

**RSPB**  
**PYRENEES HOLIDAY TOUR REPORT**



10 - 17 May 1989

Chris Durdin



## **RSPB HOLIDAY TOUR TO THE SPANISH PYRENEES**

**10 – 17 MAY 1989 Leader: Chris Durdin**

### Wednesday 10 May – Heathrow to Berdún

Thirteen of us met at the Iberian check-in area at Terminal 2 – Bernie Schwartz and Charlotte Adelman, who met us in Berdún, making our party of fifteen. The flight to Barcelona was less than two hours, where we were met by Charis Boucher and headed westwards along the motorway.

The five-hour drive was broken twice, once for a drink shortly before leaving the motorway, and an hour before Berdún for our evening meal. A glass or two of Rioja over supper helped us to get to know each other, and the remainder of the journey passed quickly. The large, luxurious coach wound its way with surprisingly little difficulty to the archway into Berdún, where we walked those few yards up the hill to our home for the week.

Then it was into the churchyard for the first of many "scops owling" sessions. Your leader whistled into the gloom, and before long the scops owl replied. Soon it was perched on the edge of the roof to our right, the silhouette of a small owl plain enough. The very similar sound of the midwife toad was also heard before we wandered off to listen to nightingales and watch the distant lightning over the mountains.

### Thursday 11 May – Around Berdún – to the Río Veral and the Río Aragon.

Last night's lightning came to nothing; a fine and very hot day. A pre-breakfast walk along the parapets was a useful introduction to some of the special local birds. Serins twittered noisily, a black redstart here and a girl bunting there. Although it seemed a little early in the morning for birds of prey, there was a black kite at the end of the rubbish chute and an Egyptian vulture too, which sat around for a while. A rock sparrow was in its usual position on the electricity wires over the bare ground at the end of the village. Most of us saw it well then, which was fortunate as it proved rather elusive for much of the week, which is typical of the species as a whole if not normally the case at Berdún.

After breakfast at Prudencia's and a few introductory words from John Boucher we set off towards the Río Veral. A melodious warbler sang unmelodiously, showing itself well, before we headed into 'the Badlands', to use John Boucher's description. Nightingales were soon seen well as well as heard. A woodlark danced over us for a while showing its classic bat-like flight, and there were crested larks and skylarks too. About a dozen honey buzzards came through, circled over us and headed north - late migrants no doubt. The raptors were then coming thick and fast; black kite, red kite and two superb pale phase booted eagles.

"You won't get a better view of a booted eagle than that," I said to Bernie, but I was wrong as it came nearer and nearer and hung in the air over us.

We crossed the bridge over the Veral, where a Cetti's warbler shouted from the scrub. Both pied and spotted flycatchers were hunting from the hedgerow round the little field on the left, and a golden oriole flashed by into the poplars. But the morning was already running out, and we climbed the hill, flabbergasted by the numbers and variety of the birds of prey.

During lunch at Pru's someone glanced outside and noticed a large raptor, and before long we were all on the veranda watching a thermal-full of some 40 griffon vultures with an Egyptian or two thrown in for completeness.

Walking down to the Río Aragon after lunch, we were escorted again by the small dog with the bald patch that was with us in the morning. But not all the village dogs we passed seemed so friendly, somehow.

The 'wet-my-lips' call of quails came insistently from the corn, and a few of us descended through a patch of garrigue in the vain hope of flushing one. What we found instead was a woodchat shrike and a red-backed shrike side by side on the same tree. The red-backed shrike soon disappeared but the woodchat was seen well by all. So was a bird that at first seemed to be a singing pipit on a tree but turned out to be another woodlark, and there were linnets and stonechats a-plenty as we turned the corner down to the river.

Away from the bird line, scarce swallowtails and Cleopatra butterflies drifted past and we admired the red sainfoin crop. A deep red vetch was identified as brown vetch, dragon's teeth – another vetch – was found by the roadside and some magnificent spikes of lady orchid and early spider orchid were photographed.

After watching the great reed warblers in the reedbed and briefly exploring the poplar plantation, many were glad to accept a lift home from John and Viv Boucher, the dog included. Those who braved the heat to walk back added a few score more corn buntings to the day's tally.

