

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Menorca
5 - 12 April 1997

DISCOVERING MENORCA
5 - 12 April 1997

The group

Enid Broxup

Peter Harkness
Margaret Harkness

Geoff Pears
Barbara Pears

Pauline Collinson
Gordon Collinson

Richard Rutt
Joan Rutt

Meg Airey

Pip Sharp

Leaders: Graham Hearl
 Chris Durdin

With commiserations to Jim and Peggy Ritchie who had to drop out just a few days before the holiday.

Our hosts at Matchani Gran were Jenny and Shaun Murphy. The group was also joined on 10 April by John Seymour, historian and Menorca resident, and by Santí Catchot from the Balearic Ornithological Group (GOB) on 11 April.

As always, this holiday contributed to the protection of the wildlife that we enjoyed by way of a donation to GOB. A thank you letter from GOB appears at the end of this report (not this web version). This holiday's contribution of £575 was made up of £25 per person in the group, including Jim and Peggy and the ten in the second Honeyguide Discovering Menorca group in the week following this one. A total of £2,945 has been given to GOB since the first Balearic Honeyguide holiday in 1992, part of over £12,000 given to conservation projects in Europe since Honeyguide started in 1991.

This report was written by Chris Durdin.

*Cover: hoopoe on a stone wall, by Will Woodrow.
Black-winged stilts by Gary Wright; other illustrations by Rob Hume.*

Saturday 6 April - Matchani Gran and Punta Prima

At Luton airport - or London Luton as it says nowadays - those who had stayed overnight at the Hotel Ibis were joined by the local contingent. The party was completed at Mahón airport where we met co-leader Graham Hearl, plus Shaun Murphy and Jan from Matchani Gran and Gilly from DonCars with our two minibuses for the week. None of those long transfers to distant hotels here; five minutes drive and we were at our base in the spacious old farmhouse of Matchani Gran, passing giant fennel and patches of Bermuda buttercup on route. We were soon tucking into delicious asparagus quiche.

It was a sunny but windy day, so the afternoon's excursion was to the relatively sheltered south coast, in this case Punta Prima on the south-east tip of the island. The late winter and early spring had been exceptionally dry this year and many orchids were either not appearing or rather past it, but we nonetheless found pyramidal (often very pale in colour), sombre bee, mirror and sawfly and small-flowered tongue orchids. The blustery conditions at sea had the effect of bringing many Cory's shearwaters fairly close in. Ahead even of the Cory's, the Menorca seabird speciality is the scarce Audouin's gull, happily slowly increasing in numbers, and this was - as it often is - a good spot for them today. On land there were Sardinian warblers and stonechats and a couple of migrant wheatears among the coastal scrub. There is much more than orchids to botanising here, and other striking additions to the list were yellow bartsia, bellardia and the large yellow retharrow *Ononis natrix*. An Algerian hedgehog and an Egyptian grasshopper appeared on route back to the minibuses.

Back at Matchani Gran there was a hoopoe on the wall under the Aleppo pines along the drive. Our home for the week home took a lot of beating for hoopoes and many other birds; today's example was a fine booted eagle.

The meals at Matchani Gran are always tasty and generous to a fault, and an added bonus was the warmth and charm of Pedro who served us. Shaun freely admitted that Pedro had taught him a thing or two about silver service practice in restaurants, and Pedro was equally at home and valuable in the more homely surroundings here. The wine flows freely here and for some the most generous measures of after dinner brandy, and as it was Joan's birthday there was champagne too. After supper there were scops owls and stone-curlews calling, and the comet Hale-Bopp was nothing short of stunning in the clear Menorcan night sky.

Sunday 7 April - Son Bou, Algendar gorge

With the wind a little calmer but still firmly in the north, the itinerary was shuffled a little to arrange a day on the south coast. Quail and hoopoe were calling at Matchani Gran and an Egyptian vulture flew round in the direction of San Clemente and the more distant Monte Toro. Putting aside thoughts that if we waited here a while everything that could be seen would turn up soon, we made for Menorca's largest reedbed at Son Bou. We went the back way to Alaior, stopping briefly to identify a large lily by the road side, *Ornithogalum arabicum* (later found in the field at the top of the drive back at base) and a Thekla lark.

