

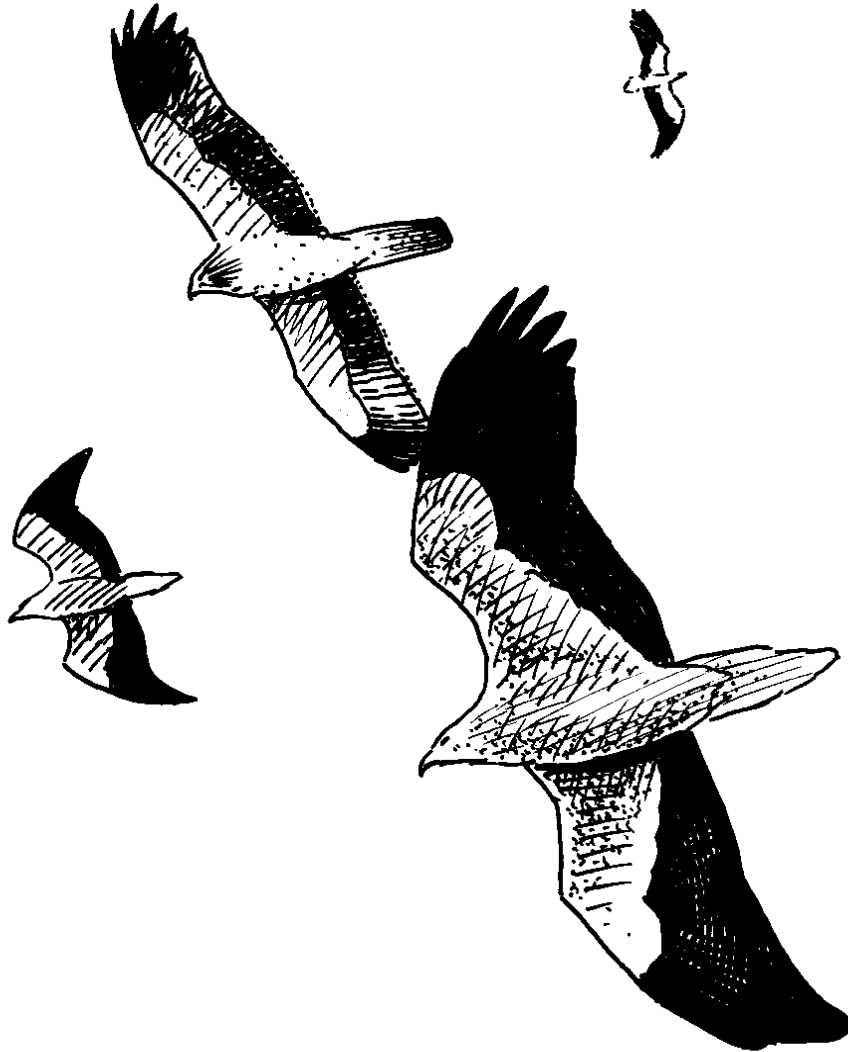
Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Discovering Menorca
6 – 13 April 1996

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The group

Shirley Sprague

Nancy Taylor

Guy Daniel
Elizabeth Daniel

Enid Broxup

Maureen Clarke
Joy Edwards

Jennie Le Huquet
Dougie Le Huquet

Michelle Le Huquet
Brian Knowles

Jumbo Burrough
Jo Burrough

Leaders: Graham Hearl
 Chris Durdin

Our hosts at Matchani Gran were Jenny and Shaun Murphy. The group was also joined on 11 April by John Seymour, historian and Menorca resident, and by Santí Catchot from the Balearic Ornithological Group (GOB) on 12 April.

As always, this holiday contributed to the protection of the wildlife that we enjoyed by way of a donation to GOB. A thank you letter from GOB appears at the end of this report (on these web versions in the scanned Menorca Plants 1996 document). This holiday's contribution of £400, made up of £25 per person in the group, is part of a total of £2,370 given to GOB since the first Balearic Honeyguide holiday in 1992. Over £10,000 has been given to conservation projects in Europe since Honeyguide started in 1991.

