

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Picos de Europa 17 – 20 October 2011

This is a report of my 'recce' trip to the Picos de Europa, ahead of Honeyguide's first holiday on here in June 2012. It was a short visit at the 'wrong' time of year, but still helped me get a feel for the tremendous potential of the area. The visit was only possible thanks to the hospitality of Teresa Farino, with whom I stayed, as I strived to glean part of her encyclopaedic knowledge about the area and its wildlife.

Chris Durdin
November 2011



Fuente Dé from Fuenfría

Daily diary

Monday 17 October

It is hot in the late afternoon at Santander, a compact, modern airport, and picking up the hire car there was straightforward. Then west along the coastal motorway, into the setting sun in the direction of Torrelavega and Oviedo, passing the former but turning south long before the latter. I keep wondering when I'll see the turn for the N621 but once there it is obvious: big, brown signs to the Picos de Europa. Much of the next stretch is through the impressive La Hermida gorge; then left at the roundabout in Ojedo and, exactly two hours after leaving the airport, I arrive at Teresa's house in Pesaguero, just before dark. Then a cup of tea and a chance to meet 14-year old twins Gabriel and Annie, Nevada the dog and the three-legged cat.

Tuesday 18 October – Fuente Dé

The hotel Posada El Hoyal, a stone's throw from Teresa's house, looks charming in the morning light, but is temporarily closed. Teresa phones Carmen and a visit is arranged for tomorrow. First stop today was in the thriving market town of Potes, picking up a local map there, and then onto the Fuenfría for a walk, overlooking the great arc of Fuente Dé. Gorgeous autumn colours on the trees and it's getting warm after a cold start, but everywhere is very dry. The only flowers are a few merenderas (*right*) and mostly shrivelled *Crocus nudiflorus* (*below, right*).



Lunch at picnic tables by the car park at the bottom of the cable car ride to follow, which goes up to the high plateau of Fuente Dé. At the top, by now shirtsleeve weather, immediately there are alpine choughs around the café looking for scraps, and a few yards away 14 are clustered round a lady with a bag of peanuts and sweet corn. The botanical potential is clear on the slopes and limestone pavement; the reality is less, the odd rockrose and alpine birdsfoot trefoil still flowering. There are holly fern and spurge laurel growing in the protection of rocks. Some red-billed choughs appear; as well as sounding and looking different, they keep well clear of people. Water and meadow pipits, wheatear, black redstart – in song – and griffon vulture are the other birds up here.



We chance on a group of chamois, at least 17, surprisingly unconcerned by our presence. They are southern chamois, here called Rebeco, *Rupicapra pyrenaica* subsp *parva*, the smallest in the genus with a reddish-brown tail distinguishing them from the black-tailed *Rupicapra pyrenaica pyrenaica*.

Then down in the cable car, a drink in El Balcón café/restaurant above Potes, and back to Pesaguero.



Wednesday 19 October – La Tuerces Natural Monument

First call this morning is to see the hotel El Hoyal (*picture on next page*). Carmen and Oscar are charming, though speak little English. The rooms are fine. It's compact, small hotel, newly built in a traditional style, and an ideal size for a Honeyguide group.

The usual cool early morning turns to sun, but only briefly and it's cloudy when we stop at the Piedrasluengas viewpoint. Then the rain starts, which is with us for much of the middle of

the day. So we head south out of the Picos to what would be a ‘plan B’ if it was wet in June, past a nearly dried up reservoir and round the town of Aguilar de Campoo.



After eating lunch in the car, the rain stops and it’s cool, though warming up as we walk round the intriguing natural monument of La Tuerces. It’s a large limestone outcrop worn into a range of stacks, bumps and mushroom shapes, and it oozes potential for flowers, birds and butterflies in spring/summer: Teresa lists any

number of species. Today there is a little group of mixed buntings, rock and gull, the latter also singing, along with the odd burst of woodlark. A couple of red kites and a few griffons drift through. By a spring there are two crayfish: lifting one it shows the red underside of the claws of the introduced American signal crayfish (*picture in lists*). Plants are the last-lingering types: chaenorhinum in flower from limestone crevices, the rather local toadflax *Linaria badalii* on a wall in the village of Villaescusa de las Torres.

