

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

36 Thunder Lane, Thorpe St Andrew, Norwich NR7 0PX

Telephone: 01603 300552

www.honeyguide.co.uk E-mail: chris@honeyguide.co.uk



Puente del Congosto

These are my diary, wildlife lists and other notes from a recce trip to the Salamanca area in the southern part of the Spanish region of Castilla y León. I was looked after by Vega Bermejo from 'Birding in Spain's Wild West' www.birdinginspainswildwest.com and I stayed at Hotel Rural Salvatierra www.salvatierrarural.es.

The area has lots of 'Honeyguide potential', as I hope this report shows. The idea would be to come with a small group (at least first time around) in May 2020, with part of the appeal that there is lots still to discover.

Photos in this report were all taken on the recce. Large tortoiseshell by Vega Bermejo, others by Chris Durdin. Diary and wildlife lists by Chris.

South of Salamanca recce Spain's 'Wild West' 4 – 9 February 2019

DAILY DIARY

Monday 4 February – Stansted to Salamanca

A first for me: an overnight stay at Stansted Airport. The combination of parking in the long stay car park and the Hampton by Hilton Hotel within walking distance of the terminal worked well and is a sensible price. The covered walkway most of the way from the hotel to the terminal was welcome in the pouring rain.

All was smooth and to time for the Ryanair flight, arriving in Madrid at 11:45 which allowed plenty of time to collect luggage and a coffee and to find the bus terminal (out of the doors of Terminal 1 and turn left) and the Avanza stop for the pre-booked bus journey to Salamanca, which set off at 13:00. A lovely sunny day though the countryside struck me as looking dry as we headed west, an impression later confirmed by what Vega told me about low rainfall in autumn and winter so far. It was a fairly uneventful journey, partly enlivened by counting red kites: 21 by the time the bus arrived in Salamanca just after 15:30, plus a sprinkling of griffon vultures and buzzards and a male marsh harrier.



Salamanca: Roman Bridge, River Tormes and cathedral.

Given we were heading well south of Salamanca, it was an ideal chance to see a bit of the city before the more rural parts planned for the recce. A short drive took us to a car park by the Roman Bridge over the River Tormes. There were several wintering chiffchaffs in around beds of reedmace, a little egret and a couple of grey wagtails, and then a mammal in the water caught my eye. It was so close to some people on a gravel bank I wondered if it might just have been a small dog, but then we had several brief but clear views of an otter. It swam towards the bridge then appeared again on the other side, with more quick glimpses of the otter on the surface of the water.



Salamanca's *plaza mayor*.

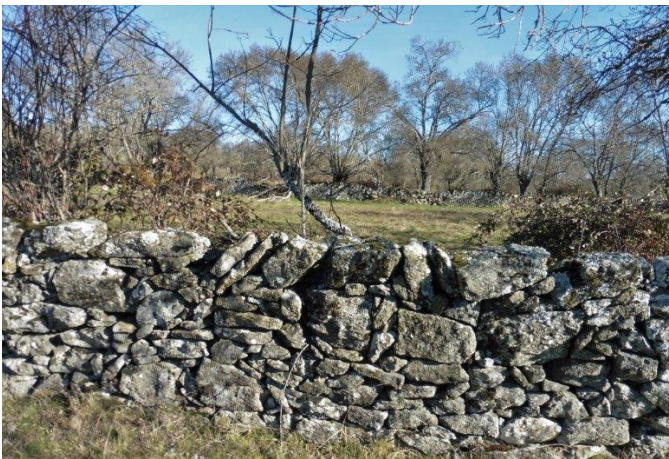
We walked past many elegant sandstone buildings – one with a black redstart – including Salamanca's two cathedrals, old (14th century) and new (16th-18th centuries), going as far as the *plaza mayor* (main square). Vega's background includes sculpture, so she was alert to various details: a spaceman in a repaired detail done at the time of the moon landings located low on one cathedral was a nice feature. An otter was again on show as we returned over the Roman Bridge, this time a youngster, and a Cetti's warbler showed well.

