

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Discovering Menorca
10 -17 April 1999

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CAST

Participants:

Kate Abbott
Ann Brown
Judith Booth
Edward Cox
Helen Cox
Margaret Cox
Sharon Eastwood
Mike Edwards
Jo Edwards
Dr Guy Lewis
Mick (Iris) Lewis
James Stott
Jean Stott
Shineen Galloway

Leaders:

Graham Hearl Mallorca
Will Woodrow Norwich

Matchani Gran Personnel:

Shaun Murphy	Owner and egg poacher extraordinaire
Jenny Murphy	Owner, chef and keeper of many pets
Frank	Barman and all round entertainer
Kate	Shaun's niece and pourer of large measures of dodgy liqueurs
Babe	The house sheep
George & Isabella	The manic friendly and the aloof donkey, respectively

The group as joined on Thursday 15th April by John Seymour, historian and Menorcan resident, and by Santí Catchot from the Balearic Ornithological Group (GOB) on the last full day, Friday 16 April. Santí was there because, as with all Honeyguide holidays, £25 of the price of the holiday was put towards a conservation project, in this case for GOB's work in Menorca. The cheque for £350 from this holiday brings the total to £3645 contributed to GOB by Honeyguide holidays in the Balearics. The total contributed to conservation projects in Europe from all Honeyguide holidays is now £17,425 (at the end of the 1999 season). A thank-you letter from GOB appears at the end of this report (but not this web version).

This report was written by Will Woodrow and Sharon Eastwood.
Front cover illustration by Will Woodrow. Other illustrations by Rob Hume.

SUMMARY

Booted eagles, fig trees, olive wood gates, herons, antique furniture, hoopoes, sherry (free!), orchids, more orchids, stone walls, small fields, reed beds, more herons and egrets, a sheep that thinks it's a dog, kites, ospreys, ancient burial chambers, mad Menorcan barmen, gorges harbouring Egyptian vultures and ladder snakes, Audouin's gulls were just some of the ingredients making up a great week in Menorca.

Day one - Saturday 10th April: Matchani Gran

It was an early start to arrive at Luton for 6ish and all holiday makers checked in with the airline while Will and Sharon kept an eagle eye out for Honeyguide luggage tags so they could meet everybody and check that there were no last minute hitches - there weren't.

We arrived into Mahón to the news from the captain that outside was 12°C. Luckily as soon as we disembarked, it was apparent the captain had been given wrong info and it was a pleasant Mediterranean spring day. We all got through luggage collection and customs and were met by Shaun and Graham who took all the guests and most of the luggage to Matchani Gran leaving Sharon and Will watching booted eagles and minding a few suitcases.

Matchani Gran

The narrow aleppo pine-lined drive down, to the farmhouse was attractive, picturesque, welcoming and not over-imposing which in a way sums up Matchani Gran and to the delight of us all it was often frequented by Hoopoes. Walking down the path and through the olive-wood gates (which are all over the farm and Menorca in general) you entered an oasis of life which inspired rest and contentment. One guest, upon seeing her room remarked that she was staying in a palace!

After an excellent lunch we went to explore some of the fields around the house. The whole area was tinkling and wheezing with goldfinches, greenfinches and linnets, and an immediate appearance of a woodchat shrike and singing corn bunting set the scene for the week. We soon got our botanical eyes in and starting picking out sawfly, mirror and bumble-bee orchids. Many times, you would spot one mirror orchid and realise that there were quite a number, in fact you were surrounded by them so much that you were worried that you were standing on them!

We took things at a slow pace, not least because most of us had been up since 5.00am (and the Cox family had travelled 3 hours from Norfolk that morning to check in at Luton at 6am). This pace suited all of us and the birds appeared on cue. We watched stonechats singing and had wonderful views of a short-toed lark displaying to a surprisingly unimpressed female who got bored after a few minutes and flew away! Jo had loads of time to photograph many orchids (or attempt to photograph them in some cases before we squashed them!).

We were greeted by George, the donkey, who later in the week got very friendly with Guy's rump, and babe the sheep who had been rescued and raised in the house leading her to fully believe that she was a sister of the Alsatian dog.