This report was written by Chris Durdin, with special thanks to Jennie Le Huquet for the list and information on flowers. Jennie's typed list of plants is scanned as a separate PDF. In this report she is Jennie with 'ie' at the end and Jenny with a 'y' is Jenny Murphy from Matchani Gran.

Cover illustrations by Rob Hume, Egyptian vultures with a pale phase booted eagle, other illustrations also by Rob Hume except black-winged stilts by Gary Wright.

Saturday 6 April - Matchani Gran

At Luton airport - or London Luton as it says nowadays - those who had stayed overnight at the Hotel Ibis were joined by Joy and Maureen who had made an early start down the M1. A smooth flight to Mahón airport, where we were met by Shaun Murphy and Jan from Matchani Gran and co-leader Graham Hearl who had flown in from Mallorca. There was a robin on the grass outside the airport as the first of our two minibuses followed Shaun on the short trip to our base in the spacious old farmhouse of Matchani Gran. We passed giant fennel and patches of Bermuda buttercup on route, and our first hoopoe flew from under the Aleppo pines in Matchani Gran's drive - the best place to see them throughout the week. Jenny Murphy, Katy and Emma met us there, along with dogs and cats and a welcoming drink.

Last year's holiday was in mid-May, but it gave but a sample of the richness of the flowers of Menorca. Early April and they were at their best, and nowhere was richer than the field right by Matchani Gran. 'The orchid field' it became, with no less than six species there, namely mirror, yellow bee, milky, sawfly, bumblebee and small-flowered tongue orchids. Corn buntings were singing as we moved away from tassel hyacinths and blue scarlet pimpernel into the next fields. There the first of many excellent views of thekla lark. There are no crested larks on the Balearics, which helps, and this often elusive species is easier to see on Menorca than Mallorca, and on Menorca there is nowhere we found better than our base for seeing this Mediterranean speciality.

The southern half of Menorca has hundreds, perhaps thousands, of tiny, rocky fields, always surrounded by walls of stone removed from the fields in an attempt to improve a meagre living. Several are attached to Matchani Gran, and here as elsewhere there often are - and were today - dozens of finches; linnets, greenfinches and goldfinches. Graham soon found a chiffchaff and migrant wood warbler and the resident Sardinian warblers chacked away as always. Enid alerted us all to two flying stone-curlews rising from the fields and dropping in somewhere near the airport.

Back at base, what looked like a dead lizard hanging from a gutter was recognised by Graham as a Moorish gecko, rather comatose from cold. In Shirley's warm hands it revived a little, and was placed somewhere safer from where it walked away a little later.

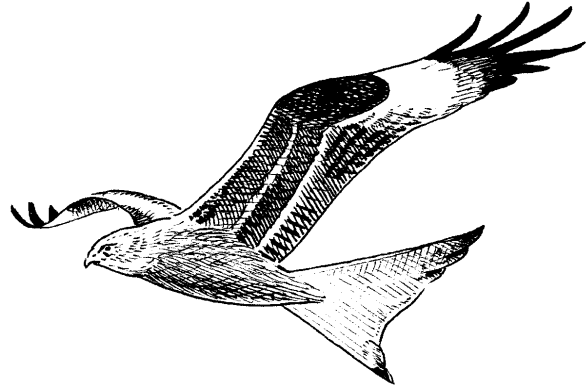
After a brief wildlife roll call, there was the first of many super and generous meals from the Matchani Gran crew, part and parcel of which is plenty of white or red wine, or both. Wildlife continues after dark here too: Graham and I found an Algerian hedgehog outside, and Michelle and Brian heard the local stone-curlews which were to call every evening round our home for the week.

Sunday 7 April - Son Bou, Torre d'en Gaumés

On the south coast lies Menorca's largest reedbed at Son Bou. Though the hills are built up with holiday development, the reedbed is intact, and is fronted by extensive vegetated dunes. On a bare patch we discovered orange-bodied masonry bees, filling their hods, as Jumbo put it. In the little pool near the car park there was a little grebe and a coot and mallards of less than wild origin. We watched Cory's shearwaters and shags out at sea and an Audouin's gull flew past. This last species, one of the world's rarest gulls, was seen later again on the rocks farther along. The shout of a Cetti's warbler and a little later the 'zip..zip..zip' of a fan-tailed warbler were heard, and fine stonechats admired. The dunes were a blaze of colour, yellow vetches and medicks, many tongue orchids here and there, sea daffodil leaves and the large dark-centred lemon-yellow composite *Urospermum*. If ever there was a place for my first rule of botany to be invoked this was it - if it's not in flower and you are in a foreign country ignore it - yet still Jo and Jumbo passed multi-coloured delights to puzzle over indeterminable emerging green leaves. I think they were persuaded to note the deep red Italian sainfoin (or French honeysuckle) by the minibuses.