Driving south, there was a puzzle. Occupied storks' nests in a row on pylons were all in the left-hand side of the roughly T-shaped structures, in one case with a ravens' nest, also a bulky structure, underneath. The pylons ran in a line between the old main road and the motorway, and it may simply be that they all chose to be on the side of the pylon that is away from the motorway. Most of what we saw here was open holm oak *dehesa*, reminiscent of Extremadura. We took a small detour to find a shop in Guijuelo, Spain's ugliest town, suggests Vega, the reason being that it is dominated by ham factories that prepare Spain's celebrated *jamón ibérico*. On then to the Hotel Rural Salvatierra, where Vega's husband Alfonso joined us for an evening meal.

Tuesday 5 February – local sites, Pinedas and Candelario

Cranes: a chorus of bugling greeted me in the half-light as I opened the patio door overlooking the reservoir that runs alongside Salvatierra. They had been roosting in the shallows on the far side. It was difficult to say how many: a few dozen flew off and I lost them against the dark slopes beyond the reservoir. A few remained and were still calling after breakfast. There was a serin and meadow pipits from the patio, too.

Our first stop this morning was a walk through a heath of broom and lavender (not in flower in February, of course). A woodlark was singing the entire time we were there, this bright and sunny morning, though it wasn't until we returned to Vega's vehicle that it showed, perched on a post. Several azure-winged magpies fed on rough pasture as did mistle thrushes. The place will be alive with warblers and other birds in spring, you could see. A feature of this area is stone walls: any number of tiny fields, some with a few livestock, usually cattle, occasionally a horse, often interspersed with wintry-looking deciduous trees.



Stone walls are a feature of the area; a Queen of Spain fritillary alights on some old baler twine.

We drove on to a quiet road where we stopped under a close cliff on which there were at least nine griffon vultures. It's probably a nesting site, though that couldn't be confirmed from our viewing angle. Here as elsewhere during the day there were early flowers on sun-soaked banks: field marigold, ramping fumitory, henbit dead-nettle and other mainly ruderal species. There were distinctive scrubby species typical of this area, too: *Daphne gnidium*, phillyrea (false olive) and gum cistus, for example.

Next stop was by a charming river that ran under a pretty bridge. A surprise here was about three Queen of Spain fritillary butterflies, looking smart and freshly emerged. (They can winter in any larval stage or as an adult, these perhaps being imagos freshly out of a chrysalis.) A walking path / driveable track led to a water mill, past banks with bee-eater nesting holes and through what was in effect ash *dehesa*, including some old specimen trees and some very recently pollarded. We had our lunch on a natural rock and grass platform under a large and leafless Montpellier maple. We found *Crocus carpetanus* in the short turf and a green sandpiper dashed along the river below.



Crocus carpetanus; ash *dehesa*; some of Modesto's marvellous wood carvings.

Driving on, we reached a bar called La Cueva del Lobo (Wolf's Cave) in the village of Pinedas, which had some old farming tools hanging on a wall. After a café con leche we talked to the three elderly gentlemen in the bar. One of these, Modesto, was an accomplished carver in wood and he took us to see his collection of wooden oxen and carts and much more which had recently featured on regional TV. Two oxen and a cart took him a month to make, he said. A small confession: somehow, I have managed to get away with buying wooden spatulas for my wife Julie (e.g. Estonian juniper and Cretan olive) and it was an opportunity to add to the collection, namely with a Montpellier maple wooden spoon. The lady behind the bar had shown us a short film on a smart phone of villagers doing the local equivalent of Morris dancing by the village church, so we had a very brief look at said church before moving on.

Our next visit was a path with views towards various mountains, with good eagle potential in spring. Tree heather and strawberry tree were growing here and no doubt lots of flowers later in the year. A red admiral, a large tortoiseshell and another Queen of Spain fritillary enjoyed the sunshine.



Snow above Candelario; a former wolf trap.