At Son Bou, though the hills are built up with holiday development, the reedbed is intact and is fronted by extensive vegetated dunes. Three little egrets flew over the reedbed as we arrived, and there was a marsh harrier from the car park too. Without going anywhere there were also fan-tailed warblers going 'zip...zip...zip' and two little ringed plovers. A stone's throw from the car park there is a small pool which often was on it a migrant wader or two, today a fine wood sandpiper. Looking out from the beach an Audouin's gull flew past, and among the scrub in the dunes a Cetti's warbler shouted and stonechats and linnets were seen. The dunes here were a

blaze of colour, dominated by the birdsfoot trefoil *Lotus (creticus) cytisoides*, with its notched standard an identifying feature. The leaves of the late summer-flowering sea daffodils were soon picked out, and along the damp edge of the dune/wetland margin many orchids, especially yellow bee, bumblebee and small-flowered tongue orchids, had an edge on those suffering from drought elsewhere. The marsh harriers seemed to everywhere, a minimum of three, and Geoff and I, briefly separated from the rest of the group, had a migrant male ring ouzel fly past.

Lunch was in the shade overlooking the marsh, which was handy as a purple heron flew in. Subalpine warblers were discovered nearby too.

Further west on the south coast - though nowhere is far on Menorca - we came to the sheltered south-facing Algendar gorge, inland of Cala de Santa Galdana. Menorca is a gentle island, so compared with the Pyrenees or Mallorca this is a modest gorge, but a striking feature for Menorca. Over the wall and we were soon bearing right into the gorge, passing grey-leaved and narrow-leaved cistuses and lots of pitch trefoil with its tarry-smelling leaves. The butterfly net was out, but not really needed for the wood whites whose characteristic weak flight makes them easy to see, nor useful for the fast-flying cleopatras or the wall butterflies that seemed to be plentiful on the bramble.

Somewhere past the quince tree the groups divided, Graham's taking the low road and mine over the olive gate and along the high road, but we all saw fabulous, soaring, gliding, dive-bombing Egyptian vultures, a minimum of 12 in total.

Jenny sensibly takes off two evenings a week from cooking, so we went to eat in Es Castell (also known as Villacarlos). The route took us past many fascinating examples of modern sculpture on roundabouts on the edge of Mahón. Safely parked, we took a quick turn around the historic town square on foot. There were children playing football alongside Indian bead trees and mulberries before we turned right again at the cannon outside the military museum towards the Restaurant España.

Back at base, the sound of scops owl and stone-curlew was joined by a nightingale.

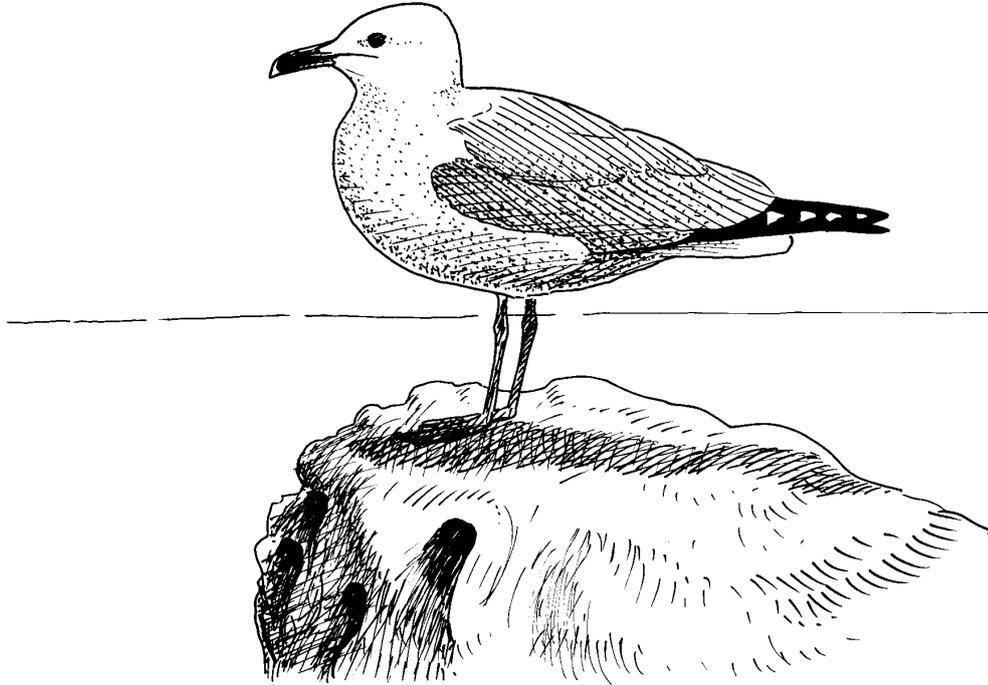
Monday 8 April - Naveta D'Es Toudons, Cala Morell, La Vall