Incidentally, the second rule of overseas botanising is that crucifers and composites can be passed over at the leader's discretion. But rule one was put aside when I was persuaded to taste test the clematis growing in scrub patches on the dunes. The burning on my tongue confirmed it as *Clematis flammula*, fragrant clematis. Later it was found growing out of the wall on the north side of Matchani Gran.

After lunch in the dunes, we called at Torre d'en Gaumés, one of many prehistoric sites on Menorca, and a good little wildlife spot too. Plants included three-cornered leek and the shrub pradium with its small, shining, nettle-like leaves and white, lipped flowers. In the air were hummingbird hawkmoths and a red kite.



Between Alaior and Es Mercadal there was a fine pale phase booted eagle, and a dark phase booted eagle in more or less the same place returning later.

At Monte Toro, Menorca's highest point, we dropped a small contingent to walk up the road past giant fennel and the big tufts of *Ampelodesmus* grass, with the rest of taking the lazy option of driving to the top. The view all over the island is one of the features here, today especially to the north - it was a little hazy towards Mahón. The simple and elegant church was decorated for Easter. Several of us had a drink in the warm afternoon sun.

Back at Matchani Gran, Graham and I explored Shaun's prickly pear wood and soon found a tortoise - Hermann's tortoise to be precise, by the pattern on the rear scales and the spur/claw on the tail. Several of the group were rounded up to see this, with Nancy earning a mention in despatches for appearing in dressing gown and slippers.

Jenny sensibly takes off two evenings a week from cooking, so we went off to eat in Es Castell (also known as Villacarlos). The route took us past many fascinating examples of modern sculpture on roundabouts on the edge of Mahón, perhaps a few more examples than originally intended. Safely parked, we took a quick turn around the historic town square on foot. There were children playing football alongside Indian bead trees and mulberries before we turned right again at the cannons towards the Restaurant España.

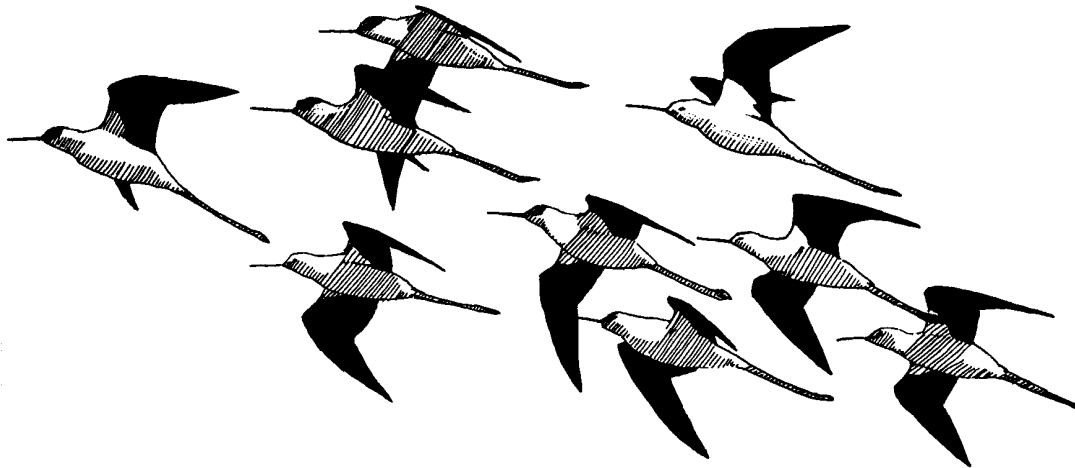
Monday 8 April - Depuradora, Cavallerja, Tirant

First stop, north of Es Mercadal, was the town's Depuradora (water purification plant). The field opposite the lagoons was where most of the action was taking place, including a steady to-ing and fro-ing of yellow wagtails of various subspecies; Iberian, ashy-headed, yellow and blue-headed. Most excitement - for birds and birdwatchers - was with the little ringed plovers: at least five were displaying. Common sandpiper, blackcap and booted eagle were also seen.