We'd seen more than enough to fill one Honeyguide day, but sometimes on a recce it helps to squeeze more, so in the late afternoon we went into the hills towards Candelario. Tucked into a plantation of Scots and black pines was an ice well, which in former days would have had snow packed into it in the winter to then create an ice supply for the summer. Just beyond that was an old wolf trap, a large pit that would have been baited by shepherds with a goat kid but so designed that once in it a wolf was trapped by the overhang on the walls and would be killed. It was colder and higher, and we had a stretch of road with snow before reaching the pretty mountain village of Candelario. We passed but didn't stop at woods that in spring would hold the Iberian subspecies of pied flycatcher. Then it was time to head back to Salvatierra.

Wednesday 6 February – Puente del Congosto and elsewhere

After breakfast, I took a short walk around Salvatierra village. The number of remnants of buildings had a stark beauty in the winter sunshine this frosty morning. The reservoir of Santa Teresa lies alongside Salvatierra and runs a good way north and south as well. Building the reservoir added momentum to rural depopulation, with many villagers offered and happy to move to new houses elsewhere, not least as some lost their farmland. The deep-water reservoir is like many in Spain being generally rather poor from the wildlife point of view, though there were many great crested grebes, gulls that had roosted overnight and the cranes mentioned yesterday were calling and moving.



Remains of many former buildings by the reservoir in Salvatierra; River Tormes; near Puente del Congosto.

Vega arrived at 9:30 like yesterday and we started by looking adjacent to Salvatierra, including at an old and still used farm building on the edge of the village made from slate. Birds were numerous: as well as many finches – chaffinches were especially common – there was a group of rock sparrows. Farther on were several Thekla larks and it was nice to see a hoopoe; I'd also heard one on yesterday morning's walk.

Moving on, we stopped by the River Tormes (at Cespedosa) where a fish bypass has been installed by a weir. We took a short walk along a newly created path, which could have potential in spring. We drove on to near a low ridge where two golden eagles flew past and did a half-hearted aerial display.

It was late morning when we drove along a track that would also be a lovely walk to the River Tormes near Puente del Congosto. Alongside this was a patch of poplars where a short-toed treecreeper showed well. It's a haunt of golden orioles and nightingales in spring, says Vega. Within sight of a mill we looked over a lagoon held back by a low weir. Its potential for odonata led me to search the twigs of an ash overhanging the water where I found the egg-laying scars of western willow spreadwing (willow emerald damselfly), following up my well-known enthusiasm for this species at home.

Puente del Congosto is also the name of the nearby small town, with two bridges (*puentes*), castle and boulder-strewn river a very attractive combination (see picture on cover). But before exploring we were treated to lunch by Vega's friend Paloma who has delightful four-room *casa rural* here (www.elgorgocil.es). The sign on the *casa rural* has a picture of a dipper which we failed to find when we walked there after lunch, though we did see a green sandpiper, crag martin, two wagtail species and several Iberian water frogs, plus a male blue rock thrush on a village rooftop. A hard place to leave.

We moved onto the edge of the Sierra de Gredos at Aliseda de Tormes. Two black vultures flew by. It was briefly quite steep then levelled out alongside scrub with a big patch of the grey-leaved (and in season yellow-flowered) shrubby pea *Adenocarpus argyrophyllus*, albeit not in flower, a central Iberian speciality also at Monfrague NP and often (wrongly) quoted as endemic to Extremadura. Beyond that, on a February afternoon it was difficult to judge the area's potential in spring.



We descended then went up again over an even more upland area at Tremedal. Above the tree line it was granite and peat with a very different feel, likely to have a different (if limited) botanical mix and higher altitude birds such as water pipit, rock thrush and ortolan bunting, suggesting merit in trying this (and for Vega to return to learn more) in spring.

