

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Spring in the Spanish Pyrenees
23 April - 3 May 1998

'I've never caused so much trouble before,' Marion said at Bilbao airport, on the way home.

Somehow, we doubted it. On the way out, indeed, she was last through the baggage claim, having not even been *found* at Heathrow – where did everyone get to? – and the first thing she said was 'I've got a problem.' It might have been 'I am a problem', but anyway, it was something similar.

A split suitcase was the problem, really; poor Marion had little to do with it, this time. Presumably it had happened between Heathrow and Bilbao, but Marion had actually been on the shuttle from Manchester to Heathrow (ah, *that's* why we didn't find her at Heathrow) so it could have been on that flight that the case was burst. What had fallen out? Who knows what bits and pieces might be scattered all the way between Spain and Manchester airport, or in the holds of British Airways jets spanning the globe? Might some bewildered airport official in Caracas or Dubai even now be wondering what it was and where from, this strange item that had fallen upon his desk?

Fortunately, the claims desk, run by Iberia, proved to be efficient and helpful and, bearing an official document that proved that her case was indeed split (we could all see that) Marion and I joined the rest of the party outside – already in the *Escartin* coach with our driver, José. John Boucher, from The Painting School, Berdún, should have met us at the airport, but was unwell, and in any case, quite frankly, José, Marcella and I had done it so many times before that it was really not worth his making the four-hour journey to pick us up.

The journey to Berdún seemed much quicker than that (although the return trip at the end was certainly four hours plus). We stopped for coffee half way but otherwise went smoothly on along those lovely Spanish roads that soak up EU money and drive motorways and all their associated signs, services, slip roads, bridges, cuttings and embankments through otherwise unspoiled countryside, and still seem almost empty by our UK standards. Comparisons with the M25, so recently left by some of us, were inevitable.

On the way we pulled into a side road, briefly, to leap out and examine the nest of a pair of white storks on the tower. Sure enough, there was a stork, atop the nest: I felt a little bit sorry for it, as it was doing its best and standing in full view at close range, but all anyone could say was that it looked a bit dingy, for a stork. Well, I suppose it was a bit less than Persil bright.

At last, Berdún! To me, the familiar sight of the village perched on top of a long, steep-sided hill above the Aragon floodplain; to most of us, a new sight, a strange one, really, that would become a familiar one during the next few days. I can confirm that, even with many years' experience, it is a sight that is always most welcome, and not only for the prospect of a glass of wine and a welcome *café con leche*.

John and Vivien welcomed us all and sorted us into our rooms: despite being a small group, all were 'singles', unusually, so we spread ourselves through both the houses of The Painting School as if we filled the place. First things first: to dinner, at Emilio's. Rincon de Emilio is a small establishment at the corner of the small square by the church, not many seconds' walk from the houses (and within easy staggering distance on the way back). Without exception we were all mighty impressed by the food, not least the volume although the quality was equal to it, and everyone seemed delighted to find that the promised 'wine comes free, pay for your coffee' routine really did exist. Red wine, white wine: as much as you like. Just finish one bottle, along comes another. Then anosser boddle, ands zen, perhaps, just time for praps anuzzer . . . Well juld one more glazz. Mmmm.

FRIDAY APRIL 24

Before breakfast: a short walk around the town, to refresh memories, to get a bit of air into the lungs. Aah, yes: freezing cold and blowing like billyo. This, in fact, is ideal before-breakfast weather here and it was not really to be repeated, which was a bit unfortunate for those who were not out and about this first morning to witness the vultures.

You see, when it is hot, or calm, the vultures in the Foz de Binies wait for warmer air before they bestir themselves: it rises and gives them lift. But on a cold morning, with little prospect of warmth for a few hours, and a good strong wind blowing up the steep face of the Berdún hill, the vultures sail out and cruise gently along the upper shoulder of the Veral valley and then, in the rising air above the town, they soar up and hang, motionless, just above the streets. At first they fly by below street level and then come up to eye-level, before rising imperceptibly to fill a binocular field of view just over the little pine wood. They are utterly fantastic: vultures as you have never seen them before and may never see them again. On this first day I counted 40 at extreme close range, and watched the wind lift the upperwing feathers and twist the primary tips as the great birds manipulated their extremities with the most minute delicacy.

An Egyptian vulture – always far less common and not nearly so often present at this early-morning curtain-raiser – joined in too, and there were ravens, swifts, a firecrest, jingling, sizzling serins, goldfinches galore, rock sparrows on the hollow poles at the western end of town and spotless starlings as ever on the older tiled roofs. A taste of things to come.

So, after breakfast – toast, bread, assorted jams, frozen butter, tea and coffee, orange and peach juice, sometimes with little cakes and often, on later days, with whopping great croissants, warm and fresh from the oven – we met to discuss tactics and then set off on foot. Downhill was fine: coming back was a bit of a shock to the system. But this was easy really, just a brief walk down to

the Rio Veral, a fast, clear, cold stream running towards the Aragon from the snowy peaks to the north. Griffon vultures were again in evidence and as we walked back there were at least 100 of them, many gathered on the ground midway down the slope just between Berdún and Binies. It was not obvious what they were doing but evidently there was something of interest deep in the bushes in a little gorge below. With columns of them soaring above, this was, all in all, a brilliant vulture morning even by Berdún standards.

Black kites and red kites gave an early indication of their abundance, and their familiarity here: they are not in the least shy and, indeed, give unbeatable views. A pale phase booted eagle showed up, too: as ever, it seems, being beaten about by less appreciative crows. There were crested larks, woodlarks, black redstarts, a male redstart in the meadow beyond the Veral bridge, firecrests, occasional bursts of nightingale song and explosive Cetti's warblers. Wrynecks were heard but not seen – not until Keith saw one near the end of the trip (and only then) was a wryneck tracked down although several more were heard from time to time.