On the road to Cavallería the first stop was by a clump of tamarisk into which a chiffchaff disappeared. Through the gates, a quick split of the group for a loo stop, then down to a sheltered cove. Tawny pipits were calling away as we explored the area before lunch, a male redstart was found not far from the boats by which we ate and Sardinian warblers were ever present. Doug found three crag martins and everyone looked into the clear sea around the rocks to admire jellyfishes and sea urchins (probably *Pelagia noctiluca* and *Paracentrotus lividus*, reports Jennie).

By the road, before heading north to the cape, there was an Audouin's gull on a rock, then a distant osprey towards the lighthouse. This provided a clear incentive to get moving, and, a little later, round the back of the lighthouse, the osprey came past again in clear view. Out at sea, Cory's and Mediterranean shearwaters were settling in medium-sized flocks - an occasion where telescopes earn their keep.

The wetland at Tirant is seasonal, and it was at its best. From the road there were three male garganeys, shovelers and mallards, then three pale and one dark phase booted eagles overhead. Turning down the track by the side of the lake, there were little egrets and black-winged stilts among the sheets of water crowfoot, and a dozen wood sandpipers dropped in. We resolved to return later in the week.



Tuesday 9 April - Mahón and Algendar Gorge

Hangovers (or was it just the one?) under control, we were soon emerging from the underground car park into Mahón market. Many went from there down into the city to visit the cathedral of Santa Maria, the produce and fish markets, and to make various purchases from camera batteries to postcards to gin.

Towards the south-west corner of the island is the town of Cala de Santa Galdana, from which Algendar Gorge winds inland. Over the low wall and we were into this gentle gorge. Pitch trefoil was smelt, with its tarry smell and purple pea flowers, and narrow-leaved and grey-leaved cistuses compared. Marsh harriers and herons seen here would both have been migrants. The butterfly net was in use too, with speckled wood (the brighter southern European sub-species) and wood white studied in the box, and Cleopatra on the wing.

The gorge is one of the best places on the island to see Egyptian vultures, and they did not disappoint. At one stage there was a vulture, three dark phase booted eagles and a peregrine together in a thermal. An equally surprising bird of prey was a scops owl calling in broad daylight.

Shaun & Jennie's splendid picnics always came with fruit, and every day the quantity of bananas was increased and still they were all eaten. So there were none left for the barbecue this evening. The tortoise had been found again at Matchani Gran by Jo while the rest of us were in the gorge, and after our banana-less supper the Algerian hedgehog re-appeared. A scops owl sang later too - after dark this time.

Wednesday 10 April - Mongofre Nou and Es Grau

Mongofre Nou has a super selection of lagoons and scrub, and is one of the best birdwatching sites on the island. The owners, a large private estate, have recently made an agreement with GOB, which is studying the migrant and waterbirds there, and they arranged access for us. It was a woodchat shrike, of the Balearic subspecies, which first grabbed our attention. We found seven black-winged stilts and three spotted redshanks and a small flock of green sandpipers dropped in. Early April is a touch early for Menorca's many bee-eaters, but their distinctive 'prruip..prruip' calls alerted us to a group of seven overhead. There was an Egyptian vulture and both chiffchaff and cuckoo were heard.

Sage-leaved (large white flowers) and narrow-leaved (small white flowers) cistuses were commonplace here, but not so the serapias - tongue-orchid - by the road, a puzzling specimen that may have been a hybrid. There were also two of the white-flowered dorycniums here, both *hirsutum* and *pentaphyllum*. Back past the tree heather and strawberry tree by the gate into the estate, we rejoined the minibuses. A short trip followed to where we lunched on the terrace of house owned by a friend of Shaun's, Dudley, overlooking the Es Grau area.

