



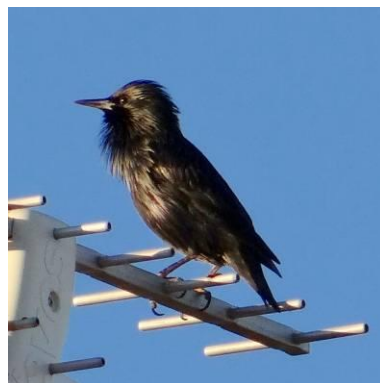
Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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La Mancha
7 – 14 October 2014

Participants

Jenny Loring
Lyn Guy
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Malcolm and Helen Crowder
John Rumpus and Rosemary Macdonald
Jane and Andrew Elliott
Gill Page
John Hollingdale and Margaret Huitson
Ann Stearns

Leaders

Pau Lucio and Chris Durdin
Report and lists by Chris Durdin

Photos edged green by Chris Durdin, edged yellow by Helen Crowder, and others by group members identified by initials, all taken on the holiday.
Cover photos clockwise: a plate of churros (JL), fly agaric (JL), spotless starling (JR), tapestry from Belmonte castle showing cheese and wine making (MC), hoverfly *Chrysotoxum intermedium* on *Seseli montanum* (HC), merenderas and windmill at Mota del Cuervo (CD), griffon vultures at the Devil's Window (CD), booted eagle at San Juan (PL), centre, view from 'El Gigante' at Mota del Cuervo (JR).



Above: Pau, centre, and the group with sculpture of Sancho Panza and windmills at Mota del Cuervo.

In Belmonte we stayed at the Hospedería Real La Beltraneja www.casonalabeltraneja.com
and in Villalba de la Sierra, the Hotel El Tablazo www.hoteltablazo.com

This holiday, as for every Honeyguide holiday, also puts something into conservation in our host country by way of a contribution to the wildlife that we enjoyed. The conservation contribution this year of £40 per person towards lammergeier protection was supplemented by gift aid and we were able to give €871 (£700) to the Grupo de Anillamiento Pit-Roig (pit-roig is the robin in Catalan) which runs bird ringing stations in Valencia. Pau described the group's work during the holiday – see account on page 8.

As at October 2014, the total for all conservation contributions through Honeyguide since 1991 was £97,378.

La Mancha Húmeda and Serranía de Cuenca Natural Park

Daily Diary

Tuesday 7 October – Valencia to Belmonte

Heavy overnight rain had more or less cleared as the Corner House Hotel contingent left for Gatwick, wondering how the staff would deal with the grumpy customer who we'd left behind. In South Terminal we were directed to zone 'haitch' with a capital H for easyJet's new 'auto bag drop'. This proved straightforward, and plainly worked as all the bags arrived as they should once we'd flown over France and the Pyrenees to arrive safely in Valencia on the Mediterranean coast of Spain. There we met Pau, completed minibus paperwork and loaded bags into our two Europcar Mercedes Vitos. It was a warm and sunny day as we drove west and we made quick progress along the A3 motorway through for the most part rather featureless landscape. An hour and a quarter later we stopped at a service station at Castillejo de Iniesta for drinks and a rather late lunch of bocadillos, toasted sandwiches or salad. Outside there were several butterflies, notably clouded yellow and Bath white, around the wayside flowers such as heliotrope and white wall rocket.

Another hour and quarter later and we were nearing Belmonte, our destination, but first we turned to enjoy the cluster of hilltop windmills that celebrate Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. It's all quite low key with a modest souvenir shop and an interesting collection of farming and rural bygonas. Several purple merenderas were bursting from the dry hillside close to the windmills, a kestrel spooked the local pigeons and of course it was a chance to take photographs.

We drove on and soon could see Belmonte Castle. In Belmonte town we were settled into the elegant rooms at our hotel, the Hospedería Real La Beltraneja, an hour or so later assembling in the interior courtyard. This hotel doesn't do evening meals so we to walked at twilight – amid the murmurs of large numbers of spotless starlings gathering to roost – to La Muralla restaurant, where we enjoyed a fine selection of local delicacies.

Wednesday 8 November – farmland near Belmonte, lagoon at Alcazar de San Juan & Belmonte Castle

After our eight o'clock breakfast at the hotel, picnics and group were in the minibus and away at 9:10. Minutes later we were turning off the main road out of Belmonte and onto a quiet area of farmland, a mixture of stubbles, vines and bare soil. We made our first stop at the edge of Monreal village where lined up on wires were rock sparrows, alongside many spotless starlings. The rock sparrows didn't stay still for long: they were constantly dropping off the wires and into weedy areas to feed, but then returned to perch in good view. This movement made them tricky to count but they were certainly in double figures and there may have been about 20 of them. From the same point we watched several tree sparrows in and on cypress trees behind a wall. Pau found a Spanish sparrow but it didn't stay on show. Just around the corner, starlings, feral pigeons and three rock sparrows had gathered on the roof of Monreal's church tower; they then scattered in response to a sparrowhawk flying through.

We made three more stops along the *Ruta de Don Quixote* that a sign said we were following, the same is true for many routes in this area. First stop was for nine little bustards foraging on dry cereal stubble. The birds seemed not at all spooked by our presence and we watched them for a long time. The next was on account of a northern wheatear, but also revealed an Iberian hare. On the final stop there was a marsh harrier over a wooded rise, our first red kite (there were several others later) and a buzzard, plus an investigation of squirting cucumber by the road side. The cucumber had a couple of orange-coloured ladybirds that like this plant; later research revealed these to be the gourd ladybird *Henosipalachna elaterii*. By now there was heat haze to contend with.

Moving on, we drove to the town of Alcazar de San Juan for coffee or beer. A complimentary *tapa*¹ of potato and mussel purée, deep-fried in a mussel shell, was enjoyed by those who ordered beer. Three-quarters of an hour later, we were at the nearby lake – *Reserva Natural Complejo Lagunar de Alcázar de San Juan* to give its official title. Here we ate our picnics, most of us birdwatching at the same time as there was so much to see. The shallow wetland, viewed through a gap in the tamarisks, was alive with birds. White storks soared in thermals over us and several flamingos, both brown juveniles and pinky adults, were in the water. Around these were hundreds of wading birds. Black-winged stilts were joined by a large avocet flock. Curlews mixed with black-tailed godwits. There were ruffs, calling greenshanks, green sandpipers and herons. Flying over us was a fabulously close pale-phase booted eagle.