Lady orchids proved few and far between, but early spider orchids were even more difficult to discover. Butterflies, too, were a bit sparse in the cool wind, but wall, speckled wood, brimstone, scarce swallowtail, painted lady, green hairstreak and wood white started the list off quite well.

Lunch: ah, yes, a rest from the steepest bit of the climb at the very end, then in for more wine, more food, more wine, and a coffee. Marion was little trouble. It was Helen's turn next.

It was downhill again after lunch. Probably the wine had little to do with it really; it was more the slope, the pause to examine the Judas tree, even maybe the little hole in the ground that did it. Anyway, Marcella dashed back uphill for a plaster and a tube of TCP. Marion made a fuss. Everyone looked at Helen's knees (not for the last time) and the local dog came up to see what was doing. Suddenly a lady from the house nearby ran out

with Savlon and lint and Elastoplast and a pair of scissors, and Helen was almost as right as rain. A bit of blood, that's all, a bruise or two. Marcella, plasters made redundant, took it well when she returned from the ascent from Base Camp.

It was all out for the Aragon: down to the main road, across to the assorted farms and barns and on along the little road towards Martes. It was, to tell the truth, a bit windy; a bit cold. But it was sunny and Berdún from there looks sensational, with the white peaks far beyond beneath a cool blue sky. I had remembered to tell everyone to take a camera and only forgot my own (Marcella's really) and wished I hadn't: this is always such a photogenic place and this walk gives a great view.

It was, though, just too windy for small birds and of large birds there was little sign. There were kites, of course, both red and black, and vultures, both griffon and Egyptian, but nothing to match the morning's views. Two yellow-legged gulls on the river were a mite unusual.

On the roadsides were lady orchids and scatterings of beautiful, delicate little rush-leaved narcissi, tiny bright yellow daffodils in little clusters. Pyrenean broom created vivid displays; on a smaller scale, so did shrubby gromwell and several colours of common rockrose. Blue aphyllanthus made a brave show in places when the sun shone and brown vetch kept more demurely half-hidden in the grass; near the river were a few small grape hyacinths.

After dark, a barn owl was glimpsed and scops owls heard. This turned out to be the usual pattern: barn owls glimpsed or not seen at all (except that Mary had excellent views one night) and scops unusually difficult and uncooperative, although they kept people awake at night. But only if they were awake to start with.

SATURDAY APRIL 25

Coach. Breakfast at 8.30, down by the ramp ready for take off at 9.15. José already there, bus turned round. Spotless starlings to see us off; and John. It

was cloudless, calm, very serene and beautiful; no vultures, but a lot of snow on the high peaks and some on much lower hills beyond Jaca. Like most, it was a wonderful morning.

After heading east, we turned north towards the hills at Puente la Reina ('Queensbridge') into the Hecho valley. The long approach runs through farmland beside a river with little villages and assortments of odds and ends perched on hilltops and valley slopes round about. After Hecho the road rises and the valley narrows, the fields perched on slopes but surrounded by hedges: and mostly ablaze with great quantities of dandelions. Finally, beyond Siresa, the road winds through mixed fields and pine woods with great cliffs rising above: a great place.

Knowing there was a wallcreeper in the offing, we stopped and walked forwards into a gorge, the mouth of the Boca de Infierno. A lammergeier drifted over: moderate views, but the only ones for a day or two (I was beginning to panic). There were, though, scores more griffons, a golden eagle, kites and buzzards. At the regular wallcreeper nest site there were fresh droppings: a good sign! But we walked on through the gorge, intent on enjoying the valley while Marcella, determined to prove things one way or the other, remained for two hours staring at the nest hole. Nothing. Bill took a photograph to immortalise the great wallcreeper watch, Marcella intent on her vigil. Oh well, it showed that if we had all waited two hours we would not have seen much, while we enjoyed the odd dipper, firecrest and our first hepatica flowers.

Later we turned just a little way onto the Garbadito road to have lunch: people never being satisfied, there were cries of 'It's too hot; there's no shade', although of course there was, if you only climbed a few yards up the steep banks to get into the pines. That made second helpings of bread a touch difficult, I admit, but the view was great.

In Hecho, next to the *servicios* stop, a group of wagtails waltzed about in a field of sheep. One was a typical British type yellow, seven were

French type blue-headed and one was a Scandinavian type grey-headed, the richest coloured of the lot – all lovely.

We retreated along the valley to the Aragon, crossed the bridge this time and went on to the Sierra de la Peña. It is a magnificent drive up to the viewpoint halfway and then on past the old monastery up to the new one at the top. But it was crawling with people. It was warm and sunny, the views exciting; we ventured to the top of the slope above Santa Cruz de la Seros and looked round at distant Berdún. There were masses of hepatica, the star flower of the day, a few rush-leaved narcissi, cowslips, a few scraggy wild daffodils. Scarce swallowtail, comma, brimstone, red admiral; common wall lizard. Not too many birds: in fact we saw most by the coach, with a family of crossbills, firecrest and crested tits. The cliffs had griffons but for once failed to provide lammergeier.

‘What’s that up there?’

I was looking for lammergeiers as we drove down (having spent a while in the old monastery of San Juan de la Peña). I looked up; others looked across.

‘Black woodpecker.’

Out we get; there it is, can you hear it? Calling somewhere up the hill in the woods. Let’s walk up the road a bit to get closer; it’s calling; still calling; now it’s stopped. Now calling over there, below us. Two. This is no good: back to the coach.

‘Lovely view, it flew right over my head,’ said José, or words to that effect. I used to like José.

Oh well, can’t be bothered about black woodpeckers now: I’ve never seen one before and still haven’t, so I’m no worse off.

‘Lovely view as it settled on that tree though.’ Who said that? That was in English: that was no José. Hmm.