### Friday 12 May – St Juan de la Peña

The early morning birdwatchers by the Veral failed to find the ortolan bunting, which stayed absent all week, but did discover subalpine warblers singing in the hedgerows beyond the river.

Alberto, our birdwatching Severiano Ballesteros look-alike coach driver, took us first to the charming village of Santa Cruz. Higher up the mountain we stopped at a viewpoint from where we watched a young griffon on the cliffs below. Meanwhile, the botanists found hepatica, early purple orchids, common globularia, Pyrenean violet and cowslips galore under the mistletoe-bearing pines and the white-flowered amelanchier shrub. We all admired a Pyrenean snakeshead fritillary flowering amongst the rocks.

It was raining as we arrived at St Juan de la Peña (St John of the Rock) so we sheltered in the coffee-shop. But the sun came out for lunch, which we enjoyed on the hilltop opposite the monastery. The tiny rush-leaved narcissus stole the show here, along with more hepatica in the woods and some elder-flowered orchids. Heading back into the woods the heavens opened and, after sheltering for a while under some holly, we ran for the bus. Fortunately there was then a long break in the rain during which we dried off as we walked through the woods in this 'Natural Monument' and round the 17th century monastery. The highlight was a party of crossbills, which rested and fed high on a pine tree; we watched a red male extract a seed from a cone. No crested tits or citril finches, but Bonelli's warblers sang and a strange raptor-like call in the woods might have been a black woodpecker.

Down by the 12th century monastery below, now substantially rebuilt, crag martins buzzed around and a firecrest flitted for a while in the trees. Then great excitement as a lammergeier flew over – they don't seem to hang around like griffons – so we piled out the bus and the first few saw it as it disappeared over the mountains beyond.

The 'scops owling' party in the churchyard that evening had the best view to date as the male settled in a floodlit tree to look at your whistling leader. The barn owls were seen going in and out of a hole in the church where no doubt they were nesting.

### Saturday 13 May – the high Pyrenees: Col de Portalet, and Formigal

The superb mountain scenery helped the drive in Alberto's safe hands pass quickly, and we descended from the coach into the cool mountain air amongst the souvenir shops. The pass here at the French border is 1,794 metres high, and there were several snow patches to cross as we headed up the hill by the frontier.

The falcons up above the coach were kestrels, somehow appearing larger and more peregrine-like as they flew with the alpine choughs. Black redstarts hopped from roof to roof; wheatears, ravens, house and crag martins and skylarks were added to the list. Most of the pipits were meadow pipits, but the odd water pipit – now considered a separate species to the rock pipit – did not sit around long enough for good views to be had.

As we climbed the hill, a large furry mammal came into view; an alpine marmot, introduced from the Alps into the Pyrenees. But it was mainly the flowers that captured our attention as we climbed and then picnicked. Tiny cowslips were emerging everywhere and wild daffodils were at different stages of growth as the snow melted. There were a few of the beautiful, delicate Pyrenean snowbell, and sheets of trumpet gentians. Spurge laurel was growing sheltered by a rock; and after careful examination of the alpine flower book, alpine pasque flower, yellow saxifrage, Pyrenean and amplexicaule buttercups and others were listed.

Several chamois (or isard in the Pyrenees) were found beneath the rock face above, including two kids. We potted and botanised some more, then after three hours or so on the mountain descended to take tea in a frontier cafe. Perhaps because it was Saturday the pass was busy with travellers; surprising when the pass is not always open through May.

Just below Formigal we stopped and explored the flower-rich meadows there, a treat for even the most hardened birder. Thousands of elder-flowered orchids, both yellow and purple, mingled with spring and trumpet gentians to create an astonishing carpet of colour. In damper flushes, pink birdseye primroses delighted the eye and globe flowers were beginning to emerge. On drier slopes, cowslips and early purple orchids gave more of a lowland feel to the area.

All too soon we had to head down the mountain, but we did stop briefly as a Montagu's harrier (a migrant?) rose off the hillside and flew round the distant valley below.

That evening John Boucher kindly showed us slides of Berdún and around, giving us an insight into the history of our home for the week, with a few bird of prey and wild flower slides to follow.

