hotel library.

### 23 November – Gallocanta, Belchite, Los Monegros

Aptly there was a crowing cockerel at 6am: we were up early for a 7am departure in the dark. The reason for this was to drive to a cranes’ overnight roost, ready for their departure at first light. It was darker than half-light when we arrived at a spot overlooking a reed-fringed pond, from which cranes were already moving off – perhaps 300 here this morning. That pond was a small place here where the cranes could roost with their feet in water, which they like to do to feel safe from predators. As it grew light, the pale expanse became defined as salt flats, a dried up Gallocanta Lake. Cranes here included some juvenile birds with brown heads, and we heard the occasional high-pitched ‘peeping’ call of a juvenile crane, which continues while it is dependent on its parents. We completed the circuit, ending up overlooking the salt flats by the impressive crane information / conference centre, which is just a stone’s throw from the Hotel Allucant. Rock sparrows perched on rooftops. Outside the hotel we briefly met three counters of cranes who had all done the counts for the Aragón Government for many years.



Salt flats where Lake Gallocanta should be.

After an excellent breakfast we packed and left. We made several stops in dry, steppe-like habitats with flocks of calandra larks and golden eagles on pylons. At Belchite, by now with local guide Ricardo, our picnic was on a high point overlooking the low vegetation of SEO's<sup>1</sup> reserve. This is best known for Dupont's lark, though we didn't see this today, and the backdrop was the extraordinary *meseta* (tableland) landscape.

Just beyond the river at Sastago we pulled off by the road for a short walk into a dry, rocky gulley, where we successfully found black wheatear.

The afternoon's drive was around more steppe country of Los Monegros, now with Marcos as local guide. Lesser short-toed and calandra larks moved in small flocks. Nine great bustards walked across a field in the middle distance and then in front of a huge, intensive indoor pig-rearing unit. Three then four black-bellied sandgrouse flew through (*left, RC*).



But the star bird was late in the afternoon when, just as a male hen harrier flew past, a wheatear perched on



a stone. After a little time, improving views and the results of the several long lenses, it became clear it was a vagrant desert wheatear (*right, RC*). Marcos was delighted and alerted other local birders, who re-found and photographed the bird again later. Marcos wrote to us soon after with various details, noting: "This is the second time this species has been spotted in Aragón. Last time was January 2012 near 'Salada de la Playa', only 4 kilometres south from this second sighting!"<sup>2</sup>



Great bustards walk past an intensive pig unit.

Then a long drive north, two hours or so, to our accommodations. We ate at O Chardinet da Formiga (the ant's little garden) [www.ochardinet.com](http://www.ochardinet.com) which we reached just beyond the archway entrance to the village of Charo. Three stayed here and three of us were taken by owner Miguel a short small distance to our overnight stay Casa Gerbe [www.casagerbe.com](http://www.casagerbe.com), which we were told overlooks a large reservoir. Both were charming, though as we arrived and left in the dark the short stay didn't really do them justice.

#### 24 November – Ordesa National Park

Our early departure – a 7:15 pick-up for me at Casa Gerbe – was prompted by Alberto's offer of an addition to the itinerary, namely an excursion into the high Pyrenees in Ordesa National Park. It was too good a chance to miss, even with the road taken a diversion due to roadworks. Up high we saw a Pyrenean chamois – Jo's ambition realised – on a



<sup>1</sup> SEO is the Sociedad Española de Ornitología (Spanish Ornithological Society / BirdLife Spain).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.honeyguide.co.uk/documents/MoreabouttheMonegrosDesertWheatear.pdf](http://www.honeyguide.co.uk/documents/MoreabouttheMonegrosDesertWheatear.pdf)

ridge, alpine accentor and a flock of red-billed choughs (*photo, page 8*). Our destination was a vertiginous viewpoint into the glacial canyons of Ordesa where Alberto gave an impromptu and inspirational talk on the creation and geology of the Pyrenees and how it had risen from the sea by shifting land masses, all aided by the strata and mountain shapes behind us and sketches on a not-very-white board. Flurries of snow added to the atmosphere.

Lower down, we had a gentle walk through open woodland – with firecrests – to a viewpoint at Valle de Escuaín, where Alberto showed signs us of wild boars: not the usual rootings but a small tree with bark removed by territorial rubbing. We opted for a late lunch inside Lamiana restaurant, despite the potential draw of a raptor feeding point up the hill by which there were two new small photographic hides. It was a wise decision with the cold weather and the time it took to eat three different starters and a main course, all of local produce. Lovely, but taking too much time when daylight hours were limited. We had *postres* and coffee outside as red kites and corvids came down to whatever had been put out at the raptor feeding station. Elsewhere, lammergeiers and many griffon vultures were around at various times.