I returned to Matchani Gran to drop Jo, then came back to the agreed rendezvous to find no group. Following views of a great white egret, high water levels had forced a different way into this area of wetland, dunes and pines. Re-united not far down the road by the beach, we all went up a slope to a view over the lake. This field was thick with orchids; hundreds of mirror orchids, dozens of yellow bee orchids, and scores of sawfly orchids. There was a serapias that was quite white, and pyramidal orchids both white or very pale pink. We puzzled if this was chance, or perhaps a nutrient deficiency that caused these similar variants.

The woods were a little birdless this afternoon, though chaffinch was new for the list. At the far side of the woods there was a choice of a short wade across the flooded track, which Guy, Liz and myself braved, while the rest of the group returned through the woods.

Shaun, Jennie and Jan joined us for the evening meal at Ses Torrades in Es Castell.

Thursday 11 April - La Vall estate, Cala Morell and Cuitadella

First stop was by the 'M1' (actually the 721) for the most immaculate, stunning purple heron you could imagine, no doubt a migrant just arrived and happily feeding in a field very close to the road.

The second unscheduled stop was made for a striking-looking field, dominated by creamy-white hollow-leaved asphodels *Asphodelus fistulosus*. It was the time of year for fields a haze of one colour; elsewhere field marigold (soft orange), the thistle *Galactites tomentosa* (pinkish-purple), crown daisies (yellow and white) or Bermuda buttercup (yellow) would dominate.

La Vall is another private estate, but with an agreed access route through the woods down to Cala Agaiarens. This heavily northern corner of Menorca is the best area for birds of prey on the island. At one stage there were red kite, peregrine, sparrowhawk and Egyptian vulture together in one thermal. As in so many places there were booted eagles too, but the most interesting raptor record was a steppe buzzard *Buteo buteo vulpinus*, the eastern sub-species of buzzard with a pale or reddish tail, which moves through the Bosphorus, and eastwards from there, in enormous numbers but also through the Balearics in small numbers. There was a second steppe buzzard as we overlooked the cove where Jenny found a tawny pipit as well as various flowers. Lunch was in the shade back near the minibuses.

At Punta de S'Escullar by Cala Morell, the cliff-top wild flowers would have put any rock garden to shame. A mystery remains about the identity of the large yellow broomrapes (in hindsight, probably *Cistanche phelypaea*). Two bright slate-blue blue rock thrushes and a female were seen well.

After Cala Morell we visited some caves at the head of the ravine which leads down to the cala. These burial caves were hewn into the rock towards the end of the Bronze Age and during the Iron Age, and form one of the biggest and most spectacular prehistoric necropolises not only on Menorca but throughout the Mediterranean as well.

Time was a little short so the tour of Ciutadella was a brief one, but time enough to take in the old port and town square of the former Menorcan capital. We bumped onto an English walking group at the final stop of the day, the only two-storey prehistoric site on the island, the Naveta that lies just south of the main road west of Ciutadella.

Somehow Dougie had failed to see a hoopoe well all holiday, and by common consensus the drive into Matchani Gran was the best place to see them. But despite the informal swapping between minibuses, he was always in the bus at the back which couldn't see them as well as the lead bus. So by special arrangement, today he was in Chris's bus which was taking the lead. But after Alaior, with Chris's minibus returning via the main road, Graham's bus turned off via the shorter (but slower?) back route. So would Doug be at the back again? The tension mounted, the first bus stuck behind slow moving traffic on the 721. Right up the hill towards the airport, right again by the roundabout with the triangular sculpture, past the end of the runway and those often admired Norfolk Island pines, and into San Clemente. A left turn, and there was Graham's bus, just behind. And was the hoopoe there? Look for Doug on another Honeyguide holiday and ask ...



Historian John Seymour and his wife joined us for supper and gave us insight into Menorca's varied and often troubled history.

Friday 12 April - Tirant, Fornells and Punta Prima

We had promised ourselves a return to this superb wetland, and it was worth it. There were various goodies; two marsh harriers, greenshank, nine black-winged stilts, two spotted redshanks, ruff, a pallid swift and sand martins. But all were overshadowed by the pratincole overhead, around us, away, back again, off into the distance. What a bird ...

At Cala Tirant, not far away, there was a tortoise for all to see and another cistus species, *Cistus cretica*.