There were the inevitable marsh harriers over the reedbed beyond the open water; zitting cisticolas showed briefly and Cetti's warblers gave bursts of song. Large flocks of ducks were dominated by shovelers. Ann walked out to stretch her legs and came across a fox.

¹ In Spain, a *tapa* is a lid or cover. In the early days of *tapas*, a slice of cheese or ham was placed over your drink, possibly to keep out the flies. More on <http://gospain.about.com/od/fooddrink/qt/tapasdefinition.htm>



At San Juan: white storks soaring in a thermal (PL); telescopes fixed on waders.

We walked around part of the lake's perimeter, aiming for an elevated hide. On the water's edge at one point were little stints and other small waders. Red kite again was no surprise but a single black kite was less expected. As we passed some rather leafless fennel², Helen remarked that we could look for swallowtail caterpillars, but instead there was an adult butterfly that appeared to be egg-laying. In the same place there was a red-veined darter; elsewhere there were many common darters 'in tandem' and we saw a migrant hawk. From the hide there were other wildfowl species – mallard, gadwall, teal and greylag goose – and common sandpipers, including one perching on a small, drowned tree. With such riches it was difficult to leave. Some saw a group of five griffon vultures as we returned to the minibuses.

Back in Belmonte, we all visited the castle, going in small groups or as individuals around the various numbered points of interest, armed with our device that was set to give an English-speaking commentary. Part of the tour includes a superb audio-visual presentation, in Spanish, but so well done that a sense of the several centuries of history came through, including the 20th century occasion when the movie *El Cid* was filmed here. Much of the first and second floors shows off the additions made in the 19th century, with fabulous ceilings a particularly memorable feature. Gill found a hummingbird hawkmoth trapped inside against a window, which I released through a much older upstairs toilet – a 'long-drop' through which you could see the present re-building work in progress.

After dinner, as we returned from La Muralla restaurant, a gecko scurried under the sign saying 'Cafetería' outside our hotel. Another gecko then scurried up the wall, and with care and a torch the first could still be seen tucked in behind the sign. The following morning it had gone.

Thursday 9 October – Las Tablas de Daimiel National Park

We were away sharply from Belmonte and an uneventful 90 minutes later we arrived at the *depuradora* close to Las Tablas de Daimiel National Park. From a rise, overlooking the area, it was immediately obvious that what I'd said about nowhere having as many birds as yesterday wasn't true. There weren't the waders, but instead large numbers of ducks and grebes. Most remarkable was the concentration of white-headed ducks: tricky to count but easily 100 or more, making the usual script about this species being scarce and globally-threatened seem wide of the mark. Equally numerous were little grebes and a few black-necked grebes too, looking black-and-white in comparison with the dabchicks. Shovelers were by far the commonest duck, all in nondescript or patchy eclipse plumage. A few pochards and tufted ducks were easy enough to pick out, but a couple of gadwalls and about four pintails took more effort to find. Two avocets swam on the lake and a water rail squealed from the reeds. Four spoonbills flew overhead and corn buntings moved to and fro.



Bath white (left); dusky meadow brown *Hyponephele lycaon* (right) – a surprise addition to the lists after checking photos. Features include a rather speckled underside hindwing and slightly scalloped wing edges.

² The fennel was spreading and chest-high, rather than upright and above head height. It seems to fit *Foeniculum vulgare* ssp. *piperitum* (= *Foeniculum piperitum*).



Cattle egrets following the plough.

Behind us, dozens of cattle egrets were following a ploughing tractor. The landscape was all rather dried up to find much of botanical interest, but species noted included red star-thistle, rough and spiny cocklebur growing side by side and a squirting cucumber plant that covered a remarkably large area. There were several butterflies, including Bath white, brown argus and a grizzled skipper and other invertebrates noted were fire bug and blue-winged grasshopper.

A little further on, we parked at the National Park's information centre, ideally timed for loos and picnic. We then moved the very short distance to the watermill Los Molinos de Molemocho where scores of little egrets and one great white egret were sitting in or near dead waterside trees. Carmen from the National Park's staff was there to meet us, not long after one o'clock. She showed us round the combined museum and restored watermill, answering many questions on how the mechanics of the flour milling process worked, powered by water. The area's protection as a wetland started on account of the king's enthusiasm for duck hunting here in the 19th century but now it is fully protected and recovering from a period of excessive water abstraction.

We returned to the visitor centre and set out over small islands and along boardwalks taking us over open water and through the reeds. It was quieter for birds here; relatively few ducks but there were a few waders, namely a snipe, greenshank and couple of black-winged stilts. Two more great white egrets were on distant reed edges. A sheltered corner held a group of wintering chiffchaffs. The walk's end was a roofed viewing platform from where sharp-eyed Helen picked up a distant osprey, then Jenny pointed out an overflying hoopoe. The building itself had large numbers of funnel-web spiders' webs under its eaves, and on fascias and walls there were the miniature mortar homes of potter wasps.

Retracing our steps we took the little detour to the 'acclimatisation' lagoon. Andrew and Jane were ahead of the main group's arrival and had fixed a telescope on a kingfisher inside the netted enclosure. Ducks awaiting the reintroduction process included marbled ducks, red-crested pochards and ferruginous ducks, plus a collection of wintering wildfowl species. The eclipse plumage ducks were rather outshone by the partially-trapped kingfisher: only partially trapped as we could see an entrance slot through which presumably it came.

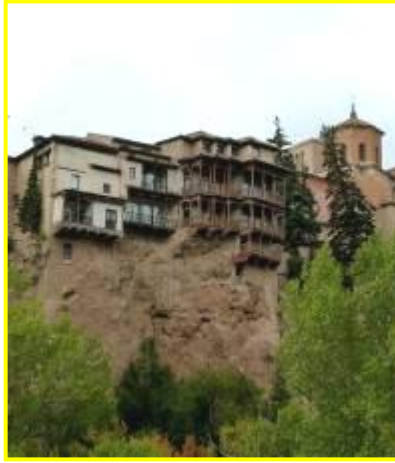
We left at 4:30 and were back at base just after six o'clock. John and Margaret walked the short distance to one of Belmonte's two fine squares and found a grayling. After checklists we returned to La Muralla restaurant for the third and final time and enjoyed another selection of local foods; the cheese and quince jelly salad was now up to six plates for the table and several enjoyed the 'fried milk' pudding.