Booted eagles waited until their absence was noted before making an appearance. Other highlights included a stack of some 70 thermalling ravens. Italian wall lizard darted in and out of the stone igloo-type structure which protected the fig tree in the back field. Not only birds but butterflies were also out to greet us - common blue and large white. Blue headed wagtail, dung beetle (a seemingly tireless individual), tawny pipits, superb views of thekla lark, marsh harrier, calling hoopoes and Cetti's warbler and all within 200 metres of Matchani Gran.

Day two - Sunday 11th April: Son Bou & Torre d'en Gaumes

We drove down to Son Bou with the windows open and continually heard corn buntings and Cetti's warbler singing around the island. The first things we were struck by were the strong colours of the Italian sainfoin and the Bermuda buttercup by the car park. We meandered slowly along the reedbed behind the sand-dunes and a good number of the group had a superb view of a Cetti's warbler, not only out in the open but actually waiting patiently as people queued to see it through the telescope - a rare view indeed.

As we walked past burping, elusive (mainly to Will) tree frogs and more noisy Sardinian warblers we seemed constantly accompanied by Cetti's warblers and stonechats, often singing from prominent positions. One of the stars of the morning was definitely a squacco heron flying over the marsh and later seen on two separate occasions on the ground in full view along the beach. In fact it was a good day for herons all round with purple, grey, squacco, cattle and little egrets all making appearances.

As we walked further up the marsh, we had good views of a zitting cisticola or fan-tailed warbler. We heard many little grebes and the squeal of a water rail and spent a while watching a superbly bright plumaged male linnet and accompanying female collecting nesting materials from reedmace. The colouring of these common birds was really superb and almost made you look at them in a different light. A marsh harrier drifted across the reeds giving us superb views and it was good to know that there really were moustached warblers around, one having been seen by Margaret.

There were plenty of plants to get our teeth into as well on the way, including small-flowered tongue orchid. A yellow bee orchid on the edge of the dunes, probably one of the last still flowering, provided a great distraction from watching masonry bees on the nearby path collecting sand grains. The flowering tamarisks were appreciated by both us and singing Cetti's warblers. *Lotus creticus* and yellow flags in flower provided great splashes in colour along the way.

After a well-deserved lunch under the pine trees we drove the north west side of the marsh to try and see some waders and wildfowl. Although distant views, here we did see some wonderful drake garganeys, ruff, wood sandpiper, little-ringed plover, black-winged stilt and all five of the day's heron species, including at least 10 grey herons. There was a scattering of butterflies including speckled wood and large white and a swallowtail fluttering over a field of *Silybum* and *Galactites* thistles. There were some enormous flocks of goldfinches and many people had good views of hoopoe flying over the track. It was about now that the weather got a bit more serious and the suntan cream came out. An almost dead Egyptian locust (allowing easy identification) was found on the track on the way back to the vans.

On return we visited Torre d'en Gaumes where we all tried to make some kind of sense of the stone age water collection and storage systems and Mike's (later to become infamous) keen eyes picked out an Egyptian vulture. Many also saw a red kite drifting overhead before walking through the small fields carpeted in pyramidal and sawfly orchids.

Day Three - Monday 12th April: Montgofre Nou, Cap de Favaritx

An early and cloudy start saw a small group of diehards headed down the back fields of Matchani Gran. The early birds saw several shrikes and had great views of thekla and short-toed larks on the ground, and singing overhead.

Heading out to the north east of the island we passed a red kite and we turned off the main road, and as soon as we found somewhere reasonable to stop we did so as it looked promising for raptors. We hadn't been long stopped when Jean spotted two birds of prey circling overhead, one

a booted eagle and the other much larger. It was clear that this was something special – it turned out we didn't reach a conclusive identification. Discussion between Graham and Will brought it down to an immature either spotted or imperial eagle (well off course, whichever it was). This created a great deal of excitement among the leaders (although not everybody was totally captivated by what quickly became a spot in the sky) and set the scene for a day of excellent birding. A short way farther down the road, and a stop for a blue rock thrush provided some great views. At the turn off for Mongofre Nou an exceptionally early dark phase Eleanora's falcon kept things on a high. The track that led down to Mongofre Nou had some wonderful sandstone sculptured rocks, harbouring rock doves and kestrels.

We parked at the end of the track and walked through private tracks to the reserve. Here we could see both the Spanish and the spiny broom in full flower, which allowed for good comparison. A short walk down to the salt pans produced a chance to view many waders and wildfowl. Here we saw green, wood and marsh sandpipers all together. Squacco heron as well as purple heron, little and cattle egret. There was a good number of many ruff and for comparison black-winged stilts and seven little stints. Also, a line of three Kentish, little ringed and ringed plovers also provided an excellent opportunity to compare the species.