Fornells is one of the prettiest coastal towns on the island, and we had coffee at a cafe overlooking the bay. At the Fornells salinas, down the road, there was the best view of a fan-tailed warbler to date, but little else of note.

A siesta back at base was followed by a short drive to the south-east corner of the island at Punta Prima. Highlights included another mysterious broomrape, reddish this time, a host of orchids and other flowers in the coastal scrub, a flock of Cory's shearwaters at sea and several migrant wheatears.

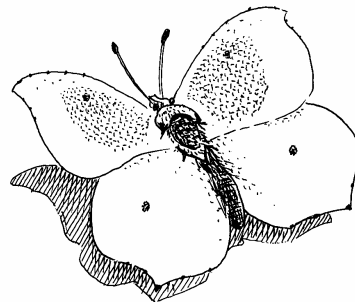
That evening we were joined by Santí Catchot from the Balearic Ornithological Group (GOB). As well as giving him the Honeyguide cheque, we found out a lot about the island's wildlife, especially the mixed fortunes of birds of prey. For ospreys it is good news. From one pair in 1981, they have increased to seven resident pairs in 1996. This has been achieved by protection by GOB wardens, despite the threats of disturbance and urbanisation of the coast. For red kites, however, the trend is downwards, from 100 pairs or more ten years ago, the highest density in Europe, to ten pairs or less now. Last year's group had heard about the problem of poisoning. A search by 20 GOB volunteers over the last winter had revealed another serious worry. Under electric wires, 15 corpses had been found, apparently electrocuted on account of shorting on the particular type of pylon now widely used. Also, 80-90 ravens had been found, another species in decline. Contact with the electric company is in hand, and environmental education remains a high priority for GOB. In support of the latter, a poster of red kites has been widely distributed, and each of the group was presented with a copy in exchange for the traditional Honeyguide cheque - 'serious money' in Graham's words for a small organisation like GOB.

The usual generous supper was followed by poetry, limericks and laughter, and presentations by Shaun, not least to Joy for being first in the pool in 1996.

Wildlife lists – see separate PDF for plants

Butterflies

- | | |
|----------|----------------------------|
| 6 April | Cleopatra (<i>right</i>) |
| | Large white |
| 7 April | Wall |
| | Clouded yellow |
| 9 April | Speckled wood |
| | Bath white |
| | Painted lady |
| 10 April | Small copper |
| 11 April | Green hairstreak |
| | Red admiral |
| 12 April | Small white |



Also an unidentified blue and a small heath type were seen

Some notable insects

- Hummingbird hawkmoth
- Egyptian locust
- Carpenter bee *Xylocopa violacea*, which nests in dead wood, seen around Matchani Gran
- Masonry bees

Reptiles

- Moorish gecko
- Hermann's tortoise
- Lilford's wall lizard

Bird List

Little grebe	Cuckoo (heard)
Cory's shearwater	Scops owl (heard)
Mediterranean shearwater	Swift
Cormorant	Pallid swift
Shag	Bee-eater
Cattle egret	Hoopoe
Little egret	Thekla lark
Great white egret	Sand martin
Grey heron	Crag martin
Purple heron	Swallow
Teal	House martin
Mallard	Tawny pipit
Garganey	Meadow pipit
Shoveler	Yellow wagtail
Red kite	White wagtail
Egyptian vulture	Robin
Marsh harrier	Nightingale
Sparrowhawk	Redstart
Steppe buzzard	Stonechat
Booted eagle	Wheatear
Osprey	Blue rock thrush
Kestrel	Blackbird
Peregrine	Cetti's warbler
Red-legged partridge	Fan-tailed warbler
Quail (heard)	Subalpine warbler
Moorhen	Sardinian warbler
Coot	Blackcap
Black-winged stilt	Wood warbler
Stone-curlew	Chiffchaff
Collared pratincole	Willow warbler
Little ringed plover	Great tit
Kentish plover	Woodchat shrike
Ruff	Raven
Spotted redshank	House sparrow
Greenshank	Chaffinch
Green sandpiper	Greenfinch
Wood sandpiper	Goldfinch
Common sandpiper	Linnet
Black-headed gull	Crossbill
Audouin's gull	Cirl bunting
Yellow-legged gull	Corn bunting
Woodpigeon	
Turtle dove	Total: 84 species