Just west of Cuitadella is the Naveta D'Es Toudons, the only two storey prehistoric site of the hundreds on the island, in the shape of an upturned boat. This one was restored on 1959, but the historians are, as ever, arguing about whether the restoration was correct. On safer ground, for us natural historians, were the many corn buntings and, for the trained ears of Pauline and Gordon at least, the sound of quail. The turf here is well grazed and dry but has many plants able to cope with those conditions; evax, field madder and star clover to name but three.

With caution we got out of the minibuses at Cala Morell, taking care not to disturb both male and female blue rock thrushes on the wall; later there was a tawny pipit on the same wall. The area between the road and wall is the Mediterranean equivalent of limestone pavement, rich in flowers. Especially striking was the yellow broomrape that defied identification as it did last year. A short walk over to the cliff top revealed nothing other than a few yellow-legged gulls on the cliffs and sea.

La Vall, a large estate in the north of the island was the next stop, where we picnicked while watching three Egyptian vultures, a peregrine and two fine woodchat shrikes, then topped by booted eagles in soaring and diving display flight. The conifer woods were quiet this afternoon so we were soon overlooking the charming cove of Cala Agaiarens, where some walked a way,

others paddled and gossiped, others stood and watched. Two Audouin's gulls drifted around, settled and drifted on, and soon after an osprey appeared.



There was still time for a visit to the old capital of Menorca, Cuitadella, and to wander from its magnificent square into quiet streets to look or to buy anything from books on the Menorquin language to postcards and ice cream.

Historian John Seymour joined us this evening and told us much about the island, prehistoric, ancient and modern.

Tuesday 9 April - Mahón and Es Grau

We were soon emerging from the underground car park into a distinctly quiet Mahón market. Many went from there down into the city to visit the large church of Santa Maria with its famed organ or to the produce and fish markets farther down the hill. We then drove down to the harbour, where there was an Audouin's gull as we parked. During a quick dip into the gin factory shop a free sample or two led to many a purchase.

A superb marsh harrier was quartering the fields as we drove towards the wetland area of Es Grau where we lunched. A walk through the lagoon area found a common sandpiper and a few egrets, then through the woods to a slope covered in sheets of *Lotus cytisoides*. Sage-leaved cistus and mallow-leaved bindweed were identified, a few mirror and sawfly orchids found and a debate over a vetchling - *Lathyrus clymenum* or *articulatus* - which was eventually resolved in favour of the former. Pip found an osprey and a white-bellied juvenile shag was on the lake.

Returning towards Matchani Gran, where the marsh harrier had been there were now two - migrants perhaps. A quiet hour or two back at base was planned, towards the end of which we were able to explore Shaun's fields in search of the sheep for which we had buckets of food.