We arrived at Aínsa as the sun was setting, perfect timing as the lammergeier centre opens at 5pm. Run by Fundación para la Conservación del Quebrantahuesos (FCQ), it's an impressive three-storey structure. The shop on the ground floor had lammergeier cuddly toys, fridge magnets, books<sup>3</sup> and much more, and you go up through displays and a diorama. Outside was an immature lammergeier (*right, RC*), a short-toed eagle and eagle owls, injured birds unlikely to make it back into the wild. We tried out the lammergeier puppet used for feeding chicks to avoid imprinting them on humans, these birds being raised for release in the Picos de Europa.



We had time to walk around Aínsa, a charming town, somewhat gentrified but with wonderful old buildings (see cover picture). Original features on the heavy doors including knockers in the outline shape of male genitalia; not some modern joke but an old fertility symbol.



**Eco Museo de la Fauna Pirenaico in Aínsa; lammergeier cuddlies for sale, plus a tree in a diorama to help you pretend you've seen a Tengmalms's owl ...**

Then onto our next stopping point of Albuella [www.aragonactive.com](http://www.aragonactive.com) with Lucy and Simon, who'd we'd met briefly at Zaragoza airport. Again, a delight – accommodation, food and company – and we took the chance to talk at length about what was on offer.

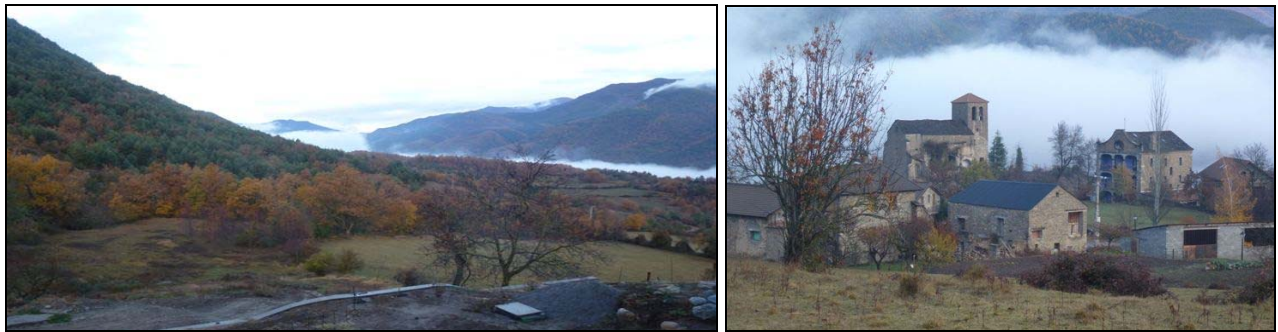
### **25 November – Albuella, Ordesa National Park**

Morning in Albuella revealed the kind of views anyone would wish to wake to, the low cloud over the Pyrenees and pre-Pyrenees lifting slowly this morning. The many birds in the garden under construction included hawfinch and siskin.

A stone's throw away was a covered *fuente* (font/fountain) which still had water, despite the drought, with tadpoles of the midwife toads that Lucy and Simon hear in spring and summer. Simon gave us a short tour around local fields and a flavour of life, buildings and history in this quiet hamlet. On one gravelly bit of path

<sup>3</sup> Several of us bought *Wildlife of the Pyrenees* by David Guixé and Toni Llobet, a compact new paperback on the subject. The mammals section includes domestic breeds, including the Pyrenean brown cattle we saw several times.

he showed us that we were walking on fossils: nummulites<sup>4</sup>, evenly sized and shaped like a minstrel chocolate. More get revealed whenever it rains.



**A misty morning in Albuella; a view over the village on our brief morning stroll.**

*Albuella notes:* seven twin/double bedrooms with en suite facilities. No kettle or hair dryer in rooms, wifi. They have their own 8+ driver minibus. An ideal venue for a small group.

We paused as we drove over the Ara River, the one and only completely natural, unmanaged river in the Spanish Pyrenees, says Alberto. There was a dipper upstream of the bridge.

Our drive took us round the edge of Jaca and chasing a rainbow while ascending the Hecho Valley where we rendezvoused for coffee with Peter Rich at the Hotel Usón [www.hoteluson.com](http://www.hoteluson.com). It was meeting of old friends for Bob and the proprietors as Bob regularly brings his groups here. The hotel was undergoing autumn upgrades and decorating but you could see the attraction of the warm welcome and the location within sight of the Boca del Infierno where the road winds through a narrow part of the gorge.

We stopped at Boca del Infierno (Hell's Mouth), where we failed to find a wallcreeper, before going farther up the Hecho Valley with Peter as our main guide now. It was cold and there was light rain high in the valley where livestock were still grazing, probably not for long now. A lammergeier and a golden eagle put in an appearance over the mountain opposite us. Dropping down, our picnic was set out in a shelter in an open area popular on summer weekends. A red squirrel scampered across the grass and we saw both marsh and coal tits before we adjourned for coffee to the adjacent bar/restaurant, outside of which a black redstart perched on a fence.