SUNDAY APRIL 26

It blew a gale overnight. Yet the morning was still: very grey, very dull, overcast, wet and thundery. As John Boucher said, it was a beautiful morning. It was, in its way – so quiet and restrained, with lovely cloud effects over the low, grey hillsides. It brightened up a bit, but then drizzly rain returned. It was not the best of prospects for a day’s walk and a lunch on a grassy meadow with a tablecloth spread over the ground.

Nevertheless, we were ferried by John and Vivien to the gorge above Binies: the Foz de Binies, through which the Rio Veral pours fast and furious. Once we had all gathered, and had looked at the petrocotis growing from the rocks (the common one or the thicker-leaved *hispanica* that is found near Jaca?), we walked slowly up the gorge on the road, winding between craggy hillsides covered in trees and bushes that were not yet in the full flush of vivid greens that we had expected. Spring seemed a bit late and reluctant. We looked at Pyrenean hyacinth (like a sparse, pale-flowered bluebell), snapdragons, Pyrenean saxifrages with no signs of flowers yet, Nottingham catchfly, butcher’s broom.

As we went, so the rain eased and returned, every so often making us cower under some great overhang, or under a tree, to get out of the worst of it. Now and then there were bright spells, even a bit of blue sky promising better to come, but the vultures weren’t fooled: most of the griffons were still on their ledges. All the same, we saw 40 or 50, plus a couple of Egyptians, a brief view of a short-toed eagle and the ever present kites. There had been a Montagu’s harrier over the fields (or was it? later we were to see a hen harrier, so who knows). Earlier, as Mary, Keith and I walked down from the village we had seen two disgruntled looking bee-eaters. The gorge was full of crag martins, the river occupied by grey wagtails and a dipper, the trees alongside sizzling with serins and firecrests.

But try as we might we couldn’t really make the best of Binies: it is a stupendous place, but it was

persistently, stubbornly wet. Sometimes though the scene was quite stunning, with grey cloud washing across the tops of the slopes and silver rain sweeping down against the hills. Eventually, after we reached the open meadow at the top, John appeared and shouted to us: what did we want to do? There was no chance of a picnic lunch surely? No: indeed, as we turned to walk back the heavens opened good and proper, with thunder echoing around and rain lashing down. Some took advantage and returned with John immediately, the rest of us took shelter under the great overhangs at the top of the gorge until Vivien, then John again, returned for us in their cars. It was Berdún colours and lighting effects and weather at their most dynamic, but for birds it was a bit of a washout.

In the afternoon we tried again, this time being driven out to a point on the main road to the east, then trying to walk back around a track beside a marsh and back to Berdún over the open cereal fields. Most of us failed even to leave the starting gate, hopping back into the cars again right away as the rain came on. For those who walked, it was merely a miserable plod back through cold, drenching rain.

MONDAY APRIL 27

A calm morning with some promise: later some rain, then sun, a cold wind but a bright middle of the day. After that there were heavy dark clouds and rain around, some over us; then sunny spells between long, cold showers of rain and sweeping hail, just as if buckets of hailstones were being thrown beside the coach, with a bit of snow mixed in for good measure. Spring in the Pyrenees indeed! The evening, though, was fantastic: bright, sunshine gleaming through crystal clear air, making rainbows.

At Berdún we saw a male harrier and, surprisingly, it was not the expected Montagu's but clearly a male hen harrier. A female Montagu's was there later on, in the evening. I have seen hen harriers here before in summer and they may well breed somewhere along the valley.

We drove south from Puente la Reina: I noticed that part of the new road which had collapsed on one side a year or two ago was still there, still collapsed, with some new road built around it. Over the top we reached a narrower, rougher road until Murillo, where 30–50 choughs were feeding in a roadside field. We turned off towards Agüero after stopping to look at Los Mallos de Riglos.

Agüero is like a slightly smaller, less extreme version of Los Mallos above a really delightful village which, despite the developments on its fringe, remains one of my favourites over the years. Built on a steep slope beneath beetling cliffs it is the ideal picturesque place with ancient roofs, peculiar chimneys and hidden alleyways and back yards holding all sorts of surprises. We walked the 'usual' circuit east of the village, by the cemetery, then back down through the village streets. This takes in some nice garrigue and maquis – Patricia managed to explain which was which and we vaguely remembered 'maquis = tall because a man (m for man and maquis) could hide in it, so garrigue must therefore be short. It is odd that we had to 'find' some of this habitat but with so much recent afforestation of the slopes in many areas, this typically Spanish habitat is not so abundant as it was. So we took our chance to search for such characteristic birds as subalpine, Dartford and Sardinian warblers – with limited success, although we saw them all and all of us at least saw Dartford moderately (or very) well. But the cold and the wind which periodically swept the slopes made things difficult and we missed more than we saw (bearing in mind that this place has possibilities of lammergeier, blue rock and rock thrushes, black wheatear and so on).

Never mind. Back to Murillo for coffee and servicios. The huge church opposite is said to have pallid swifts: I had not noticed in previous years whether it had or not, but now looked carefully. There were no swifts at home, of any kind.

Riglos station gets more and more 'done up' but we still stopped for lunch, only slightly affected by a shower or two. A short-toed treecreeper showed itself quite well: this area is good for woodlarks as

a rule, but of those there were none. A train came by, though, which was a tick.

Riglos was as stunning as ever: those huge, overhanging cliffs threaten to fall on top of you as you walk underneath, watching griffons flying overhead. We missed black wheatears again – this was not really our day – and a lammergeier was so far off that no-one really saw it. A peregrine shot into the cliff face so fast that few saw that, either. It began to seem a little bit disappointing for birds, although the sight of the town, the cliffs and the valley below was as wonderful as ever. The wind, though, was really cutting, as were some of the comments.

We had time, so we set off via Ayerbe for Loarre and the magnificent *Castillo*. We knew it would not be open on a Monday but that is how things worked out and we wanted to see it on its pinnacles and enjoy the view, too. As we arrived we had the hail, snow and rain mentioned already. Once that stopped the view was blotted out, as it drifted on south-east, but it cleared at times to give some remarkable, memorable effects over the plains towards distant Huesca: really far more exciting than a plain sunny day!