Friday 10 November – travel to Serranía de Cuenca Natural Park

As we loaded up after breakfast for the journey to Villalba de la Sierra it was drizzling slightly, and continued most of the morning, gradually getting heavier. Yesterday evening Pau had gone out to find great bustards on local farmland, in our direction of travel, word about which had reached him from a local farmer via Anna at the hotel. However for these we were out of luck: they had evidently moved. But we did find several Thekla larks on rocky piles along the quiet farm road and a flock of 42 little bustards, their snow bunting-like wing patterning making them obvious in flight even at a distance, before they dropped out of sight in a field.

After an informal loo stop at a derelict petrol station we then made the official comfort break at a café, parking under two horse chestnut trees under which the conker crop was vast and uncollected. We enjoyed a plate of churros with coffees; several group members bought local produce and I learnt that last night's football had finished Slovakia 2 Spain 1 (with England's victory over San Marino a footnote in comparison to Spain's defeat). The planned picnic in the field was impractical in by now heavy rain, so after refuelling minibuses we pressed on towards the Serranía de Cuenca. The weather was easing somewhat as we passed golden-yellow autumnal poplars on the approaches to El Tablazo hotel, where we found our rooms and ate picnics in the lounge/TV room. Outside, a grey wagtail settled on one of the pontoons on the trout lake.

The afternoon's excursion was an addition to the itinerary: a visit to the city of Cuenca, capital of the province. The minibuses wiggled through the streets and by following the signs to the *Auditorio* we entered a small underground car park. The main purpose of the visit was to see the astonishing architectural spectacle of the 'hanging houses' in the old part of the city. Cuenca is built on the edge of a gorge and the city's edge is an amazing sight, including some properties that seem to lean over the cliff edge, last remaining examples of this type of building. No wonder it's a World Heritage Site.



At Cuenca – above: botanising near the suspension bridge (AE); 'hanging houses, built over a rock above the Huécar River gorge in the 15th century'; an unusual bartsia *Odontites longiflorus*.

Left: those who shunned a second bridge experience sought any available shelter during a torrential downpour.

A great bonus was a lot of natural history interest, helped by the rain having stopped. The special flora of the Serranía started here, with the first big rock supporting rock-clinging dwarf buckthorn *Rhamnus pumilus*; *Potentilla caulescens* (albeit no longer in flower) and *Sarcocapnos enneaphylla*, an unusual member of the poppy family known locally as *boca de dragón* or dragon's mouth. Our first griffon vulture drifted overhead, then another and soon there was a steady stream. Three red-billed choughs perched and foraged on the cliff, one of them hassled by a magpie that seemed to be hoping to steal a meal. Back at ground level was another flower in none of our books: detective work back in the UK revealed it was the rather local bartsia *Odontites longiflorus*.

We botanised and birdwatched walking up the hill, then crossed the somewhat vertiginous St. Paul footbridge across the chasm. The bridge was decorated by scores of 'love locks': padlocks inscribed with two names, fixed to the ironwork and the key thrown away, supposedly symbolising an everlasting bond. A small wedding group was among those taking photographs. Over the bridge and onto the remains of an ancient Arab fortress, our eyes were caught by a party of long-tailed tits before we delved into the narrow streets. Many of

the group walked down through the old streets to make a circuit and get a feel for the place – and perhaps to avoid having to cross the bridge again. Gill and I looked into the cathedral, particularly enjoying its modern stained glass windows, and were with those retracing the route across the bridge and down. Everyone safely gathered by the car park at 5:30 and half an hour later we were back at El Tablazo hotel for dinner.

Saturday 11 October – Serranía de Cuenca Natural Park: Ventano del Diablo, Laguna de Uña, Huélamo

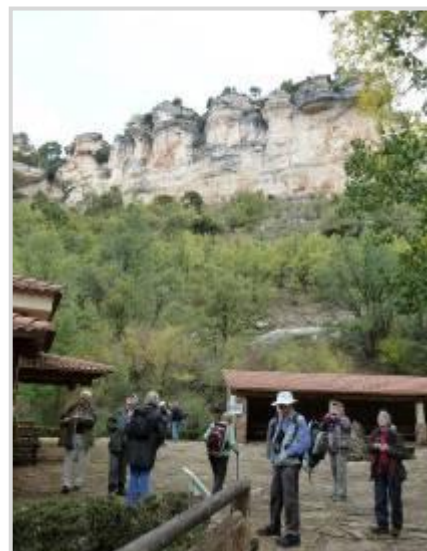


Rock bunting at Ventano del Diablo (JL).

It was only just getting light as eight o'clock approached and many of us gathered overlooking the hotel's trout lake. The grey wagtail was there and there were at least half a dozen medium-sized bats around the tree tops. Pau picked up a dead signal crayfish on the path: an invasive alien here as elsewhere, albeit a popular prey item for local otters. We walked a little way through the nearby wood where there were several chiffchaffs, a great spotted woodpecker and a few other woodland birds.

First stop was after a short drive to Ventano del Diablo, the Devil's Window viewpoint. Immediately there was a crowd of crag martins in the air and moving round us. Across the gorge on the nearest prominent crag were three griffon vultures, later joined by two others; there were more on the cliffs below and in the sky above, with more griffons moving on the stronger air currents as the morning warmed.

Close below, a rock bunting appeared and teased us as it moved from bush to bush over the path to the viewpoint, joined in much the same area by a fine male black redstart. There was curry plant, Montpellier maple and barberry near the short walk to the Devil's Window itself. Returning to the car park, weekend visitors were building up, both sightseers and a group struggling into tight wet suits ready to swim in the River Júcar that runs through the gorge. No-one was tempted by the stall selling colourful pots.