### Sunday 14 May – Arbayún and Lumbier

An 8am breakfast today to help us get to the Hoz de Arbayún in good time for the birds of prey. The Embalse de Yesa en route was birdless, save for one grebe.

The gorge (= Hoz) at Arbayún is especially renowned for its griffon vultures, and they did not disappoint. The platform over the edge of the gorge made it easy to fix telescopes on the far cliffs where we watched a young griffon being fed. Crag martins were everywhere, with good views above and below, and we all saw the alpine swifts which up to now had been mile high dots which your leader had failed to convince everyone else about! In scrub nearby, underneath the perching stonechats, there were asphodels by the score and more lady orchids.

The car park at the start of the Hoz de Lumbier was full with Sunday day trippers but although some cars had driven through the gorge on the old railway track we were to follow, the birdwatching was none the worse for them. Indeed the star bird of our trip – and of the Pyrenees – came over us in the busy car park. Martin first spotted the unusual bird of prey, and the lammergeier flew steady towards then low over us before disappearing slowly into the distance.

We could have stopped there and then but we didn't, instead walking through the first tunnel into the gorge. Crag and house martins were nesting on the rocks and several choughs (red-beaked) flew round us. The pigeons looked as near as you can get to true rock doves. Scores of griffons moved endlessly and effortlessly overhead.

A cold wind hurried us on into the second and longer tunnel. Torches were not really needed; perhaps Prudencia's carrots were helping us to see in the dark. But when the light at the end of the tunnel turned out to be a motorbike coming through it made one wonder what meeting a larger vehicle would be like. We stopped for lunch away from the steep section of the gorge and the cold draughts, sitting down to a chorus of nightingales and Cetti's warblers and a procession of crag martins.

We moved off the railway track for better views of two bee-eaters prospecting a sand bank high up on the left of us, the telescope giving us a good view of this wonderful bird. These slopes were rich for orchids too, as we added monkey, pyramidal and wasp orchids to our tally. A golden oriole flashed between the riverside poplars.

The first arrivals at our destination of Liédena tried to kid the second wave that the promised bar was shut, but before arguments could break out a strange thrush was seen disappearing over a roof top. On a wall beyond then perched a superb male rock thrush; no doubt the previous bird was the female.

We then adjourned to slake our thirst at the bar, which was also the rendezvous with the coach which then took us home to Berdún.

### Monday 15 May – Hoz de Biniés

It was to be another hot day, but it was distinctly chilly as most of the party met for a 7am walk to the Veral. The subalpine warbler performed for all to see, and golden orioles flew closely but quickly past. The usual dog appeared and escorted us back up the hill for breakfast.

Fortified by bread and marmalade, we were ferried past Biniés village on the hill to the southern end of Biniés gorge. There a superb Pyrenean saxifrage was throwing out its remarkable flower spike on the rocks above us, while nearer to hand was a show of petrocotis, found only in the west Pyrenees. Our alpine flower book also mentioned a petrocotis found only in the Jaca region, but this appeared to be the more common one, *Petrocotis pyrenaica*.

Choughs, griffons, alpine swifts and ctal martins appeared almost immediately, and not long after a short-toed eagle. Those specialities of fast flowing rivers, grey wagtails, dippers and common sandpipers, all put in appearances keeping still for long enough to study then through the telescope. The dippers here are the black-bellied type, the usual continental version as opposed to the British chestnut-bellied bird.

All in all a quiet meandering day, with a stop for a paddle and plenty of time over lunch to struggle with a choice of five different tin openers for the tuna. Past the end of the gorge we wandered by the river, for a while and looked at and listened to some frogs in the shallows. But the heat was too much, and we soon returned to the shade of the gorge. Yet more griffons overhead, a red squirrel for some, a further view of the black-bellied dipper, then we failed to find Vera's sunglasses on the rocks by the river.

Viv Boucher put some reviving drinks in the back of the car, encouraging several of us to walk back from the bridge over the Río Veral rather than accept a lift home. In the early evening sun we encountered a patch of excellent birds. Watching some bee eaters and the trip's first sand martins, we heard a 'chack' behind us, a stonechat alarmed at a red-backed shrike no doubt in its territory. Following this shrike, we found another, this time a woodchat, which for a while perched side by side with the first. A black-eared wheatear was followed by a tawny pipit, and finally a rock bunting.