As we started to return, much of the early day cloud had gone and it started to warm up, if a little windy. Everyone also got good views of European pond terrapin, the size of a 50p piece, and some got incredibly close views of marsh sandpiper.

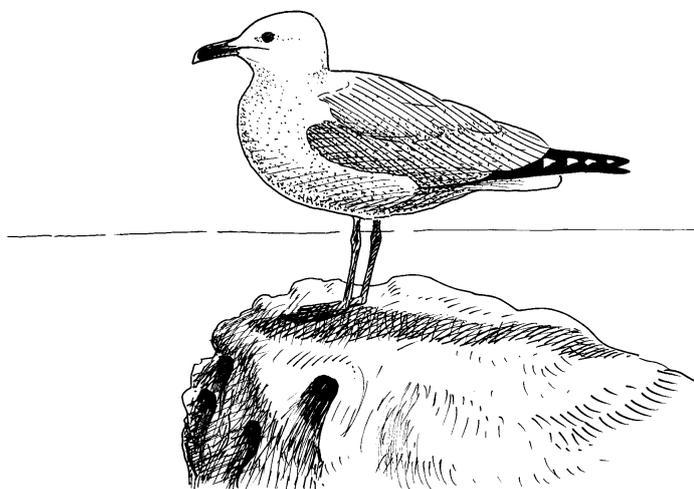
Lunch break produced serin seen by Mike and wood warbler. We drove onto Cap de Favaritx and passed 'garrigue' low scrub habitat and a sward of Hottentot fig. At the pool just before we parked the vans there was a Kentish plover with one chick, little more than a week old. A walk out to the headland produced some interesting sea-watching with views (though often fleeting and distant) of Cory's and Balearic shearwaters. A group of some 100 shearwaters mingled with gulls and were catching fish offshore. As we watched them, swallows, including one red-rumped swallow, battled past us to reach land.

A drive back through the garrigue habitat produced, sadly, no spectacled warbler but a drive inland revealed where the hirundines were headed. We stopped the vans in a valley where we were surrounded by many thousands of swallows, sand and house martins and swifts feeding on an afternoon insect hatch. It was a spectacular sight.

Day Four -Tuesday 13th April: Mahón and Es Grau

A cloudy, windy morning and we donned our jackets and trousers to venture into Mahón on Market day.

It was a day to buy the obligatory postcards and mingle in streets full of mainly English and Scottish people! The route to the harbour, via the spectacular fish market, wound via narrow streets and wide steps to one of the most prized natural harbours in the Mediterranean. Upon seeing water we got fantastic views of Audouin's gull made better as they swooped down to feast on the stale bread donated by Jenny.



Returning heavily laden to Matchani Gran for lunch we got our first views of a Hermann's tortoise basking in the midday sun at the edge of the 'wildwoods'. Sharon was chuffed that she had spotted something!

Many clad in shorts, we set off in the afternoon for the only nature reserve on Menorca - s'Albufera Es Grau, a large brackish lake set behind sand dunes and host to many wildfowl. En route we saw some of the 62 houses and the overgrown golf course that were to be part of the development - Shangri-La. However, pressure by conservationists resulted in the development being closed. The remaining houses have to be pulled down within the next decade. As we started to walk along the edge of the lake, we were rewarded with fantastic views of an osprey (a first for several in the group) circling overhead. Common sandpiper flew past easily recognisable by its wing markings and 'flicky' flight.

The shorts were a bad idea as the sun appeared for very little of the afternoon (although it remained at Matchani Gran all day). A redstart welcomed us as we entered the woods and then it proved difficult to find anything. Fortunately, Edward soon found us a pied flycatcher. We had views of Sardinian and wood warbler before we retreated from the mozzie attack.

We then went up to several small pastures covered in an array of wonderful plants including large clumps of the Italian sainfoin, still looking splendid although no doubt they would have been a better display last week. On top of the pasture we had sweeping views across the lake and got some very close and long views of tawny pipit and were able to study a superb purple heron. We spent a while here surrounded by tree spurge and the white *Cistus monspeliensis*. Male and female blue rock thrush were seen on the way back.