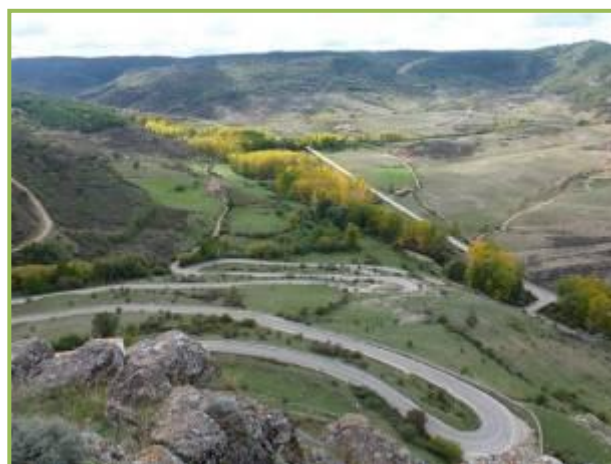


Uña lagoon with its stunning backdrop of limestone cliffs (JL)
and the start of the walk behind the lake and into Uña village (MC).

Next stop was the Laguna de Uña, where we first took in a superb view over the well-vegetated lake and especially the broad sweep of the limestone cliffs beyond. A couple of cormorants were drying wings alongside half a dozen grey herons; water rail, little grebe and Cetti's warbler called and a handful of coots moved in and out of the reeds. We drove a little further along the lakeside and parked by the *Escuela de Pesca* – fish school – which was closed, but marked the start of the walk around the back of the lagoon. The woods held several noisy nuthatches; we heard a firecrest and a short-toed tree creeper but neither showed well. Up with the many griffons, two Bonelli's eagles appeared, both adult birds so presumably a pair, and as we were looking up two ravens and a peregrine were also picked out. It was sunny enough for butterflies to be showing, notably a bright Adonis blue, grayling, grizzled skipper and clouded yellow, with additional flashes of colour from many blue-winged grasshoppers. John H turned a rock and revealed pale springtails, and further invertebrate interest was provided by what seemed to be a freshly-emerged and very tame common darter.

The circuit took us to Uña village where Bar Zaballos was ideal for pre-lunch coffee. Pau and I retrieved the minibuses and we had picnics by the wall overlooking Uña lake. Our getaway was delayed by the arrival of two forest guards to talk to Pau. He had successfully applied for a licence to catch and release butterflies for ID purposes, and this was so unusual it had prompted interest and checks into what we had in mind. Apparently we were the first ever overseas wildlife group in the Serranía de Cuenca.

We moved on to the red-roofed hill village of Huélamo, where we walked up through pretty streets and past the tiny bullring where some lads were kicking a football, then onto the rocky outcrop that rises above the village and gives it such a distinctive setting. On the slopes below we found curl buntings and what were probably yellowhammers, though they didn't show so well. There were also black redstarts, white wagtails, a chiffchaff and a blackcap. Most of the group made it to the viewpoint at the top of the rock, from which the course of the River Júcar stood out by the yellow of autumn poplars.



Views of and from Huélamo.

Returning to the bullring, people were gathering and a cattle truck had just arrived. The truck was going about the difficult process of reversing into the bullring with no space to spare, then manoeuvring with a view to dropping some young bulls into a holding area. Luck had meant we were in Huélamo on one of the very few occasions when this pocket handkerchief-sized bullring was to be used for a down-scaled bullfight. Among the group, this provoked curiosity into the community occasion and the practicalities of what was to come later that afternoon, and strong disapproval. It was time to move on and return to El Tablazo, where several took a short walk to the water wheel on the adjacent River Júcar.

Sunday 12 October – Serranía de Cuenca: río Cuervo and Los Callejones

Lightning and thunder in the night had cleared by first light when the pre-breakfast contingent gathered by the trout lake and walked along the local lane to the bridge over the river. A thornapple was a notable plant and there was lots of green amaranth, another alien.



Red squirrel (PB) and some of the massive limestone structures at Los Callejones.

We set out minus Andrew and Jane, who'd caught the cold I brought on the holiday. It was a distinctly cooler morning as we arrived at our first stop in the Serranía de Cuenca, a walk to the source of the river Cuervo – *Nacimiento del río Cuervo* as the signs say. We'd

already moved from black pine country to Scots pine dominated hillsides as we drove, and we walked through more Scots pine here alongside streams, past mossy waterfalls and eventually to the spring that is said to be the river's start. A highlight of the walk was a red squirrel that showed quite well in the pines, and it had particularly splendid ear tufts. We also had a good view of a firecrest, a few crested tits, our first coal tits and short-toed treecreeper. Botanically it was uninteresting, apart from a last-lingering chalk milkwort and a large spreading *Juniperus sabine*. However Pau's knowledge of fungi, edible and otherwise, is impressive, and we found several species. One of these was *Lactarius deliciosus* – John R found us the English name of saffron milkcap – that grows under pines. Plates of these fungi were served as part of the dinner menu later, back at El Tablazo.

Coffee was in the café across the road from the *Nacimiento del río Cuervo* car park where the open fire was popular. Luckily we arrived ahead of a large coach party of retired Spaniards – and one Mancunian lady – from Granada. We left them to their lunch and had ours on the picnic tables by the car park. We'd nearly finished as it started to rain, but that cleared as we drove towards Los Callejones of Las Majadas. Taking care to keep together as a group – it's all too easy to get lost here – we moved in and out of the impressive limestone structures, some worn into shapes like mushrooms by rainwater through the ages, which provided shelter from the cold wind. Another forest guard appeared to quiz Pau about his butterfly netting licence and what his English group was going to do, which on the one hand is very thorough but also odd from our perspective as we still hadn't got out a net all week and the onset of cold weather had knocked that idea on the head.

It wasn't a place for showy flowers in autumn, but with some searching there were botanical treasures. We deduced that tiny leaf rosettes, some with seedpods above them, were the whitlow-grass *Draba dedeana*. There were lots of the rock-hugging dwarf buckthorn *Rhamnus pumilus*, sometimes alongside patches of the leaves of creeping globularia. There were a few chaenorhinum flowers and also some shrubby white cinquefoils (*Potentilla caulescens*) had flowers, though mostly the latter species had seedheads.

After wildlife checklists, and before dinner, Pau explained about the work of his local bird ringing group in the Valencia area, Grupo de Anillamiento Pit-Roig, which this holiday's conservation contribution supported. In August and September 2014, they ringed, weighed and measured 2084 birds, including 935 reed warblers, 192 Cetti's warblers, 148 moustached warblers, 147 bluethroats (two were re-traps of birds first ringed in France and the Netherlands) and 133 Savi's warblers. The number of birds underlines the value of these coastal wetlands, both for resident birds (e.g. Cetti's warbler) but especially as refuelling stations for migrants (e.g. reed warblers, one of which was first ringed in Slovakia). Highlights in this period included two of the globally threatened aquatic warbler and a kingfisher first ringed in the Czech Republic.