Finally, by now in the half-light, we visited the mountain village of Neila de San Miguel. One building alone was worth the visit: a church bell tower on a large granite outcrop, complete with a flight of steps, one of the most eccentric buildings I've ever seen (*left*). Perhaps it was simply an opportunistic economy measure to have a cut-price tower for the adjacent church.

Thursday 7 February – Herrezuelo area and Alba de Tormes

We headed roughly east today. On one side of the road near Herrezuelo was a small, active gravel pit with a row of last year's sand martin holes and a solitary moorhen. On the other side of the road in a group of poplars were many white storks' nests, occupied and busy; within this is a small heronry, though no herons were visible today.

The idea today was to look at an extensive arable area to assess it for steppe birds and other wildlife. My conclusion: very dull and birdless! On the far side of this extended arable area was a wetland, Azud Riobos, which had a flock of ruffs and various winter wildfowl. But they, like the lagoon, were distant: a place you'd check out if convenient but not one to travel a distance to. Still, this is what a recce is for. Geography also ruled out a walk by riverside scrub at an area called Ventosa del Río Almar.

By now the early cloud had cleared as we stopped at the strange fortified tower in the small town of Alba de Tormes. It felt like this was well worth checking out. Vega went into the information centre while I walked to some raised platforms. These gave a view over what looked like a nice lake below – actually a dammed part of the River Tormes on which today were a great white egret and many ducks. Below the platforms were pits that it turned out had only been excavated in the 1990s, revealing a range of items now inside the tower including a range of elegant ceramic tiles. Vega appeared with a lady who explained some history including French invaders, Spanish resistance and a link with English royals from Stuart times. Up a flight of stairs were some remarkable Italian frescos.



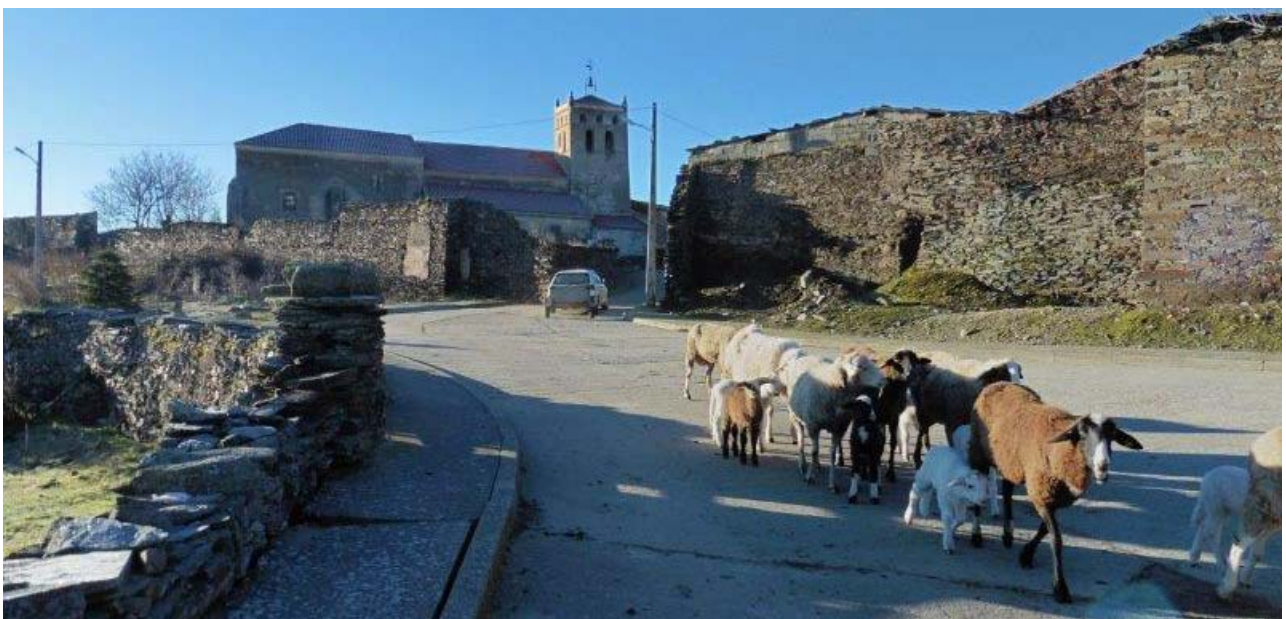
Castle and riverside birdwatching area in Alba de Tormes.