‘I’ve seen a hoopoe!’ shouted Marcella. The great hoopoe hunt: success, with a fine hoopoe on the ground uphill from the castle. Two woodlarks, too, were feeding on open grass with black redstarts, plus two more in a field on the way down.

‘I’m not speaking to Rob,’ said Marion, ‘but will someone ask him if we are going to that tunnel where you need a torch tomorrow – I can’t stand tunnels, and I won’t walk through it.’

‘Tell Marion that no, we are not going to that tunnel tomorrow, but no doubt she will be just as much in the dark as usual.’

It was the wine, of course: another fine evening meal accompanied by several bottles of red and a couple of white, before the *cafe con leches*, ending the day with everyone in excellent good humour as always.

TUESDAY APRIL 28

Goodness me: a beautiful – *really* beautiful – morning, with sunshine, sunshine and sunshine, and cool, fresh air that made you feel good. We deserved it, after all. We had the coach and since the hills looked okay we decided to make the best of it by heading gently uphill, then higher as the day went on if the weather held. So we turned west, then quickly north via Majones (‘Is that Majones or Ma Jones?’ asked Stourbridge/Glasgow Mary [as opposed to Solihull Mary] – we quite liked Ma Jones). The road becomes narrow and twisty, much to everyone’s feigned delight (funny how you laugh when you think you’re five seconds from plunging into a ravine) and gradually climbs towards Foz de Fago. Here, at the little tunnel (no need for a torch, despite teasing Marion on the way), we stopped, alighted, and let José drive on. This is a gorgeous place: a deep, steep-sided valley plunges down to a blue pool beneath a waterfall, with oaks and beeches in new leaf on the slopes; above sheer cliffs rise from the hillsides towards craggy peaks. It is undisturbed – we didn’t see a car until we were practically at Anso – quiet and fantastic in weather like we had, lots of lovely sunshine.

Griffon vultures are to the fore, of course, although not in great numbers, but it was the lammergeier that we secretly hoped for. It was not long before one appeared – so close, for a moment, then gone, soon to reappear farther away and higher up but still magnificent. In the end we saw two, perhaps three, immatures without the classic white head and orange breast and somewhat shorter-tailed than adults, but impressive for all that. There is still little to beat a lammergeier in my book.

With a lammergeier and several soaring griffons a tiny dot proved to be a peregrine; a short-toed treecreeper eventually showed itself but singing Bonelli’s warblers were elusive. Most of us, I think, saw blue rock thrush well, but crag martins surprisingly poorly in this, a place that is usually ideal for seeing them at close range. On a couple of ledges griffons were brooding small, downy chicks.

Before Anso we flushed a whole crowd of griffons off a wooded roadside slope. In Anso I marched gaily into the open doors of our usual hostel, sent some of the group to the servicios and then wondered why there was no-one to serve the coffee. Eventually a lady ran in to say the place was closed: at the idea of people trapped in the servicios she wrung her hands and covered her face in her apron. We beat a hasty retreat.

Patricia is a linguist but admitted she had only tried Spanish on the plane on the way here. But she found out where the cafe was and off we marched through the streets. And more streets. Patricia investigated and chatted with the locals and we went on – ‘all the way down past the church.’ Another set of directions – ‘all the way down as far as you can go.’ Now the only thing wrong with ‘all the way *down*’ is that ‘all the way back’ is *up*: plus, of course, that the cafe at the bottom was closed as well. Eventually we found a bar with excellent coffee, which is where Pip first became besotted with a poster of a ceramic sheep, which had been in several of the shops and bars before but now became an item of prime interest: something to grab and take home. Some days later Pip did, indeed, grab one, and I believe she took it home, where it probably graces a wall even now – baa-ing accidents.

But Anso – although not John Boucher’s favourite place (then he doesn’t live in Sandy) – enchanted all of us and the diversion was not wasted. The weather, though, called for a quick restart and we set off up the valley towards Zuriza. This is an excellent area, through fine pine and beech woods above a rushing river, with great cliffs and then snowy peaks up above. There was even a picnic site, with barbecues, seats and tables by the river – just right, as it was nice to sit down but it was small and informal enough not to be an eyesore.

Beyond we stopped to look and walk. The treeline always looks exciting: huge pines march up the slopes, then thin out where they meet deep snow, brilliant in the sun, and black rocks. There should be bears up there. There were griffons: and then, at last, a couple of lammergeiers, too, although not

that close. A peregrine again joined the vultures, while in the woods we saw firecrests, long-tailed tits, a marsh tit and nuthatches.

Before Zuriza proper we turned left and crossed a high pass over to the Belagua – Roncal valley. Here we glimpsed clumps of brilliant gentians. We turned on up towards France: up to the Belagua meadows at great height, looking back down the spectacular valley. Griffon vultures sat in a field beside some horses; choughs and 35 alpine choughs fed in the same meadows. Higher up chough flocks became mostly alpiners – eventually 46 joined by another group to make about 125 in all – with a few red-billed. They were superb as they all took off together and swirled around like dead leaves caught in a whirlwind.

Flowers were good, but the grass was still mostly brown and flat, newly uncovered, and the spring/short-leaved gentians were mostly not open, although here and there a clump revealed the full glorious blue. Elder-flowered orchids were few and far between and hardly showing colour. Oxlips were common, as was wood anemone and yellow whitlow-grass. It was a joy to be up so high and a pity to turn back down, inevitably, to drive back home via Roncal and Sigues, through gradually deteriorating weather after a great day.

WEDNESDAY APRIL 29

More remarkable weather: mixed blue sky and heavy cloud, sun and showers, longer spells of rain then dramatic effects with heavy cloud, heavy rain and patches of vivid blue dotted about overhead, seen through great ‘chimneys’ of space between towering clouds. This was exciting stuff and Berdún looked fabulous up on its hill. In the late afternoon, spells of thunder added one more element to the heady brew.