Dinner tonight included rainbow trout from the hotel's lake.

Monday 13 October – Serranía de Cuenca, Beteta Gorge area

We headed north along the western edge of the Natural Park. After about a quarter of the journey, we drove past a remarkable concentration of rock sparrows. The birds were on telegraph wires above a mixed area of stony, rough grassland and arable, the latter including unharvested sunflowers. We had already heard from Pau that a poor harvest meant much of the sunflower crop had been abandoned. The first group of rock sparrows were about 90 strong then there were at least four other flocks of that size or bigger: easily 500 birds in the area, and probably closer to a thousand. On the return journey there was a single flock of about 250 rock sparrows and just one other small group that was immediately obvious as we drove.

It looked like being another wet and chilly day, but happily the rain had stopped by the time we reached the Hoz de Beteta, an hour after setting out. It's an impressive gorge, and we started by walking left on the signed path, which took us through the wood under one of the cliffs. This took us to a wooden walkway from where we could see the basal rosettes of one of the rarest plants of the area, the butterwort *Pinguicula mundi*, which occurs only in the Serranía de Cuenca and in one other Spanish mountain range. There were scores of the yellowy-green leaf rosettes of these in the most unpromising of conditions, namely growing in damp patches on the cliff-face where water was seeping. There was also more of the dragon's mouth *Sarcocapnos enneaphylla* that we'd seen at Cuenca, and a patch of leaves against the bottom of the cliff with a few remaining white, stitchwort-type flowers: later research points to an ID of the rather local sandwort *Moehringia intricata* subsp. *castellana*.



Butterwort *Pinguicula mundi*; dragon's mouth *Sarcocapnos enneaphylla*; swallowtail butterfly caterpillar.

We retraced our steps and went in the opposite direction from the parking area. This took us down some steep stone steps to an easier walk parallel to the River Guadiela through deciduous woodland in which there were obvious areas of wild boar rootings. Gill had a good view of a firecrest, and new plants included scorpion senna and wild service tree. There were many gone-over orchids, helleborines of differing types, and fine large-leaved lime trees. This path took us to a view over the cliffs opposite where, in the right season, griffon vultures nest, and today there were 13 up there, sitting around and occasionally stretching out their wings. Back at the minibuses Jenny had found a curious flower that turned out to be red hemp-nettle, plus a plump swallowtail caterpillar.

Not far on, we had drinks in the pretty mountain town of Beteta. It was interesting to see how those who ordered beer rather than coffee were also provided with *tapas* of tortilla. We ate our picnics sitting on the benches in the small *Plaza Mayor* – main square – outside the bar, then moved on to the lake Laguna de El Tobar. There weren't many birds on this mountain lake, just a great crested grebe, a single cormorant and coot and moorhen moving in and out of the reeds. We had a short walk though *causse*-type habitat, in which it was hard work to find much of interest this late in the season, but not entirely fruitless as we found the snapdragon *Antirrhinum pulverulentum* in flower, patches of bearberry, dodder, and a dead Montpellier snake.

Our final walk was along the edge of very open woodland of mixed black and Scots pine, which was remarkable in itself as we noted yesterday that the transition zone from black to Scots pine as you gained altitude was incredibly brief. Three crested tits moved through one pine and onto the trunk of another; some in the group were able to see a green woodpecker, though it was a bit distant to make out the differences of the Iberian *sharppei* subspecies – or new species, in some books. The short walk took us to a spring that is another river's *Nacimiento* (birthplace), in this case the River Guadiela. Then it rained so we retreated to the minibuses, which were parked where there were several golden-yellow Spanish oyster plants in the edge of an arable field. Two red deer slipped quietly out of sight in the pine woods alongside the track shortly after we set off.



Autumn colours at
Laguna de El Tobar (MC) and
Antirrhinum pulverulentum.

Back at the Hotel El Tablazo the final evening meal included pigs' cheeks (delicious!) and profiteroles, over which we exchanged holiday highlights.

Tuesday 14 October – to Valencia and home

An early breakfast at 7:30 and we left at 8:30 sharp in the pouring rain that continued until we'd crossed the border into Valencia region. Otherwise the journey was smooth, taking two and half hours, including re-fuelling near the airport. We said goodbye to Pau in the Europcar area in the underground car park opposite the terminal, and the rest of the journey back to Gatwick was straightforward.

The best bits

Towards the end of our final evening meal at El Tablazo we shared our holiday highlights. Lowlights of getting a cold, and rain on the final two days, were mentioned – but moving swiftly on to the best memories of the holiday ...

John R	The food at the restaurant La Muralla in Belmonte; the depuradora; Los Callejones.
Rosemary	The red squirrel.
Jenny	Cuenca gorge; colours and textures from the Devil's Window viewpoint around the jade-coloured river.
Andrew	Griffon vultures; the kingfisher at Las Tablas de Daimiel MP that kept returning to the same perch.
Jane	Wonderful guides; the contrasts in the holiday.
John H	Storks wheeling overhead at San Juan lagoon.
Margaret	Merenderas; and the use of telescopes, which was appreciated.
Gill	The depuradora with white-headed ducks; the variety of things we saw and did; wonderful views and autumn colours.
Lyn	Booted eagle; colours in the rocks in Beteta Gorge; the tame robin in the woods by the Rio Cuervo birthplace.
Helen	Finding a close group of little bustards; walking through medieval Cuenca; the Devil's Window rock bunting and scenery.
Malcolm	Little bustards; duck species on the island at Las Tablas; Devil's Window; the sight of Ann running full pelt across the bridge at Cuenca and scattering a wedding party.
Peter	Windmills; booted eagle.
Sue	The group, especially seeing Ann enjoy the holiday; kingfisher; butterwort.
Ann	Being able to see with Chris's spare binoculars; the swallowtail caterpillar.
Pau	Wonderful group; Bonelli's eagles at Uña.
Chris	Wetland birds and the booted eagle at San Juan lagoon; red-veined darter; Cuenca; the mix of wildlife at Uña lagoon with butterflies, dragonflies and Bonelli's eagles, raven and peregrine up with the griffons in beautiful scenery with a café at the walk's end – very Honeyguide!