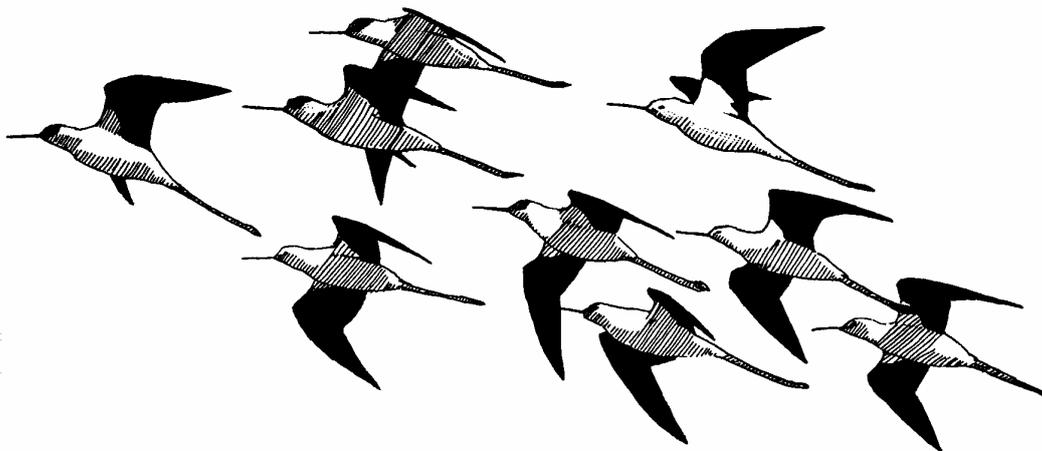
They were in the farthest field, inevitably, close to the airport perimeter. Evax, galactites and star clover were noted on route, and the sinuated leaves of the mullein *Verbascum sinuatum*. The prickly pear wood was searched for tortoises, without luck, but gladiolus and rose garlic found.

Quiet pottering followed, during which I was questioned by Meg about a black and white bird she had just seen on an old iron barrel, with no firm conclusion. Wandering into the field, a group of us found Thekla larks showing well and a fine wood warbler. Then the black and white bird reappeared; a male collared flycatcher, complete with full white collar. It's a regular migrant through the eastern Mediterranean, often seen on Crete and Cyprus, but well off course here in the western Mediterranean, and doubtless brought by recent winds. Erratic weather can have its compensations. After confirming its identity, I ran to get Graham and Geoff, successfully persuading them to leave the bar. The bird performed well for several minutes, perched on low scrub and making feeding forays onto the ground nearby, before disappearing into the cactus wood.

Wednesday 10 April - Depuradora de Es Mercadal, Tirant, Fornells and Cavallería

A lesser short-toed lark and a wheatear were found pre-breakfast. For the less energetic majority, the first birdwatching of the day was at the *depuradora* - water purification plant - north of Es Mercadal. It can attract migrants, but not today, though stonechats and a fine Egyptian vulture were seen.

Perhaps all the migrants were at the seasonal wetland at Tirant instead. From the road overlooking the marsh there were many aerial feeders, including alpine swifts, which wetted the appetite to get onto the wide track that runs alongside and overlooks the wetland. At first it seemed quiet with just four herons among the sheets of water crowfoot. Mallards, moorhens and little egrets appeared, followed by both dark and light phase booted eagles and two marsh harriers. The harriers put up some birds; two black-winged stilts, then a glossy ibis. Four green sandpipers and a greenshank came through, all this against the constant backdrop of corn buntings, Sardinian and fan-tailed warblers and the persistent, if quiet, 'wet-my-lips' of quail. Two red-rumped swallows were found in a flock of house martins and swallows and, to complete the set, a couple of sand martins too. Finally, as we moved away from Tirant, there were eight cattle egrets feeding, as they should, among cattle.



Fornells is a quiet and pretty resort on the bay of Fornells, and time was taken out for hot chocolates and other drinks and a quick town tour. Then we were off towards the northern top of Menorca, the Cap de Cavallería. Part way to the cape there is a quiet bay where we stopped for our picnic lunch on the upturned boats. Tawny pipits and a shag with yellow feet could be seen as we tucked into generous quantities of broccoli quiche, from which the local goats appreciated less than generous leftovers. A stroll over the hill after eating followed, from where a stone-curlew flew from among the garrigue.

Heading towards the lighthouse we stopped the minibuses for perhaps the most glorious of all the birds on the holiday - four ravens, twisting, turning and tumbling as if there was no tomorrow. Behind the lighthouse there were many Cory's shearwaters at sea, but the odd Mediterranean shearwater little more than dots over the water were seen by the leaders only so didn't make it onto the list. An osprey came through, low and slow, giving fine views, and a chiffchaff was presumably waiting for a good moment to fly on farther north.