We were driven by John and Vivien to the Rio Aragon. It was deemed best not to walk down the hill and risk another falling over exhibition from Helen. Besides, Marion had cut and bruised *her* leg, too, somewhere, and there was enough competition going on between them.

'How's your leg this morning?'

'Ooh, it's really terrible, such pain – here, have a look . . . erm, oh, sorry, that's the wrong one – but it really does hurt.'

Enough of legs. Back on foot. Vivien took us westwards along the southern bank of the Aragon, through green trees and past narrow swathes of waving reeds. Red kites were brilliant – what great views they give here – while black kites seemed more reclusive. Griffons were mostly very distant and few until clearer weather came along and suddenly about 40 circled up over the town and came our way, now quite high but drifting across in marvellous fashion. A female marsh harrier hunted beyond the reeds, while two Montagu's were far away beyond the fields on the edge of the slopes. Little ringed plovers, common sandpipers, white and yellow (Spanish-type blue-headed) wagtails were on the shingle. A couple of bee-eaters flew over: we all saw them, at last, but this was a poor effort really for such a 'wanted' bird.

There were crested larks and chiffchaffs and a sedge warbler in the reeds, but more impressive were great reed warblers which eventually gave good views after we had sheltered from the rain. As we walked back, we saw several alpine swifts overhead and an excellent woodchat shrike. Both the groups in cars and those walking back managed to see two splendid male golden orioles near the almond orchard, eventually far out in a cereal field in just a small, solitary tree.

A bird I had not seen here before, although it was only briefly glimpsed, was a fan-tailed warbler: it sang several times. A while later Keith ventured down into the valley, farther east and saw another, also singing over cereal fields. I had only once seen one on these trips, over a cereal field some years ago at Lumbier, many miles west.

THURSDAY APRIL 30

A rotten, grey, overcast start: but a man has to do what a man has to do. In our case, birdwatchers had to make the most of it: we had to 'get high up'

while we had the bus, whatever, so we set off for Col de Pourtalet. It seemed a bit silly, on the face of it, as the Sierra de la Peña and Sierra Oroel were swathed in low, grey cloud – quite something in its way, but not looking optimistic – and up north, towards our intended goal, it looked considerably more dreary. Were the crates of beer in the back?

But beyond Jaca we could see some breaks; the cloud was thick low down but seemed more broken higher up and, sure enough, as we climbed, we seemed to enter some open spaces within the grey and could even see many of the surrounding mountains, covered in snow, if not their topmost peaks. This is real Alpine country: I always think it is important for any group to do this, to see the Pyrenees at their most grand and expansive.

We passed Biesca, scene of the camp site tragedy a few years ago now, and went on up to El Formigal. The reservoirs were glassy calm, the views and reflections superb. Up at the top, unfortunately the Pic du Midi d'Ossau refused to clear properly, keeping its shroud of cloud almost intact, but elsewhere we had a grand vista of snowy peaks and rolling, snow-covered slopes. There was a mixture of isolated, deep, long-term snowfields and fresher, thinner stuff almost covering everything in between, enough to make walking off the road a little foolhardy, so we stuck to the road itself (after sampling the local coffee).

Flowers were relatively few, but purple mountain saxifrage was good, in full flower, and there were a few wild daffodils. There were birds about, though: in a low, sheltered gully swallows hawked for food, while there was a thin but almost constant stream of them heading north. A common sandpiper appeared, and the odd red kite. It began to snow. A red kite against a bright, but grey, sky, lit from beneath, behind a curtain of falling snowflakes, looked exquisite. Most of us saw a rock thrush and there were many wheatears and a few black redstarts; water pipits were excellent, in full breeding plumage and sometimes quite confiding. A yellowhammer was the first bird on our French list as we walked across the border.

Twenty or so feeding choughs proved to be 'ordinary' red-billed ones but a big flock from the coach, much farther off, must have been Alpines.

Two mammals were real highlights, though: first, chamois, of which we saw a group of 20 or so then a single in a deep snow drift, and then marmots, two or three on rocks, one of which was content to show himself off for a long time as we stood in France and looked back into Spain.

We retreated, through rain as we lost height and left the falling snow behind. We went into the Panticosa valley. Today we had as our driver Jesús, who said 'You tell me if you see a good spot for lunch and I will stop' (translation courtesy of Patricia). In fact, we didn't spot a good place until he pointed to a picnic site far below in a deep valley. Great, we thought, just the ticket: so he turned off onto a tiny rough track, in his full-sized coach, and took us down over steep gradients between narrow banks and through gates, until we could go no further and we walked the short way on to the excellent picnic place. And sunshine!

With much of the day still to go and the weather now improving – it became a lovely, sunny afternoon – we went on down via Jaca and proceeded part way along the road back up towards the San Juan de la Peña monastery. By the picnic site low down – incidentally its approach track had been washed away – we got out and Jesús drove on up to the viewpoint halfway up. We walked the intervening distance and it wasn't long before everyone showed that they were by no means tired of looking at griffons. Indeed, the great birds, performing their two-by-two and four-by-four formation flights, had us enthralled. But small birds were difficult, even though we could hear firecrests, crested tits and singing Bonelli's warblers not far away.

That, of course, was not all, as we soon heard a black woodpecker, but saw nothing. Later we heard one much closer at hand: no more than 50 yards away I suppose. It called several times; it moved, then moved below us, then around and up above the road, calling as it went, but no-one saw

a thing. It called a few times thereafter, high up the slope, but there was nary a glimpse.

A lammergeier made up for it, every bit. It gave a good view; then came out again (it, or another) and gave a great view. Finally, later on from the viewpoint, it gave an even better view, flying around at our level, its 'beards' easy to see with binoculars, before it went off in a long, level flight towards the communication masts on the top of the hill above Santa Cruz. This one was a magnificent adult, a real orange-bellied, white-headed bird which I so wanted everyone to see after our (welcome) succession of duller youngsters. Adults in their prime, often so much longer-tailed, are really what lammeregeiers are about, sheeny charcoal above with silvery wingtips, black under the wing, orange on the chest.