Thursday 20 October – above La Hermida

Another wet day. We spend the morning in the mixture of meadows and sessile oak wood west and above the La Hermida gorge. A few astrantia and bloody cranesbill flowers linger and stone water troughs have lots of huge midwife toad tadpoles. The rain stops at lunchtime so we can eat picnics by the river in La Hermida town, providing a chance to watch a dipper doing what dippers do, clearly visible under the water, plus grey and white wagtails.



Then back to the coast, along the motorway to Santander, successfully finding the petrol station tucked away in the out-of-town shopping centre near the airport. Walking to the plane there is a recipe for confusion as we cross the path of another plane-load of people walking towards the Ryanair flight to Paris, but it seems to work and I’m soon back at Stansted.

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Wildlife lists

BIRDS H = heard only, plus yellow-legged and black-headed gulls nearer to Santander.

- | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Cormorant | Hoopoe | Wren |
| Mallard | Green woodpecker | Dipper |
| Griffon vulture | Great spotted woodpecker | Dunnock |
| Red kite | Woodlark | Robin |
| Buzzard | Meadow pipit | Black redstart |
| Kestrel | Water pipit | Stonechat |
| Woodpigeon | Grey wagtail | Wheatear |
| Collared dove | White wagtail | Blackbird |
| Tawny owl H | | Song thrush |

Mistle thrush
 Cetti's warbler H
 Blackcap
 Chiffchaff H
 Firecrest H
 Long-tailed tit
 Crested tit H
 Blue tit
 Great tit
 Nuthatch
 Short-toed treecreeper

Southern grey shrike
 Jay
 Magpie
 Jackdaw
 Carrion crow
 Alpine chough
 Chough
 Raven
 Spotless starling
 House sparrow
 Chaffinch

Serin
 Greenfinch
 Goldfinch
 Bullfinch
 Crossbill
 Cirl bunting
 Rock bunting
 Yellowhammer

Mammals

Southern chamois *Rupicapra pyrenaica*
 subsp *parva*
 Hedgehog

Reptiles/ amphibians

Wall lizard
 Midwife toad tadpoles

Butterflies

Large white
 Clouded yellow
 Red admiral
 Wall
 Speckled wood
 Common blue

Other notable invertebrates

Blue-winged grasshopper
 Hummingbird hawkmoth
 Signal crayfish (*left*)



Flowers

Only those in flower noted, except where noted, with some common northern European species not noted

Day 1, Picos de Europa

Andryala integrifolia a furry-leaved composite
 Round-leaved fluellen *Kickxia spuria* (in Teresa's garden)
 Wild carrot *Daucus carota*
 Alfafa (lucerne) *Medicago sativa*
 Fringed pink *Dianthus monspessulanus*
 Black knapweed, rayed form *Centaurea nigra*
 Old man's beard *Clematis vitalba*
 Leafless crocus *Crocus nudiflorus*
 Merendera *Merendera pyrenaica*
 Harebell *Campanula rotundifolia*
Genista legionensis – a compact broom, not in flower
 Common rockrose *Helianthemum nummularium*
 Alpine birdsfoot trefoil *Lotus alpinus*

Day 2, La Tuercas

Chaenorhinum or Malling toadflax *Chaenorhinum origanifolium*
Linaria badalii (no English name)
Spanish bellflower *Campanula hispanica*
Lavender *Lavandula lanata*
Field eryngo *Eryngium campestre*
Spanish oyster plant *Scolymus hispanicus*
Fennel *Foeniculum vulgare*
Hoary mullein *Verbascum pulverulentum*
Small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*
Spanish broom *Spartium junceum*

Day 3, Picos de Europa

Great masterwort (or mountain sanicle) *Astrantia major*
Viper's bugloss *Echium vulgare*
Bloody cranesbill *Geranium sanguineum*
Thornapple (fruiting) *Datura stramonium*
Black nightshade *Solanum nigrum*
A toadflax *Antirrhinum braun-blanquetii*
(right)



Ferns

Holly fern
Maidenhair spleenwort
Black spleenwort
Maidenhair fern
Wall rue
Hard fern
Lemon-scented fern
Bracken
Shield fern sp.



Photos by Chris Durdin, except dipper and southern chamois by Teresa Farino.
Above: from the bridge in Potes