With some minor navigation problems overcome, we emerged onto the track alongside the Veral. A charming view of Berdún was complemented by the locals of all ages busy planting and tending their crops. The dash up the hill through the Badlands was interrupted by a fine pale phase booted eagle. We all made it to Prudencia's not too long after 8pm for another of those wonderful meals where plates of food kept appearing, all washed down with a generous supply of red wine.

#### Tuesday 16 May – Sotonera and Riglos

It was another hot day as we paused to admire the cliffs of Riglos from the other side of the river. The ever-energetic Angus meanwhile found Sardinian warblers on a hillside not far away, and we all watched probably four birds flying to and fro, in and out amongst the scrub.

A right turn down a track into and through the village of Montmesa, then a left after a small bridge brought us to the starting point for a walk to the Embalse de Sotonera. Alberto moved the bus to the shade while we set off towards the lake, thankful for the breeze which took the edge off the heat and the mosquitoes away. A tawny pipit and the regular zit...zit of fan-tailed warblers promised much; Cetti's and great reed warblers underlined the wetland feel of the place. So to find the lake some 2 kilometres receded from where your leader last saw it was quite a shock. The lone mallard we saw earlier was clearly searching for water.

We trekked across the dried lake bed through the tamarisk bushes, and from a ridge looked at the lake in the distance through the heat haze. So, giving up on wetland birds, we pursued a calandra lark, which we failed to see well. Steve and Janet explored a little and found enough wetland to support a redshank and a water rail. Then lunch in the shade by the coach was in the company of bee-eaters which Alberto was watching as we returned.

Riglos was extremely hot. After watching a woodchat shrike by the coach, we walked past the washhouse up the charming but very steep streets to the church. Sadly the black wheatears and blue rock thrushes failed to put in an appearance, but there were choughs, alpine swifts and the usual griffons. Meanwhile Charlotte got herself invited into the farm buildings under the cliffs and emerged holding a goat kid.

Walking on through the heat, we found few birds and stopped to study irrigation systems from the shade. Returning to the church, a superb adult Egyptian vulture circled low over us before we headed back down the hill. The Riglos bar was shut, but Alberto soon drove us to another.

John Boucher joined us at our last supper in Berdún. The as always superb meal was accompanied by champagne, followed by a few words, and the presentation of our collection, a British tin opener and a kiss to Prudencia. Then after the bird log we looked yet again for scops and barn owls into the small hours.

Here's a couple of the limericks read out over supper:

Vera thought that she'd seen lammergeier  
As the griffon flew higher and higher  
But she said with such pathos  
Quebrantahuesos  
That no-one could call her a liar.

One morning a young lammergeier  
Flying over the monastery spire  
Said "This is the crunch"  
And dropped into lunch  
On two nuns, a monk and the Prior.

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In case you can't remember, quebrantahuesos is Spanish for lammergeier and means 'bonebreaker'. And quote of the week was from Charlotte over the bird log (which should be read in an American accent): "What about that cute little toe-less eagle?"

#### Wednesday 17 May – to Barcelona and home

An early breakfast, then away, though I fancy each of us has left a little of ourselves in Berdún. Two white storks were seen on the way home, one of those being on the cathedral in Huesca. Our packed lunch was eaten amongst the snails by the service station we'd called at on the outward journey, and the intrepid few found short-toed larks in the field behind the fence.

Charis Boucher left us, then Charlotte and Bernie went to catch the Paris train. Those who birdwatched to help pass the time discovered that the swifts were not pallid but that the starlings were no longer spotless. Two herons flew by, the last species to add to our trip list, and a fan-tailed warbler zit...zit...zitted beyond the car park.

Then to Heathrow and home.