There were more orchids to be seen including more sawfly and mirror orchids and many pyramidal orchids nearing white in colour. One suggested reason for the colour difference may be a difference in minerals in the soil.

Day Five - Wednesday 14th April: Es Mercadal, Tirant and Monte Toro

Stopping off at Es Mercadal, a small waterworks, produced a good start to the day with wood and common sandpipers and yellow wagtails in attendance. A sky full of many swallows, house and sand martins and swifts moving through provided a spectacle and a lone squacco heron sat on one of the dividing walls between the pools. Both pale and dark-faced booted eagle floated over our heads giving an excellent opportunity for comparison. We had good views on the field behind of a stone curlew and a tawny pipit in display flight. Moving onto Tirant, a wonderful sight of water crowfoot over the marsh hiding a number of waders including ruff and wood sandpiper. Little egrets and purple heron were also spotted on a morning brightening between cloudy periods. We had excellent views of marsh harrier and red kite and a quail called from the fields behind us.

Lots of hirundines and swifts seeming to change every five minutes from a host of sand martins to swallows to swifts and house martins.

We then drove up to Cap de Tirant where we had our lunch amongst tongue, small flowered tongue and bumble bee orchids and wonderful blue lupins. We watched a party of black-winged stilts which had just dropped down to the shallow surf.

On to Cap de Cavallería and a drive on the pot-holed track up the headland took us through a number of habitats: low bushes, bare rock and tussocky grasses. The people in the first mini-bus saw a robin in the first car park, a new one for the list.

Starting a sea watch from this rocky headland it quickly became apparent that the shearwaters weren't playing ball and we spent our time listening to a male blue rock thrush singing and picking out the odd Audouin's gull from the yellow-legged gulls. An acrobatic display from a pair of peregrines was a great sight. We had only seen a few shearwaters and were thinking of moving on when Shineen noticed a group of gulls and shearwaters close in - everybody got wonderful views of both Cory's and Balearic shearwater through the telescopes. On the way back, we stopped at another small wetland at Tirant which was full of little egrets and grazing cattle and pigs! And a little closer was a field of goats tied together in pairs to stop them running off too far, with yellow wagtails following in their grazing footsteps.

On the journey home, we went to Monte Toro for a cup of tea and a wonderful view over the island which was nothing but spectacular. Through binoculars we could pick out Matchani Gran and many of the other places we had been to in the week.

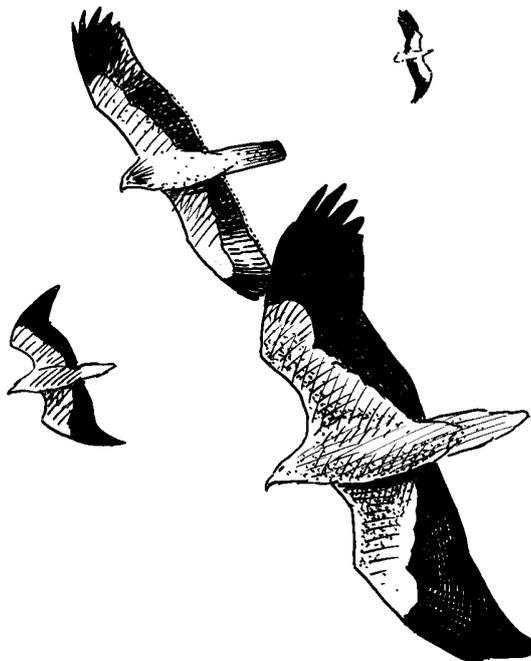
Day Six - Thursday 15th April: Algendar Gorge, Naveta d'es Tudons and Ciutadella

Early cloud cleared for our early morning walk with finds of wood and willow warbler giving us hope that there might be some migrants around today. However, this proved not to be so.

En route to Algendar gorge, we drove past a beautiful turquoise bay surrounded by lots of businesses getting ready for the holiday season to begin. We were welcomed to the gorge by a circling Egyptian vulture as we parked the van. Having negotiated the gate or wall, we began to walk up the gorge. Tongue orchid in flower was a great sight. Now familiar Cetti's warblers were singing all around us as were nightingales, but both species giving only a handle of people views. Margaret, who had arrived optimistically in shorts, soon changed into her jeans as the weather showed it wasn't going to improve anymore.