FRIDAY MAY 1

May day. May day. Mayday, Mayday. Wake up: it's just a dream. When it comes to seeing black woodpeckers you're beyond help. No-one will m'aidé me, I'm afraid. Croissants; coffee, croissants, toast and jam, that's what you want – go for breakfast.

We went to the baker's, too, to see how he made our bread, and our croissants, using a wood-fired stove and bits and pieces of French wood from a parquet floor factory in Pamplona. The fragrance of fresh bread and cakes was wonderful. Most of us were also looking at odds and ends in the village such as doors and windows and chimneys and roof tiles, after John's entertaining and informative illustrated talk about the area, its history and its architecture.

In fact the morning was 'free': all day, actually, although everyone joined in the afternoon foray. In the morning Marcella and I walked along the Rio Veral to Binies and back by road, partly to scout out the route for the afternoon. An interesting bird resulted from this walk: on a little barn near Binies a small, calling lark turned out not to be crested, but a thekla lark: the first I had seen in the area, probably for want of careful looking.

In the afternoon we were all taken to the bridge at Binies: the morning was beautifully warm and sunny and the afternoon began that way, although it was not to last. We wandered along the river in the direction of Berdún, to an area where Vivien searched for orchids: we found a few lady orchids (farther along there were better, bigger specimens), a few small early spider orchids, some sombre bee (or dull ophrys) orchids and a few of the tiniest ever burnt (or burnt-tipped) orchids in the riverside grass. Butterflies included brimstones, walls and a clouded yellow (in general the commoner butterflies we saw, in a rather poor week for them, were brimstones, walls and speckled woods of the bright, orange-brown form).

Birds were not altogether neglected: in a copse of poplars below the track a red kite sat resolutely on its nest in the morning, but I'm not sure whether the nest was occupied or not in the afternoon: it seemed to contain a bit of feathery orange rag or fluff, the same colour as the kite, as part of its lining. Overhead were griffons, of course, a couple of Egyptian vultures and some excellent kites, then a bit of real excitement. A fabulous short-toed eagle hovered, sometimes extremely high up but giving us great views. It was not quite vertically above us, but we looked 'along its tail' as it hovered, so had a somewhat foreshortened view of it, and its wings seemed broad, floppy and powerful while its tail looked particularly short, almost non-existent in that view. Once it stooped in the characteristic way, very fast, headlong, then swinging its legs down and forwards ready for the strike.

Then a lammergeier appeared: low, swinging around over the valley: far down the river from the gorge and the bridge, over the lower valley, and totally majestic. It was a beautiful adult. Vivien, not to be outdone, suddenly pointed at something else and said 'It looks like a stork coming over' – sure enough, the little dot grew in size as it came closer and it turned out to be a lovely black stork, the sun catching its red bill and trailing red legs perfectly.

Some of the party took Vivien's offer of a ride

back, while the rest of us began to walk. Sadly, the effect of the sun on the stork was enhanced considerably because it was flying from bright sky into really filthy weather up in the hills, and that filthy weather bore down upon us with some speed. We got half way back, dry and cheery, before it caught us, but after that it was a dreary plod in cold, drenching rain.

SATURDAY MAY 2

A dull start: looking out a little later, before breakfast to check the weather, all we could see was thick fog. It enveloped everything. Low cloud covered all the hills low down, but there were a few breaks and some higher peaks could be seen poking out of the top. It never really cleared but we spent most of the day in clear air, looking at cloud around, above and below us; it was rainy at first, later clearer, becoming fine and dry and even by evening, quite sunny.

We took the coach (9.15 as usual) to Puente la Reina and turned into the grey Hecho Valley, past a silhouetted bee-eater on a wire. Beyond Hecho and Sigues we turned off for Garbadito: the place where we had lunch a few days before, but this time instead of soon stopping we went on up a long, twisting climb through superb forests of pine right up to the *refugio* of Garbadito. The view was marvellous, improved a bit in some ways by the clouds, the wisps of mist over the valley far below, the snow on the hills just above us. The refugio is in a grassy clearing – which proved eventually to have citril finches, as discovered by Keith and seen briefly by most of the rest of us – and we looked down to the area of the Boca de Infierno, the 'wallcreeper gorge' and the cliffs beyond which so often have lammergeiers, choughs and golden eagles. Griffons were about, but mostly kept down by the weather.

A walk through the woods brought firecrests, marsh tit (extremely pale here, and singing – a rare enough sound at home), crested tits, short-toed treecreeper, choughs, black redstart and, in a clearing, two gorgeous birds that had everyone talking, a pair of rock buntings. They are real stars.

Lunch was taken lower down, at a strategic stop – sure enough we heard a black woodpecker, but of course no-one saw it. Last year another group saw three somewhere along here. A group of crossbills was near the road as we walked on down, before picking up the coach again and going to Hecho for coffee.

It seemed much brighter now and we thought, here we are, near the gorge, tomorrow we won't have a chance, so – let's give the wallcreepers a go. Why not? So, back up the valley we went, to find the gorge more like its usual self – not calm and warm, but cold and windy. After the previous two-hour wait for nothing, most people wandered on, but within a few minutes I saw a wallcreeper flying in from upstream. Not much equals the excitement of that first glimpse: the wallcreeper, high up, suddenly appears, surprisingly small as always, weak, flickering along, all wing and no tail, like a fluttering butterfly.

'It's here, it's here!' Having got Keith onto it I dashed on to find half of the group, bring them back and – there were two! Keith had watched a pair on the opposite side of the gorge. Marcella ran on up the road to find the rest of the party and soon we were all wallcreeper-watching. Two could be seen but we tended to watch the male and the female drifted off, or was simply 'lost' as our attention was taken by the bird with the blacker wings and bigger black bib, which foraged around the foot of the cliffs across the gorge, above the waterfall. It was far off but still looked great.