**Daily log of birds seen. H = heard.**

	Barcelona to Berdún	Berdún	St Juan de la Peña	High Pyrenees	Arbayún & Riglos	Biniés	Sotonera & Riglos	Berdún to Barcelona
All dates are May 1989	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Great crested grebe							✓	
Grey heron								✓
White stork								✓
Mallard							✓	
Honey buzzard		✓						
Red kite		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black kite		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Buzzard	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
Booted eagle		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Egyptian vulture		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Griffon vulture		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Lammergeier			✓		✓			
Short-toed eagle				✓		✓		
Montagu's harrier				✓				
Marsh harrier							✓	
Kestrel	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-legged partridge					✓		✓	
Quail		H	H	H	H	H	H	
Water rail							✓	
Redshank							✓	
Common sandpiper		✓	✓		✓	✓		
Black-headed gull							✓	
Woodpigeon	✓	✓					✓	
Collared dove	✓							
Turtle dove		✓		✓	✓	✓	H	
Feral pigeon/rock dove	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cuckoo			H	H	H	✓	H	
Barn owl			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Scops owl	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Little owl	✓							
Swift	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Alpine swift			✓		✓	✓	✓	
Bee-eater	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hoopoe		✓	H	H	✓			
Green woodpecker			H		H	✓	✓	
Great spotted woodpecker		✓	✓				✓	
Black woodpecker			H?					
Short-toed lark								✓
Calandra lark							✓	
Crested lark	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Woodlark		✓			H			
Skylark		✓	✓	✓			✓	
Sand martin						✓		
Crag martin			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Swallow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House martin	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Tawny pipit						✓	✓	
Meadow pipit				✓				
Water pipit				✓				
Yellow (Spanish) wagtail		✓					H	
Grey wagtail		✓			✓	✓	H	
White wagtail		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-backed shrike		✓				✓		
Woodchat shrike		✓				✓	✓	
Dipper						✓		
Wren		✓	H		H	✓		
Dunnock			✓		H			
Cetti's warbler		✓	H		✓	H	✓	

May 1989	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Great reed warbler		✓					✓	
Melodious warbler		✓	✓	H	✓	✓	✓	
Garden warbler		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Blackcap		✓	H		H	✓		
Whitethroat							✓	
Sardinian warbler							✓	
Subalpine warbler			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Willow warbler				✓			✓	
Chiffchaff			✓					
Goldcrest			✓					
Firecrest			✓			✓		
Fan-tailed warbler							✓	✓
Pied flycatcher		✓						
Spotted flycatcher		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Whinchat		✓	✓			✓		
Stonechat		✓			✓	✓	✓	
Wheatear		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black-eared wheatear						✓		
Rock thrush					✓			
Black redstart		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Robin			✓	✓				
Nightingale		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Blackbird		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mistle thrush	✓		✓				✓	
Long-tailed tit			✓			✓		
Coat tit			H					
Blue tit			✓	✓		✓	✓	
Great tit		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Nuthatch			✓					
Corn bunting	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock bunting						✓		
Cirl bunting		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Chaffinch		✓	✓	✓	H	✓	✓	
Serin		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Greenfinch		H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Goldfinch	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Linnet		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Crossbill			✓					
House sparrow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Tree sparrow		✓						
Rock sparrow		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Starling								✓
Spotless starling	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Golden oriole		✓	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Jay		✓	✓	H		✓		
Magpie	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Chough					✓	✓	✓	
Alpine chough				✓				
Jackdaw					✓			
Carrion crow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Raven		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Total number of birds seen or heard: 109								

### TOUR PARTICIPANTS

Janet Benson  
Dr Angus Clappen  
Vera Carrick  
Dennis Barr  
Martin Read  
Steve Stagg  
David Whitelaw  
Robert and Elizabeth Pyke  
Barrie and Norah Coxon  
Felicity Branigan  
Charlotte Adelman and Bernie Schwartz

RSPB Leader: Chris Durdin, RSPB East Anglia Office

Our host: John Boucher, The Painting School, Calle Mayor 30, Berdún, Huesca, Spain.

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to Emma Alexander, for typing the report, and to Rob Hume for the cover illustration of black kites.

WP Ref: IE HO PY 2

### Postscript, 28 years later

This holiday report records my second visit to the Spanish Pyrenees as a holiday leader. It was scanned from a printed copy with Optical Character Recognition, with the errors that brings mostly ironed out, and the daily log of birds was re-typed. Apart from some light edits it appears much as the original did, including Rob Hume's splendid line drawing of black kites on the cover and an old version of the RSPB logo.

Chris Durdin, November 2017