

A week in the Picos de Europa, north-west Spain

Graham Phillips

The term 'unimproved grassland' will gladden the heart of any naturalist. It's the prospect of meadows rich in wildlife, with farming little changed for centuries. In the Picos, mountains add diversity of habitat: high peaks with snow lying well into summer, wooded slopes veined with streams and rivers, down to valleys, lakes and reservoirs.

I went with Honeyguide – a wildlife holiday company based in Norfolk and run by Chris Durdin, whom many readers will know as a local guide, often to be found at Thorpe Marshes. We were an eclectic bunch. Some were birders, some botanists, some entomologists; many were generalists, happy to see whatever turned up. None were disappointed.

A Nightingale greeted us on arrival at our hotel, and Dippers could often be seen from the village's Roman bridge over the stony river.

One day we took the Fuente Dé cable car up to a height of 1850 m. There, Alpine Choughs kept watch for anyone who might drop a bit of their sandwich, while Snowfinches hopped around, and, for those of us with some stamina and much patience, two Wallcreepers made an appearance. Butterflies were few at that altitude, but in the car park below I found Small Blue, Long-tailed Blue and Adonis Blue.

Other days we went off in various directions to meadows, woodland rides, riverside paths or lakes: spots carefully selected by our local guide Pau. All different, all wonderful, most yielding sightings of butterflies that were new to me. It was noticeable that we often found wonderful things when we were not looking for them, with many serendipitous finds during lunch and coffee breaks. I narrowly missed treading on a White-letter Hairstreak on the tarmac next to the minibus!

It was not a 'tick-list' trip, but each evening Chris collated sightings and after we returned home produced an overall species list which included 62 butterflies, 11 day-flying moths, 12 dragonflies and 96 birds. Ten orchid species were in flower, among some hundreds of plants. Marbled Skipper, Pearly Heath and Speckled Yellow were some of my favourite finds, plus all those fritillaries: Knapweed, Provençal, Spotted, False Heath, and of course Queen of Spain. Others are pictured opposite.

At the airport we talked about our personal highlights. For me, sound is always important: near silence in the mountain areas, the soft but distinctive call of quail in the distance, the mysterious beep of a Midwife Toad in the evening. Above all, the scenery, those fabulous meadows, and simply being there.

Top Large Wall Brown, Cleopatra

Bottom Esper's Marbled White, Purple-edged Copper, Knapweed Fritillary

Websites honeyguide.co.uk and gp12.com/picos22