On the way back we drove past big clumps of *Ampelodesmus* grass to the top of Monte Toro, Menorca's highest point, from where you can see most of the island on a finer day than this one. Tea was taken too; two such stops in the day - how very civilised!

Another birthday, Margaret's this time, was celebrated at the Bar España on our second evening meal out.

Thursday 11 April - Mongofre Nou, Torre d'en Gaumés

Mongofre Nou is a splendid selection of lagoons on a private estate and one of the very best birdwatching spots on the island. The Balearic Ornithological Group (GOB) has recently concluded an access agreement with the owners which we were privileged to share as longstanding friends and supporters of GOB. We took our time to our rendez-vous, first stooping by the roadside to watch booted eagle, red kite and peregrine. All heard quail well here, and we identified the large-leaved buttercup as ... large-leaved buttercup *Ranunculus macrophyllus*.

Santí Catchot was there and we followed him down the track towards the estate, pausing briefly for a pied flycatcher, for the second minibus at least. We parked, went through the gates past strawberry trees and Spanish broom and soon we were within sight of the lagoons. Waders here included wood sandpiper, ruff, Kentish and little ringed plovers, greenshank and spotted redshank and the black-winged stilt count reached 24. Hedgehog milkvetch and two species of dorycnium were growing alongside the road through the lagoons. A squacco heron, close and still, was found, a sprinkling of garganey and, finally, views of osprey to postpone that trip to Loch Garten indefinitely - not least sitting on a no hunting sign. A dead ladder snake was found as we walked back.

Back at Matchani Gran for our packed lunch and a siesta where there were two red kites and a booted eagle from the house. Batteries recharged, we took the short trip to the prehistoric site of Torre d'en Gaumés. Enid found our first tortoise - Hermann's tortoise to be precise - under the wall from where the nettle-like shrub of *Prasium majus* grew. Swallowtail butterfly and hummingbird hawkmoth were also seen as we did a quick tour of the site.

The visit in the glorious sunshine of late afternoon and early evening was to Son Bou again, only this time walking into the barranco at the western end. Garganey can be hard to find but there were at least 10 among the water crowfoot on two lagoons. Graham, as ever, had a quick eye for

a rarity on passage, and the telescopes were soon on a marsh sandpiper, along with a snipe and two black-tailed godwits.

Santí from GOB was with us again for the evening. As well as giving him the Honeyguide cheque, we found out a lot about the island's wildlife, especially the mixed fortunes of birds of prey. For ospreys it is good news. Some 20-25 pairs fifty years ago, they declined to one pair in 1981. Since then they have increased to seven resident pairs in 1997, two of which are on artificial nests, a fair proportion of the Mediterranean population of c60 pairs. This has been achieved by protection by GOB wardens, despite the threats of disturbance and urbanisation of the coast. For red kites, however, the trend is downwards, from 135 pairs ten years ago, the highest density in Europe, to ten pairs or less now. Last year's group had heard about the problem of corpses found under electric wires. Discussions with the electricity company since then has led to an agreement for 40 of the most dangerous pylons -carefully selected - to be changed from the coming autumn, real progress indeed with a price of 20-30,000 pesetas per pylon (a total bill of £4-6,000). Ravens have also declined markedly for the same reason of electrocution, with 101 corpses found; a survey this year suggests only 50-60 'couples' on the island. Booted eagles were being surveyed this year too (too early for results as they nest later than ravens), 8-9 dead booted eagles having been found under pylons. To complete the bird of prey figures, we learnt that there are 20-23 pairs of Egyptian vultures. A final worry for GOB is the destruction of sand dunes which is threatening bee-eaters.

But GOB is in good heart, with 1,000 members of Menorca's population of 66,000 - roughly the same proportion as the RSPB's membership in Britain - and had run activities for 4,000 boys and girls last winter. Each of the group was presented with a GOB badge in exchange for the traditional Honeyguide cheque - 'serious money' in Graham's words for a small organisation like GOB.