After a long time it flew off down the valley and round the corner out of sight. Hopeful of more I wandered that way, only to see it now on *our* side of the valley, on a ledge above the road: high above us, but now much, much closer. There it sat, occasionally moving a few feet, flicking, bouncing, darting this way and that, springing its red wings in and out: absolutely tremendous. Finally it flew over the gorge again and we had to leave it, reluctantly, as it was time to go.

All this time there had been vultures about. Earlier, from Garbadito, we had seen two or even three

lammergeiers; there were two flying together, as if in display, over the cliffs as we arrived at the wallcreeper gorge. Now, as we were leaving, there were *three* flying together, circling about quite low beside the cliffs across the valley. All were immatures: dark and grey, with peculiar pale mottling on the upperwings, underwing coverts and body and wedges of creamy colour in the flight feathers, presumably old, worn feathers. As one at least had had a big gap in one wing, and these three didn't appear to include it, I suppose there were four. Certainly it was a great finale, two wallcreepers and three or more immature lammergeiers around the same gorge: quite a place, the Hecho valley.

That evening it was even more than usually uproarious at Emilio's. John and Vivien joined us, and we said our thank yous to Emilio, Louisa and Monica who had looked after us so well, and to each other. We compared legs one last time, insulted each other, withdrew all the insults, and added fresh ones. It was good: even a glass of champagne to wash the meal down as well as the red and white wines. Thank you, all of you.

Later on we saw two barn owls and heard a scops.

SUNDAY MAY 3

Nothing to do, really, but to go home. It was a sad departure for we all, I think, had become much attached to Berdún and to The Painting School. John came with us to Bilbao, to see us off and to welcome his next group, in pouring rain.

'I've never caused so much trouble before,' Marion said at Bilbao airport, on the way home.

Somehow, we doubted it. On the way out, indeed, she was last through the baggage claim, having not even been *found* at Heathrow – where did everyone get to? – and the first thing she said was 'I've got a problem.' It might have been 'I am a problem', but anyway, it was something similar. . . I think we've done this bit before. . .

The Bird List

Great crested grebe	Embalse de Yesa: a few pairs
Grey heron	Several singles, eg in Aragon and Veral valleys
White stork	One at nest, en route to and from Bilbao
Black stork	One, Binies, flying north into heavy weather
Mallard	Scattered pairs
Egyptian vulture	Ones and twos in usual vulture gorges, over valley side
woods,	Berdún, Anso, Fago, Hecho etc
Griffon vulture	Many in all the gorges, over hillsides, Aragon valley, up to snowy tops; numerous (100+) around Berdún and Binies; close-up views at Fago and San Juan de la Peña of birds in small juniper bushes
Lammergeier	Noted at Fago, Binies, San Juan de la Peña, Riglos, Hecho valley (up to four), Zuriza, mostly immatures but fine adult at San Juan de la Peña; seen on six days
Golden eagle	Fago, Hecho valley - brief views only
Booted eagle	A few singles: all pale phase, Berdún, Panticosa etc
Short-toed eagle	A few singles: noted on bus journeys as well as during walks, an indication of its size and distinctive appearance and habits
Buzzard	Small numbers especially around Puente la Reina, Hecho valley, Jaca
Goshawk	One seen by Keith near Berdún early one morning (the first I've heard of there)
Sparrowhawk	A handful of sightings
Red kite	Frequent, often confiding, especially in Aragon valley area but also right up to the highest passes; on nest at Binies
Black kite	Frequent in relatively limited areas, mostly the lower valleys
Marsh harrier	Noted in the Aragon valley near Berdún
Hen harrier	One male at Berdún
Montagu's harrier	Male and at least two females seen in Berdún area; seen on five days
Peregrine	Noted at Fago, Riglos, Zuriza
Kestrel	Sparse but widespread
Red-legged partridge	Very few (just one pair?), Berdún
Quail	One or two heard, Berdún area - marked decline from some years ago when commonly heard
Water rail	Heard in marsh near Rio Aragon below Berdún
Little ringed plover	Pair on Rio Aragon near Berdún
Green sandpiper	One at Berdún
Common sandpiper	Odd ones on rivers and at Col de Pourtalet
Yellow-legged gull	Bilbao, Embalse de Yesa, Aragon at Berdún
Woodpigeon	Very few, in upland woods
Turtle dove	Very few, in lowland valley fields
Collared dove	Scattered in Aragon valley
Cuckoo	Occasionally heard
Scops owl	Few (declined?) calling at Berdún
Barn owl	Pair, Berdún
Swift	Small numbers only, rather erratic depending on the weather
Alpine swift	Very few seen, Fago and Berdún/Aragon area