WILDLIFE LISTS

BIRDS

References here to NPs are Las Tablas de Daimiel National Park and Serranía de Cuenca Natural Park.

Little grebe	Wetlands in both NPs, including c100 at the depuradora.
Great crested grebe	Wetlands in both NPs.
Black-necked grebe	About 5 at the depuradora.
Cormorant	Wetlands in both NPs.
Cattle egret	Las Tablas de Daimiel NP, with c.100 following the plough at the depuradora.
Little egret	Las Tablas de Daimiel NP, c.50 near the watermill.
Great white egret	3 at Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
Grey heron	Seen on 4 days.
White stork	c.100 at San Juan lagoon.
Spoonbill	5 at San Juan lagoon.
Greater flamingo	20 at San Juan lagoon and 10 at the depuradora.
Greylag goose	San Juan lagoon.
Gadwall	20, San Juan lagoon; 10 depuradora.
Teal	At both San Juan lagoon and the depuradora.
Mallard	Seen every day, including a small flock around El Tablazo hotel.
Pintail	4, depuradora.
Shoveler	Several hundred in moult at San Juan lagoon; 100+ at the depuradora.
(Marbled duck)	Captive birds awaiting release in Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
(Red-crested pochard)	Captive birds awaiting release in Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
Pochard	San Juan lagoon and the depuradora.
(Ferruginous duck)	Captive birds awaiting release in Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
Tufted duck	A few among the other ducks at the depuradora.
White-headed duck	c. 100 at the depuradora. Also captive birds awaiting release in Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
Black kite	One late migrant at San Juan lagoon.
Red kite	c. 5 seen at various places on 8 October.
Griffon vulture	6 at San Juan lagoon; common in Serranía de Cuenca NP including many over Cuenca.
Buzzard	Seen on four days.
Marsh harrier	San Juan lagoon and depuradora.
Sparrowhawk	Over La Beltraneja hotel, scattering the local spotless starling flock, and at Monreal.
Booted eagle	A pale phase bird low over San Juan lagoon.
Bonelli's eagle	Two at Uña lake.
Buzzard	Seen on four days.
Osprey	One in Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
Common kestrel	Seen on 5 days.
Peregrine	Uña lake and Beteta gorge.
Red-legged partridge	Flying birds as we drove on farmland around Belmonte.
Moorhen	Las Tablas de Daimiel NP and Tobar lake.
Coot	Depuradora.
Water rail	Heard on 3 days: San Juan lagoon, the depuradora and Uña lake.
Little bustard	9 on arable near Belmonte, and a flock of 42 in a different area.
Great bustard	Pau saw a group one evening on arable near Belmonte, but they'd gone when the group returned the following morning.
Black-winged stilt	A big group at San Juan lagoon.
Avocet	A big group at San Juan lagoon.
Little ringed plover	San Juan lagoon.
Lapwing	San Juan lagoon.
Little stint	4, San Juan lagoon.
Dunlin	San Juan lagoon.
Ruff	c.10 at San Juan lagoon.
Snipe	Depuradora.
Common sandpiper	2, San Juan lagoon.
Green sandpiper	3, San Juan lagoon.
Wood sandpiper	One, San Juan lagoon.
Curlew	A small group at San Juan lagoon.
Redshank	One, San Juan lagoon.
Greenshank	3, San Juan lagoon and Las Tablas de Daimiel NP, mostly heard.
Black-headed gull	San Juan lagoon and Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
Lesser black-backed gull	3, Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.

Common tern	One, San Juan lagoon.
Feral pigeon	Seen most days.
Woodpigeon	Seen on 4 days.
Collared dove	Seen on 4 days.
Tawny owl	Heard from La Beltraneja hotel.
Kingfisher	Great views inside the wildfowl enclosure at Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
Hoopoe	One, Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
Iberian green woodpecker	Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Great spotted woodpecker	Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Crested lark	Recorded on 4 days.
Thekla lark	Several on rough ground near Belmonte.
Woodlark	Heard at Ventano del Diablo.
Skylark	A few on arable near Belmonte.
Crag martin	A group at Ventano del Diablo viewpoint.
Swallow	Seen on 3 days, including near Valencia airport before our return flight.
House martin	Recorded on the 3 rd day in La Mancha Húmeda
Meadow pipit	Recorded on 2 days.
Grey wagtail	Daily at El Tablazo and elsewhere in Serranía de Cuenca NP.
White wagtail	Recorded on 5 days.
Yellow wagtail	One flew past at the depuradora.
Wren	Recorded on 3 days, all in Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Robin	Recorded on 3 days, all in Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Black redstart	Good view at Ventano del Diablo viewpoint; Húelamo.
Whinchat	On farmland near Monreal.
Stonechat	Recorded on 2 days.
Northern wheatear	Several on farmland near Monreal.
Blackbird	Almost daily.
Song thrush	A wintering bird recorded on one day in Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Mistle thrush	A group of 5 flying through in Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Cetti's warbler	Seen or heard on 5 days.
Fan-tailed warbler (Zitting cisticola)	On 2 days, seen at San Juan lagoon and the depuradora.
Sardinian warbler	Near Belmonte on just one day.
Blackcap	Winter birds on 2 days in Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Chiffchaff	Recorded on 5 days, c10 in Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
Firecrest	Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Blue tit	Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Great tit	Recorded on 5 days in a range of habitats and heights.
Crested tit	Seen on two days in Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Coal tit	River Cuervo.
Long-tailed tit	Daily in Serranía de Cuenca NP, also at Las Tablas de Daimiel NP.
Nuthatch	Seen daily in Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Short-toed treecreeper	Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Jay	Mostly Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Magpie	Recorded daily.
Chough	3 at Cuenca; also at Ventano del Diablo.
Jackdaw	Recorded on 4 days.
Carrion crow	Recorded almost daily.
Raven	2 days in Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Spotless starling	Flocks in various places, and a big roost in Belmonte.
House sparrow	Recorded on 5 days.
Spanish sparrow	One in farmland near Belmonte.
Tree sparrow	4 in Monreal village.
Rock sparrow	Large flocks on arable in lower parts of Serranía de Cuenca.
Chaffinch	Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Serin	A small group in Tobar village, Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Goldfinch	Recorded on 5 days.
Linnet	Recorded on 2 days.
Yellowhammer	Probably at Huélamo, though the views were not conclusive.
Cirl bunting	Huélamo.
Rock bunting	One showing well at Ventano del Diablo; also elsewhere in Serranía de Cuenca NP.
Corn bunting	At San Juan lagoon.