We moved onto the widened River Tormes, which would make a delightful stop in spring. Today there were gadwalls and shovelers as well as the egret and with reeds and reedmace there would much more in spring. We then went on to Vega's house where Alfonso has prepared delicious soup and fish stew for a late lunch, and we took time to try and to experience Alfonso's many musical instruments, mostly percussion, which he uses in local events and presentations.

Vega is involved with the protection of crop-nesting Montagu's harriers and we returned to the Herrezuelo area to the arable farmland where this happens. It was quite a contrast to this morning's birdless arable: it was alive with birds. A flock of some 300 rock sparrows settled on wires. There were corn buntings everywhere, calandra larks flew around and wintering skylarks moved in small flocks. A gang of red kites and a flock of spotless starlings flew away from silage in a scruffy farmyard. Perhaps attracted by all this life, a peregrine sat on a pylon. The classic steppe birds – bustards, sandgrouse, stone-curlews – are absent here, but the area is well-placed and worth visiting.



We headed back, passing groups of cranes under holm oaks, a scene reminiscent of Extremadura (*above*).



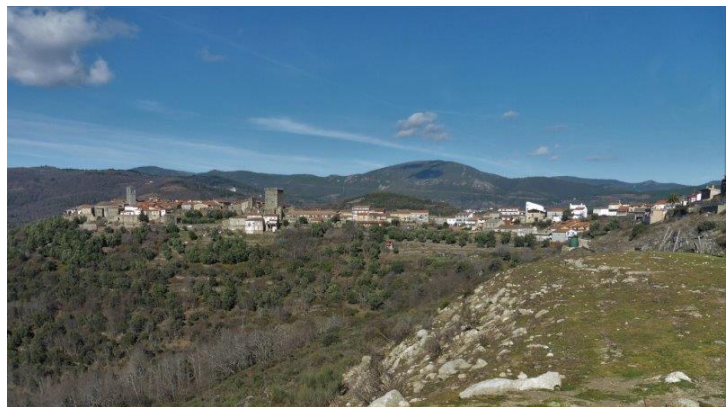
Early morning in Salvatierra. Note the splendid slate walls.

Friday 8 February – Miranda del Castanar, Monleón and Casafranca

We started the day by meeting German, the owner of Hotel Rural Salvatierra, to run through practical things like the number (10) and configuration of rooms (a mix of twins and doubles; all rooms have showers, some are over baths) and food/special diets. All good for a small Honeyguide group.

Another bright and frosty morning, warming up enough for more Queen of Spain fritillaries and large tortoiseshells to show from time to time, though with a cool edge to the wind for much of the day. We started with the most distant destination, though pausing at a roadside stop just before Miranda del Castanar to pop into woodland of strawberry trees *Arbutus unedo*. These were serious, tall trees rather than the scrubby trees that are more typical. There was a discrete sign marking the spot, showing it is recognised though it is not advertised from the road, an ideal combination.

We parked in Plaza de Toros in the beautiful hilltop village of Miranda del Castanar. Beyond the small castle we walked through narrow streets with pretty houses often leaning in on each other. Souvenirs in a small shop included cloth dragons made by the lady in charge, recognising the emblem of the town in folk tradition that is now being encouraged as the place's heritage. For birds, in spring/summer it's a good place for aerial feeders and birds of prey, though quiet today. We stopped for a light lunch at the Mandrágora – mandrake – bar. Driving away from Miranda del Castanar was a well-located viewpoint over the town, ideal for a photo and to see a soaring then stooping sparrowhawk.



Miranda del Castanar: street scene and looking over the town from a viewpoint.