Our circuit took us through Fago Gorge before we dropped down into Biniés Gorge. Peter had hardly finished saying that it was a site for wintering wallcreeper when Lara and Bob were onto a movement on the relatively small cliff face opposite. We had excellent views, then a second, more distant bird farther down the gorge and probably a third that Jo saw fly by. Leaves of *Petrocoptis* and rosettes of Pyrenean saxifrage were in many places and there was a high-flying crag martin.



**Wallcreeper in Biniés Gorge (RC).**

We moved onto to Berdún where Peter introduced us to Melanie for a tour of the colour-themed rooms of Casa Sarasa [www.casasarsa.com](http://www.casasarsa.com). There was time to relax before dinner, or to browse the extensive library in the big living room.

<sup>4</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nummulite>



Part of Casa Sarasa, with Berdún behind.

### 25 November – Berdún, Riglos, Sotonera, return to Zaragoza

Twenty at first, then 34 griffon vultures hung low over Berdún. After breakfast and packing, Peter took us for a short tour of the town, though the vultures – joined at one point by a stooping peregrine – were certainly a distraction from stories of history, people and buildings. There was also a large flock of choughs in the fields below the village and a goldcrest in a tree in the small square on the town's edge.

It was bright though not warm at Riglos, which was busy this morning with visitors and climbers – some 30 brightly clad wall creepers ascending what are plainly regular routes up the face of the conglomerate cliffs, happily well away from the main griffon vulture nesting ledges off to our right. The pigeons seemed to have the right pattern for 'real' rock doves. A bunting, probably a rock bunting, never showed satisfactorily but the opposite was true for the hawfinch that perched well in the open not far from the nettle trees overhanging the road. After coffee in the village we drove to a point adjacent to the vulture watch point and information centre, which was closed for the winter. Here, in the nesting season, you can watch vultures on screens courtesy of a camera attached to the cliffs some years ago by our intrepid guide Alberto.

Time was now tight and it took c.30 minutes to drive south to Sotonera Reservoir where we had our picnic lunch, some distance from the water on account of the drought. We left Peter to pack up the table and remaining food as Alberto drove us to Zaragoza, where we arrived in good time for our return flight to Stansted.

### Wildlife lists

#### Mammals and amphibian

Pyrenean chamois  
Red squirrel  
Rabbit  
Pine marten, droppings  
Wild boar, signs  
Midwife toad, tadpoles

#### Notable invertebrates

Clouded yellow  
Wall brown  
Pine processionary moth tents  
Green huntsman spider (in Bob's bedroom at Casa Sarasa)

**Flowers:** only those actually in flower are noted, mostly last-lingering and/or ruderal species.

Steppes area: *Launaea pumila*, *Ononis tridentata*, *Diploaxis erucooides* white wall rocket

Pyrenees foothills: common mallow, black nightshade, greater celandine, henbit dead-nettle.

Berdún: ivy-leaved toadflax

Riglos: four o'clock plant (or marvel of Peru, *Mirabilis jalapa*), fennel, *Ononis pusilla*, *Verbascum sinuatum*, common amaranth *Amaranthus retroflexus*.

## Birds

Those in brackets were seen by other group members

Cormorant  
Great white egret  
Grey heron  
(Shelduck)  
Mallard  
Red kite  
Lammergeier  
Griffon vulture  
Marsh harrier  
Hen harrier  
Sparrowhawk  
Common buzzard  
Golden eagle  
Common kestrel  
Merlin  
Peregrine  
Red-legged partridge  
Crane  
Great bustard  
Lapwing  
Black-bellied sandgrouse  
Rock dove/feral pigeon  
Woodpigeon  
Collared dove  
Little owl  
(Hoopoe)

Iberian green woodpecker  
Great spotted woodpecker  
Crested lark  
Calandra lark  
Lesser short-toed lark  
Crag martin  
Meadow pipit  
Grey wagtail  
White wagtail  
Dipper  
Alpine accentor  
Robin  
Black redstart  
Stonechat  
Desert wheatear  
Black wheatear  
(Blue rock thrush)  
Blackbird  
(Fieldfare)  
Mistle thrush  
Dartford warbler  
Sardinian warbler  
Goldcrest  
Firecrest  
Long-tailed tit  
Marsh tit

Coal tit  
Blue tit  
Great tit  
Nuthatch  
Wallcreeper  
Iberian grey shrike  
Jay  
Magpie  
Alpine chough  
Red-billed chough  
Carrion crow  
Raven  
Spotless starling  
House sparrow  
Rock sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Serin  
Siskin  
Greenfinch  
Goldfinch  
Bullfinch  
Hawfinch  
Rock bunting ?  
Corn bunting



Red-billed choughs in Ordesa National Park (RC).