Raptors were showing well with up to nine Egyptian vultures (including dark immature birds) circling together with a peregrine, three or four booted eagles (both dark and light phase) at any one time and four kestrels in the sky at once - there was plenty to look at in the skies. We also got great views of Egyptian vultures on the rocks at the side of the gorge.

Some of the best birds of this walk were ... reptiles. Early on in the walk Helen pointed out a snake which turned out to be an adult ladder snake with two tram lines down its back, but with no rungs across the lines as in the juvenile. Further on Jo spotted a viperine with its more flattened head and a buff coloured body. Nearby there was a juvenile ladder snake (with very distinctive ladder markings this time!).



Sardinian warblers and blackcaps were 'chacking' in the bushes but a lone male pied flycatcher was the only real sign of migration. Perseverance on the part of many paid off with good views of firecrest, which we had heard in a number of places on our walk. Getting towards as far as we would go up the gorge, we past a large clump of bamboo and one tree unfamiliar to the group turned out to be a pomegranate tree which still had the skins of last year's fruit intact.

Walking back with a large dark cloud gathering behind us we remarked on how stupid a Moorish gecko appeared to be sunning itself dangerously close to the adult ladder snake. Two Italian wall lizards, an adult and young, were also spotted.

After lunch we went to the Naveta archaeological site – a two-storied tomb which was excavated in 1975 when 100 human remains were discovered. A few quail called from the crops (which were scattered with pheasant's eye) close to the path. Returning to the vans, we saw a juvenile ladder snail crossing the path. We wondered what it could be doing so exposed in the cold, we thought it was possibly dazed and confused by the sight of Kate's bright yellow cycling cape.

Moving on to Ciutadella, a wonderful old town, we tried to search out some pallid swifts in the now cool and blustery afternoon but to no avail. Cups of tea and coffee soon warmed us up and we headed back to Matchani Gran.

Day Seven – Friday 16th April: Es Mercadal, Tirant, Fornells and Sa Roca

The usual morning walk brought out a handful of migrants and it was good to see chiffchaff, willow and Bonelli's warbler in the same area. Weather this morning was not as bad as we anticipated. Cold winds and rain overnight brought hope there maybe a chance of a few migrants so we headed off to Es Mercadel in our finest woolies.

Es Mercadel was swarming with hirundines, many exhausted and resting on the ground. However, a good look through them did not reveal any more red-rumped swallows. As the weather warmed up a bit they got more active as did yellow wagtails – both *flavissima* and *flava*. We could see both common and green sandpipers on the edge of the ponds and behind us we had excellent views of Egyptian vulture in the improving light. A greenshank called as it flew in, a new one for the list. On the other side of the road we got time to watch a stone-curlew in the telescope, which then walked to the edge of the field amazing those who were beginning to think that stone-curlews didn't move at all!

At Tirant it was similarly swarming with hirundines and swifts. Watching from the road a couple of the party saw a red-rumped swallow but we couldn't get out of the vans here. Two more squacco herons sat in a bush and flew off as we set off to the car park where a tawny pipit greeted us at the entrance.

With the sun behind us, and a marsh harrier apparently pushing the hirundines and swifts, the vast cloud of birds came towards us allowing the watching group to distinguish clearly between pallid and common swifts. A large number of coots disturbed the water in the distance as little egrets and squacco herons flew around. We watched this spectacle for a while before moving on for a coffee stop at Fornells. Approaching the village, Graham noticed an odd shape in the bay – a juvenile flamingo which we were able to see. Our timing was good as while we consumed our beverages, we missed a downpour.

Just before our lunch stop, we got out at Sa Roca and we saw the wonderful spikes of limador orchids and of pine martin scats in the wooded hills of Aleppo pines, holm oaks and strawberry trees. Further down another track we saw the fascinating parasitic *Cytinus hipocistis* which feeds on the roots of *Cistus* species.

After lunch we headed up another track and saw more limador spikes, this time in full flower. Those who choose to take the long climb uphill saw Bertelloni's bee orchids. On the journey back we stopped of at a Basilica near the airport which not only gave us the opportunity to see excellent mosaic floor from 5-6th centuries but also gave us a chance to give us another look at Egyptian's locust, pied flycatcher and Bonelli's warbler.

We headed back for the last time to Matchani Gran to soak up a little sun, pack our bags and prepare for our last dinner.