Along the way was a crag with crag martins opposite an exposed rock – as though strata had fallen off – with the clear pattern of trace fossils, the preserved tracks in the then undersea substrate, such as trilobites¹. Farther along we stopped where an Iberian grey shrike perched on brambles.



Moving on, approaching Monleón we walked through a short stretch of open woodland into grassland with huge granite pavements, adjacent to a small river. Monleón was a tiny village that nonetheless had a castle, overlooking an open area and river which is a reliable place for nightingales in season. Another nice place to potter.



Another day, another castle, this one at Monleón; granite pavements nearby. Top: trace fossils.

¹ More information on <http://www.trilobites.info/trace.htm>

Finally, we explored around Casafranca, walking into a dehesa that started with pollarded Pyrenean oaks around a picnic tables then became a more typical holm oak *dehesa*, but one you could get into (so many you cannot) and with good understorey of shrubs rather than overgrazed like so many. Around the corner we also entered from another direction through oak woodland, then *dehesa* and finally an abandoned marble quarry. We collected Alfonso from his and Vega's home village of Navahombela and returned for a final meal at Hotel Rural Salvatierra.

Saturday 9 February – Salamanca, Madrid and home

I had a bus to catch at 11:00. Vega and Alfonso took me to Salamanca where, after a coffee and game of table football, I caught the bus to Madrid Barajas Airport, which took exactly the 2 hours 45 minutes it said on the ticket, including first calling at Terminal 4. The likely plan for a group plus leader is to collect a minibus at the airport, hence the notes below about services on route:

Note about services / fuel between Salamanca and Madrid

Fuel and food (both sides of the road) just east of Ávila, which (heading west) is a little less than half way between Madrid and Salamanca, no more services farther west. Heading east, after the tunnel under Sierra de Guadarrama, more services both sides of the motorway at Villalba, just after the *peaje*. Then BP garages both sides just after Madrid regional border. Two fuel stations passed when the motorway hugs the north side of Madrid, but only by coming off the motorway, then along several kilometres of road parallel to the motorway. Last fuel station just after the turn to the airport. Then still a long way to go, including a short *peaje* on the bus route, though also signs to the airport to the right of that. A big loop into the airport.

WILDLIFE LISTS

BIRDS H = heard

Little grebe	Black-headed gull	Mistle thrush
Great crested grebe	Lesser black-backed gull	Cetti's warbler
Cormorant	Feral pigeon	Sardinian warbler H
Little egret	Woodpigeon	Blackcap H
Great white egret	Collared dove	Chiffchaff
Grey heron	Hoopoe	Long-tailed tit
White stork	[Bee-eater: nesting holes]	Blue tit
Gadwall	Great spotted woodpecker	Great tit
Teal	Calandra lark	Short-toed treecreeper
Mallard	Crested lark	Nuthatch
Shoveler	Theckla lark	Azure-winged magpie
Red kite	Woodlark	Magpie
Griffon vulture	Skylark	Carrión crow
Black vulture	Crag martin	Jackdaw
Marsh harrier	(Sand martin, house martin, swallow,	Raven
Sparrowhawk	red-rumped swallow: holes & nests)	Spotless starling
Buzzard	Meadow pipit	House sparrow
Golden eagle	Water pipit	Rock sparrow
Common kestrel	Grey wagtail	Chaffinch
Peregrine	White wagtail	Serin
Red-legged partridge	Wren H	Greenfinch
Moorhen	Robin	Goldfinch
Coot H	Black redstart	Linnet
Crane	Stonechat	Cirl bunting H
Lapwing	Blue rock thrush	Corn bunting
Ruff	Blackbird	
Green sandpiper	Song thrush	

MAMMALS

Wild boar (rootings)	Otter	Fox (roadkill)	Roe deer	Rabbit
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REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Iberian wall lizard	Iberian pool frog
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BUTTERFLIES

Green-striped white	Queen of Spain fritillary	Large tortoiseshell	Red admiral
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OTHER INVERTEBRATES

Pine processionary moth (tents)	7-spot ladybird	Blue-winged grasshopper
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Left: Large tortoiseshell (VB).