Friday 12 April - Tirant, Fornells and Punta Prima

We had promised ourselves a return to this superb wetland, and it was worth it. Graham's nose for where to stop excelled itself: from a field overlooking the wetland he somehow quickly picked up on two cryptically-coloured stone-curlews. Three red-rumped swallows gave superb views behind us and in the meantime Graham had also found the lesser white-fronted goose that we'd heard about, and secured permission from the farmer for us to go and have a closer look. The local birders believe this real rarity to be vagrant. The fact that it was tame and keeping the company of several fat farmyard ducks doesn't disprove this, but it makes you think. We all enjoyed the farm animals anyway.

By the road overlooking the main part of the wetland we soon found purple heron then a great white egret with a grey heron and little egrets for comparison. Joan found a tree frog on a roadside stick; then, with our eyes in, we all proceeded to find many more.

At Cala Tirant, not far away, we looked at the sand hills later used by bee-eaters and now known, following Santí's talk, to be under threat. Then returning past the wetland, it showed its ability to hide unseen birds when a glossy ibis appeared.

The final visit was to Monte Santa Agueda, Menorca's second highest spot. After lunch at the bottom by the old school, we took the old Roman road to the top. This was more of a challenge for some than others, and special mention in despatches go to Joan and Meg who, at their own paces, made it to see the splendid view from the top. Two or more Egyptian vultures were seen around the hill, and both *Cistus monspelliensis* and *salvifolius* were in evidence.

We are nothing if not civilised on Honeyguide holidays, so the return journey included a visit to the small but well-stocked supermarket in Alaior. Then our last sumptuous meal and generous drinks as always at Matchani Gran.

Saturday 13 April

Even arriving in good time for our 12.15 flight still allowed time for a leisurely breakfast and packing, then fond farewells to our home and hosts for the week and the short ride via San Clemente to the airport.

Bird list

Cory's shearwater	Yellow-legged gull
Shag	Rock dove/feral pigeon
Squacco heron	Woodpigeon
Cattle egret	Scops owl (heard)
Little egret	Swift
Great white egret	Alpine swift
Grey heron	Hoopoe
Purple heron	Short-toed lark
Glossy ibis	Thekla lark
Lesser white-fronted goose	Sand martin
Wigeon	Swallow
Mallard	Red-rumped swallow
Garganey	House martin
Red kite (<i>pictured, over</i>)	Tawny pipit
Egyptian vulture	Meadow pipit
Marsh harrier	Yellow wagtail
Booted eagle	White wagtail
Osprey	Robin
Kestrel	Nightingale
Peregrine	Redstart
Red-legged partridge	Stonechat
Quail	Wheatear
Moorhen	Blue rock thrush
Coot	Ring ouzel
Black-winged stilt	Blackbird
Stone-curlew	Song thrush
Little ringed plover	Cetti's warbler
Kentish plover	Fan-tailed warbler
Ruff	Subalpine warbler
Snipe	Sardinian warbler
Black-tailed godwit	Blackcap
Spotted redshank	Wood warbler
Marsh sandpiper	Chiffchaff
Greenshank	Firecrest (heard)
Green sandpiper	Collared flycatcher
Wood sandpiper	Pied flycatcher
Common sandpiper	Great tit
Audouin's gull	Woodchat shrike

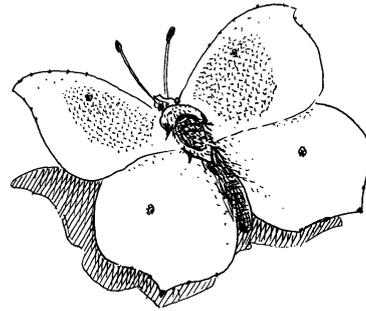
Raven
Starling
House sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet

Corn bunting

Total: 84 species
(plus Mediterranean shearwater which we don't count as it was only seen by leaders)

Butterflies

5 April	Swallowtail Painted lady Wall brown
6 April	Common blue Cleopatra (<i>right</i>) Wood white Large white Clouded yellow
8 April	Red admiral Small heath Swallowtail Bath white



Some notable insects

Hummingbird hawkmoth
Egyptian locust
Masonry bee
Carpenter bee *Xylocopa violacea*

Reptiles & amphibians

Moorish gecko
Hermann's tortoise
Italian wall lizard
A dead ladder snake
Viperine snake - seen by Pauline
European pond terrapin
Stripeless tree frog

Mammals

Algerian hedgehog
A dead garden dormouse