Bee-eater	Very few: Berdún (2), Aragon (2), Puente la Reina (1)
Hoopoe	Berdún, Loarre
Green woodpecker	Quite widely heard, occasionally seen, in high woods to tree line
Great spotted woodpecker	Few heard/seen
Black woodpecker	Pair, San Juan de la Peña; heard Garbadito
Wryneck	Berdún, Veral valley area
Crested lark	Many in Aragon valley area/Canal de Berdún region
Thekla lark	Pair near Binies
Skylark	A few in Aragon/Canal de Berdún valley fields
Woodlark	Quite often heard, Veral/Aragon valleys, four Loarre
Sand martin	Very few, Berdún area
Crag martin	Surprisingly small numbers only in gorges, eg Binies, none at nests
Swallow	Small numbers only, Berdún and elsewhere; migrating over Col de Pourtalet in good numbers
House martin	Fairly common
Tree pipit	Heard, Belagua
Water pipit	Belagua, Col de Pourtalet
Tawny pipit	Poor views, Berdún, Aguero
Yellow wagtail	Hecho (yellow, blue-headed, grey-headed), Aragon (Spanish)
Grey wagtail	Frequent on fast streams
White wagtail	Frequent and widespread
Woodchat shrike	Several near Murillo/Aguero and one-two near Berdún
Golden oriole	Few sightings near Berdún, but none heard calling
Spotless starling	Widespread, mostly uncommon
Jay	Several in upland woods
Magpie	Frequent
Chough	Frequent near gorges and cliffs at any height
Alpine chough	Flocks high up, Belagua, Col de Pourtalet
Carrion crow	Fairly common
Raven	Very small numbers (1-2) at most cliff/gorge sites
Dipper	Very small numbers, Veral, Hecho valley
Wren	Often heard singing
Dunnock	In high woods/scrub
Cetti's warbler	Often heard, rarely seen
Sedge warbler	One, Berdún
Reed warbler	One, Berdún
Great reed warbler	Several singing along Aragon near Berdún
Fan-tailed warbler	One or two singing near Aragon below Berdún
Melodious warbler	Best views in Veral valley between Berdún and Binies; scarce
Blackcap	Quite common
Whitethroat	Odd ones, Berdún
Sardinian warbler	Berdún, Aguero, Riglos - scarce
Subalpine warbler	Berdún, Aguero, Riglos - scarce
Dartford warbler	Berdún, Aguero, Riglos - better views
Willow warbler	One or two migrants, Berdún
Chiffchaff	Often heard - all 'normal' chiffchaff songs
Bonelli's warbler	Heard at several places but not seen well
Firecrest	Common and frequently seen in many areas
Pied flycatcher	Odd migrants, Berdún area
Spotted flycatcher	Odd migrants, Berdún area
Wheatear	Small numbers on high ground but very few in valleys (none on territories near Berdún)

Whinchat	One near Berdún
Stonechat	Surprisingly few, Berdún, Aguero, Riglos
Rock thrush	Male, Berdún; Col de Pourtalet
Blue rock thrush	A poor year: Fago, Binies
Redstart	A few migrants, Berdún
Black redstart	Widespread and common, villages and cliffs
Robin	Widespread but scarce
Nightingale	Widespread and common: good numbers especially at Riglos
Blackbird	Widespread and common
Song thrush	Very few
Mistle thrush	Few in higher woods
Marsh tit	Hecho valley, Garbadito - singles
Crested tit	Widespread in higher forested areas
Blue tit	Widespread, sparse
Great tit	Widespread, sparse
Coal tit	Higher forested areas, eg Garbadito
Long-tailed tit	Higher forests
Nuthatch	Zuriza, San Juan de la Peña
Wallcreeper	Pair in Hecho valley: excellent views on second visit
Short-toed treecreeper	Often heard, a few seen well
House sparrow	Common
Rock sparrow	Berdún - up to about five
Chaffinch	Common
Bullfinch	Sparse but pairs seen in three or four places
Hawfinch	Noted near Riglos
Citril finch	Pair at Garbadito
Serin	Widespread and common
Greenfinch	Common
Goldfinch	Common
Linnet	Common both high and low
Crossbill	San Juan de la Peña, Garbadito - juveniles at both sites
Corn bunting	Fairly common but perhaps declining? - no longer 'everywhere'
Rock bunting	Two, Garbadito
Reed bunting	Berdún
Yellowhammer	Highest passes only
Cirl bunting	Still in winter flocks; rather sparse otherwise, few singing

Butterflies

Speckled wood, wall, painted lady, red admiral, Camberwell beauty, large tortoiseshell, wood white, large white, scarce swallowtail, green hairstreak, cleopatra, brimstone, black-eyed? blue, peacock, orange-tip, comma, clouded yellow

Mammals

Roe deer (Hecho), mole, chamois, Alpine marmot, brown hare

Miscellaneous

Wall lizard, Iberian wall lizard, marsh frog; a 30-legged centipede *Scutigera coleoptrata* – an amazing creature found by John in his room.

Wild flowers

Lady orchid; burnt orchid; early spider orchid; sombre bee orchid (dull ophrys), early purple orchid, elder-flowered orchid

Trumpet gentian, spring (or short-leaved?) gentian

Nottingham catchfly; petrocoptis; amelanchier; hepatica; rush-leaved narcissus; lesser daffodil; wild daffodil; mountain lungwort; mallow-leaved storksbill; marsh marigold; coltsfoot; birdseye primrose; purple saxifrage; Pyrenean milkwort; Pyrenean hyacinth; blue aphyllanthes; greater periwinkle; shrubby gromwell; brown vetch; false vetch; Pyrenean broom; grape hyacinth; cowslip; oxlip; snapdragon; butcher's broom; tassel hyacinth; rosy garlic; borage; pheasant's eye; Pyrenean gagea; yellow-whitlow grass.

Participants

Helen Young

Keith Crees

Mary Grant

Pip Sharp

Marion Haigh

Patricia Duffield

Mary Macmillan

John Minihane

Bill Hudson

Marcella Hume

My thanks to you all, for such a good time: and for taking everything in good part. I hope you treat the report in the same way!

Rob Hume



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Chris Durdin
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36, Thunder Lane
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INGLATERRA

Zaragoza, 25th May, 1998

Dear Chris:

Once again I wish to thank you for contributing with your donation of £250 to our Conservation Project in the steppes of Belchite (Zaragoza - Spain). This amount brings the total given to SEO from Honeyguide holidays to £3.820. Thanks to you and people and groups like yours the Ornithological Reserve of "El Planerón" in Belchite and other projects to protect birds and their habitats can go a head.

Please, extend my thanks to your spring '98 group in Berdún and all the others that have contributed with SEO. All of you are invited to visit our natural reserves whenever you have the chance.

I hope see you again soon.

Best wishes:

Juan Carlos Cirera Martínez
SEO/BirdLife manager in Aragón.