Right: Strawberry tree
Arbutus unedo in flower.



PLANTS

Numbers on the right refer to Blamey & Grey-Wilson, Mediterranean Wild Flowers.

Where there is no number, some but not all of these are plants in floras from northern Europe.

NiF = not in flower. F = in fruit. P = planted.

Common northern European plants e.g. shepherd's purse, groundsel, are not usually noted.

Trees are not a complete list, though several are included as the species give a feel for the habitats.

Pinaceae		
<i>Pinus pinea</i>	Stone / umbrella pine	3
<i>Pinus nigra</i>	Black pine	43
<i>Pinus sylvestica</i>	Scots pine	
Fagaceae		
<i>Quercus coccifera</i>	Kermes oak	24
<i>Quercus rotundifolia</i>	Holm oak	26
<i>Quercus suber</i>	Cork oak	27
<i>Quercus pyrenaica</i>	Pyrenean oak	
<i>Quercus faginea</i>	Portuguese oak	
Urticaceae		
<i>Urtica urens</i>	Annual nettle	
Fumariaceae		
<i>Fumaria capreolata</i>	Ramping fumitory	303
Polygonaceae		
<i>Rumex scutatus</i>	Rubble dock (NiF)	
Cruciferae		
<i>Sisymbrium altissimum</i>	Tall rocket	
Crassulaceae		
<i>Umbilicus rupestris</i>	Navelwort (NiF)	396
Saxifragaceae		
<i>Saxifraga granulata</i>	Meadow saxifrage	
Leguminosae		
<i>Adenocarpus argyrophyllus</i>	Spanish adenocarpus (NiF)	
Geraniaceae		
<i>Geranium molle</i>	Dovesfoot cranesbill	741
<i>Geranium lucidum</i>	Shining cranesbill (NiF)	749
<i>Erodium cicutarium</i>	Common storksbill	761
Eupobiaceae		
<i>Mercurialis annua</i>	Annual mercury	820
Meliaceae		
<i>Melia azedarach</i>	Indian bead tree or Persian lilac (NiF) P	843
Thymelaeaceae		
<i>Daphne gnidium</i>	Daphne (NiF)	936
Cistaceae		
<i>Cistus ladanifer</i>	Gum cistus (NiF)	971
Cactaceae		
<i>Opuntia maxima</i> (= <i>ficus-indica</i>)	Prickly pear	1040
Umbelliferae		
<i>Ferula communis</i>	Giant fennel (NiF)	1141
Ericaceae		
<i>Arbutus unedo</i>	Strawberry tree	1176
<i>Erica arborea</i>	Tree heath	1178
Oleaceae		
<i>Phillyrea angustifolia</i>	False olive	1246
<i>Olea europaea</i>	Olive	1248
<i>Fraxinus angustifolia</i>	Narrow-leaved ash	
Labiatae		
<i>Marrubium vulgare</i>	White horehound (NiF)	1445
<i>Lamium amplexicaule</i>	Henbit deadnettle	1478
<i>Lavendula stoechas</i>	French lavender (NiF)	1528
Scrophulariaceae		
<i>Cymbalaria muralis</i>	Ivy-leaved toadflax	1632
Caprifoliaceae		
<i>Viburnum tinus</i>	Laurestinus	1711
Compositae		
<i>Calendula arvensis</i>	Field marigold	1908
<i>Silybum marianum</i>	Milk Thistle (NiF)	1982
Liliaceae		
<i>Ruscus aculeatus</i>	Butcher's broom (F)	2219
<i>Crocus carpentanus</i>		
Ferns, Pteridophyta		
<i>Asplenium trichomanes</i>	Maidenhair spleenwort	2525
<i>Asplenium adiantum-nigrum</i>	Black spleenwort	
<i>Ceterach officinarum</i>	Rustyback fern	2532