Mammals

Mole (hills – presumably Iberian mole)
Fox

Iberian hare
Otter (spraint)

Rabbit
Wild boar (rootings)

Red squirrel
Red deer



These seed-filled droppings were on the path at the start of the Laguna de Uña walk, probably deposited by a stone (beech) marten.



The gecko which squeezed behind the 'Cafetería' sign at the Belmonte hotel as we returned from dinner, caught in the camera flash.

Reptiles

Moorish gecko

Iberian wall lizard

Montpellier snake (dead)

Butterflies and moths

Separated into lists for La Mancha Húmeda and Serranía de Cuenca, though the latter is a short list as we had only one day with weather suitable for butterflies.

La Mancha Húmeda

Swallowtail
Large white Small white Bath white Clouded yellow
Brown argus Adonis blue Common blue
Painted lady
Grayling Dusky meadow brown Speckled wood
Grizzled skipper Mallow skipper

Serranía de Cuenca

Swallowtail – caterpillar
Clouded yellow
Adonis blue
Grayling Speckled wood Wall brown
Grizzled skipper
Hummingbird hawkmoth
Pine processionary moth (tents)



L to r: potter wasp *Eumenes* sp. at its nest on the car park wall of the visitor centre at Las Tablas de Daimiel National Park; red-veined darter at San Juan lagoon (JL); gourd ladybird on squirting cucumber flower at farmland near Belmonte.

Other notable invertebrates

Signal crayfish (dead)
Blue-winged grasshopper
Wood cricket probably *Nemobius sylvestris*
Common wasp
Potter wasp *Eumenes* sp.
Robin's pincushion, caused by a gall wasp *Diplolepis rosae*
Hoverfly *Chrysotoxum intermedium*

Common Darter
Red-veined Darter
Migrant Hawker
7-spot ladybird
Gourd ladybird *Henosipalachna elaterii*
Fire bug *Pyrrhocis apterus*
Shield bug *Nezera viridula* (on thornapple)

PLANTS

Numbers on the right refer to Blamey & Grey-Wilson, *Mediterranean Wild Flowers*. Others are in Polunin's *Flowers of South-West Europe*, though some of these from the Serranía de Cuenca Natural Park are easier to see in Blamey & Grey-Wilson *Alpine Flowers*. A few are from floras from northern Europe and others are IDs from internet references. Some with question marks are tentative IDs, some with fairly distinctive leaves but plants not in flower.

Trees noted were not in flower, naturally, and the list is certainly incomplete.

Planted trees are noted when of special interest.

Common northern European plants e.g. shepherd's purse, are not usually noted.

P = planted, NiF = not in flower.

SPERMATOPHYTA – Conifers			
Pinaceae – pine family			
<i>Pinus pinea</i>	stone/umbrella pine	3	
<i>Pinus nigra</i>	black pine	4	
<i>Pinus pinaster</i>	maritime pine	5	
<i>Pinus sylvestris</i>	Scots pine		
Cupressaceae – cypress family			
<i>Juniperus communis</i>	common juniper	13	
<i>Juniperus oxycedrus</i>	prickly juniper (shrub)	17	
<i>Juniperus sabine</i>	Savin (low, spreading)	15	Polunin
<i>Juniperus thurifera</i>	Spanish juniper (tree)	16	Polunin
ANGIOSPERMS			
Moraceae – mulberry family			
<i>Ficus carica</i>	fig	42	
Salicaceae – willow family			
<i>Populus tremulus</i>	aspen		
Corylaceae – hazel family			
<i>Corylus avellana</i>	hazel		
Fagaceae – oaks			
<i>Quercus coccifera</i>	holly/prickly/kermes oak	24	
<i>Quercus rotundifolia</i>	Holm oak	26	
<i>Quercus faginea</i>		30	
Urticaceae – nettle family			
<i>Parietaria judaica</i>	pellitory of the wall	50	
Loranthaceae – mistletoe			
<i>Viscum album</i>	mistletoe (on pine)		
subsp. <i>austriacum</i>			
Chenopodiaceae – goosefoot family			
<i>Sueda vera</i>	shrubby seablite	94	
<i>Salsola vermiculata</i>	a saltwort	104	
Amaranthaceae – amaranths			
<i>Amaranthus hybridus</i>	green amaranth	107	
Caryophyllaceae – pinks			
<i>Moehringia intricata</i>	a sandwort		
subsp. <i>castellana</i>			
Ranunculaceae – buttercup family			
<i>Helleborus foetidus</i>	stinking hellebore NiF	202	
<i>Clematis vitalba</i>	traveller's joy	206	
<i>Hepatica nobilis</i>	hepatica (leaves)		Alpine flora
Berberidaceae – barberry family			
<i>Berberis</i> sp.	barberry		
Papaveraceae – poppy family			
<i>Sarcocapnos enneaphylla</i>	dragon's mouth		Polunin 279a
<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>	common poppy	283	
Brassicaceae (Cruciferae) – cabbage family			
<i>Diplotaxis erucoides</i>	white wall rocket		Polunin 358
<i>Nasturtium officinale</i>	watercress NiF		
<i>Draba dedeana</i>	a whitlow-grass NiF		
Crassulaceae			
<i>Umbilicus rupestris</i>	Navelwort NiF	396	

Rosaceae – rose family			
<i>Crataegus mongyna</i>	hawthorn	420	
<i>Prunus spinosa</i>	blackthorn	424	
<i>Potentilla caulescens</i>	shrubby white cinquefoil/ lax potentilla		Alpine flora or Polunin 447
<i>Amelanchier ovalis</i>	Amelanchier/ snowy mespilus (in fruit)		Alpine flora
<i>Rubus discolor</i>	a bramble (labelled at Los Callejones)		
? <i>Sanguisorba rupicola</i>	rock burnet	NiF	
<i>Sorbus</i> sp.	whitebeam		
<i>Sorbus torminalis</i>	wild service tree		
Fabiaceae (Leguminosae) – pea family			
<i>Cercis siliquastrum</i>	Judas tree P	430	
<i>Ononis natrix</i>	large yellow restharrow	556	
<i>Ononis ornithopoides</i>		559	
<i>Medicago sativa</i>	lucerne/alfalfa	596	
<i>Coronilla emerus</i>	scorpion senna (seed pods)	693	
<i>Erinacea anthyllis</i>	a hedgehog broom blue-violet NiF		Polunin 515
Geraniaceae – cranesbills			
<i>Geranium robertianum</i>	herb Robert	747	
Zygophyllaceae – caltrop family			
<i>Tribulus terrestris</i>	Maltese cross/small caltrops	768	
Euphorbiaceae – spurges			
? <i>Euphorbia nicaeensis</i>	NiF	811	
Polygalaceae – milkworts			
<i>Polygala calcarea</i>	chalk milkwort		
Anacardiaceae – pistacio family			
<i>Pistacia terebinthus</i>	terebinth (in fruit)	861	
Buxaceae – box family			
<i>Buxus sempervirens</i>	box	878	
Rhamnaceae – buckthorn family			
<i>Rhamnus pumilus</i>	dwarf buckthorn		Alpine flora
Malvaceae – mallow family			
<i>Malva sylvestris</i>	common mallow	898	
Cistaceae – rockrose family			
<i>Cistus ladanifer</i>	gum cistus NiF	971	
Tamaricaceae – tamarix			
<i>Tamarix canariensis</i>	tamarix	1018	
Cucurbitaceae			
<i>Ecballium elaterium</i>	Squirting or devil's cucumber pepinillo or pepino del diablo in Spanish	1032	
Cornaceae – dogwoods			
<i>Cornus sanguinea</i>	dogwood (in fruit)		
Umbelliferae / Apiaceae – carrot family			
<i>Eryngium campestre</i>	field eryngo	1081	
<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>	fennel	1108	
ssp. <i>piperitum</i>			

Umbelliferae / Apiaceae – carrot family (cont'd)

Bupleurum falcatum sickle-leaved hare's ear 1125
Seseli montanum

Plumaginaceae – thrift family

Limonium sp. a sea-lavender (a difficult group!)

Ericaceae – heath family

Arctostaphylos bearberry Alpine
uva-ursi (in fruit) flora

Araliaceae – ivy family

Hedera helix ivy

Lentibulariaceae – butterworts

Pinguicula mundi a butterwort NiF

Rubiaceae – bedstraw family

Rubia peregrina wild madder (in fruit) 1305

Aceraceae – maple family

Acer Montpellier maple 856
monspessulanum

Aquifoliaceae – holly family

Ilex aquifolium holly

Tiliaceae – lime tree family

Tilia platyphyllos large-leaved lime

Oleaceae

Olea europaea olive P 1248

Apocynaceae – oleander family

Nerium oleander oleander P 1256

Convolvulaceae – bindweed family

Cuscuta epithymum common dodder 1311

Boraginaceae – borage family

Heliotropium heliotrope 1341

europaeum

Buglossoides purple gromwell 1348

purpureocaerula

Echium plantagineum purple viper's
 bugloss 1383

Verbenaceae – verbena family

Verbena officinalis vervain 1418

Lamiaceae (Labiatae) – mint family

? *Marrubium supinum* a horehound NiF

Rosmarinus officinalis rosemary 1526

Lavandula angustifolia common lavender 1532

Mentha longifolia horse mint Alpine flora

Galeopsis angustifolia red hemp-nettle

Sideritis sp.

Solanaceae – potato family

Solanum nigrum black nightshade 1563

Solanum dulcamara bittersweet

Datura stramonium thornapple 1575

Scrophulariaceae

Antirrhinum pulverulentum Polunin
 1197f

Chaenorhinum chaenorhinum Alpine
organifolium flora

Verbascum thapsus great mullein 1597

Verbascum sinuatum 1601

Odontites longiflorus Polunin
 1240a

Globulariaceae – globularia family

Globularia repens creeping Polunin
 globularia NiF 1263a

Caprifoliaceae – honeysuckle family

Sambucus ebulus dwarf elder/ 1710

danewort (in fruit)

Lonicera xylosteum fly honeysuckle NiF

Dipsacaceae – teasel/scabious family

Scabiosa mournful widow 1749

atropurpurea

Asteraceae (Compositae) – daisy family

Erigeron acer blue fleabane 1798

Helicryum stoechas curry plant 1824

Pilosella officinarum mouse-ear hawkweed

Dittrichia viscosa sticky fleabane 1842

Xanthium strumarium rough cocklebur 1852

Xanthium spinosum spiny cocklebur 1853

Onopordum cotton thistle 1975

acanthium

Volutaria lippii volutaria 1987

Centaurea calcitrapa red star-thistle 1990

Centaurea solstitialis yellow star-thistle 1994

Carthamus lanatus 2012

Scolymus hispanicus Spanish oyster plant 2020

Cichorium intybus chicory 2023

Jasione glutinosa rock tea (in seed)

Andryala ragusina (felt grey-leaves, 2083
 yellow flowers)



L to r: the unusual whitlow-grass *Draba dedeana* at Los Callejones, rosettes and seed heads;
 Spanish oyster plant; the rather similar *Carthamus lanatus*

MONOCOTYLEDONS

Liliaceae – lily family

Merendera filifolia merendera 2132

It's possible that merenderas in the Serranía de Cuenca are *Merendera pyrenaica* (= *M. montana*) but they are separated with difficulty by differences in the leaves that appear in spring.

Agavaceae

Agave americana agave, century plant P 2253

Orchidaceae – orchids

Epipactis broad-leaved 2380

helleborine helleborine NiF

Cephalanthera narrow-leaved 2383

longifolia helleborine NiF

These orchid identifications are best guesses, based on a combination of the look of the leaves and seed heads along with distribution information. Dead stalks of limodor were also reported, and there were dried broomrapes of unknown species.

Gramineae – grasses

Cynodon dactylon Bermuda grass 2481

Typha angustifolia lesser reedmace

Arundo donax giant reed 2494

Phragmites reed

australis

FERNS (PTERIDOPHYTA)

Andiantum capillus- 2522

veneris

Asplenium trichomanes maidenhair 2525

spleenwort

Asplenium fontanum smooth rock 2528

spleenwort

Ceterach officinarum rustyback fern 2532

Pteridium aquilinum bracken

Fungi

Agrocybe aegerita poplar mushroom

Amonita muscaria fly agaric

Boletus luteus

Lactarius deliciosus saffron milkcap

Rusulla xerampelina

Scleroderma aurantium

Tricholoma terreum