

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Discovering Menorca
12 – 19 April 1997

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The group

Jill Blake
Peter Blake
Kathleen Richards
Patricia Anderson
Jim Pollok-Morris
Pat Pollok-Morris
Jane Dunlop
Jil Kendrick
Ann Carr
Ann Davey

Leaders: Graham Hearl
 Ivan Nethercoat

Our hosts at Matchani Gran were Jenny and Shaun Murphy.

As always, this holiday contributed to the protection of the wildlife that we enjoyed by way of a contribution to the Balearic Ornithological Group (GOB). A thank-you letter from GOB appears at the end of this report. This year's contribution of £575, made up of £25 per person in this year's two groups to Menorca, was handed to GOB's Santi Catchot during the holiday in the preceding week. This brings the total given to GOB to £2,945 since the first Balearic Honeyguide holiday in 1992.

This report was written by Ivan Nethercoat with plant and insect lists contributed by Graham Hearl. [See separate scan of these lists plus thank you letter from GOB].

Cover illustration of a hoopoe by Rob Hume.

Day 1

After a slightly delayed flight, Menorca was soon upon us. The relatively short flight bringing us to a world of sunshine and warmth, never far from the Mediterranean, a world away from home.

Minibuses collected at the airport and we were off to the hotel, but this was no long slog through built up areas on busy roads for in no time we were at the hotel, farm, villa. It is a little hard to describe exactly the type of accommodation. A 300 year old farm house converted to holiday rooms hardly does it justice. It was just superb, with perfect hosts, wonderful food, wildlife on the doorstep – oh, and a pool!

A walk around the fields to stretch our legs was a delightful introduction to the week. The island had had a very hot dry spring which played havoc with the normal growing season. Plants that should have been in full flower had already gone over. Despite this a few orchids were to be found, with nice examples of mirror and pyramidal showing among the thistles and weasel snout.

A peregrine flew over as the group were gathering, perhaps eyeing up the feast to be had from the many migrants passing through the island at this time of year. This evening there were large flocks of swallows and swifts gathering over the fields while the regular Thekla larks ran among the rocks. In the background, corn buntings sang from the bushes and wires, providing a musical background to our week, the like of which is now rarely heard in the UK.

Day 2

A stroll down the drive before breakfast. Calm warm and sunny with the accompaniment of quail, hoopoe and goldfinches. Pied flycatchers were migrating through the island stopping off to feed among the sheep. At the end of the drive a family of donkeys provided most of the ‘aahs’ for the week as the youngsters found it difficult not to look very cute.

Fortified after a substantial breakfast, our destination for the first part of the day was the wetland at Tirant. Here we got a feel for the island’s birds, with a good mix of the regular species familiar in the UK and those associated with the Mediterranean. Booted eagle, in both pale phase and dark phase plumages and Egyptian vulture both made a fly past soon followed by a wonderful red kite. The island once had the densest population of kites in Europe but now their numbers are declining rapidly. The wetland area also held several grey herons and one uncharacteristically obvious purple heron, walking alongside its more familiar relatives.

Sardinian warblers were nesting in the old wall and frequently came out to view what was going on, while bouncing around in the air was the fan-tailed warbler on its ‘springy’ display flight. Several little egrets were feeding in the wet areas, familiar birds of the Mediterranean but in among them was an elusive glossy ibis, a migrant bird which evolution seems to have designed to be just a bit smaller than whatever piece of grass or reed it feeds behind! Eventually, however, we all saw the bird in the open. All these wonderful birds were overshadowed a little by a very obliging tree frog that sat out in the open a few feet

away from the track. It was difficult to get near but in the telescope it filled the field of view. A good find by Graham and a real highlight for the trip to see one so well.

For lunch we took a short drive to the coast, stopping off for a look at one of the areas of concern for the local conservation organisation. This is often one of the first arrival points on the island for bee-eater, but this time we were a little early.

Lunch was taken on the edge of a quiet bay on the Cap de Cavalleria, quiet that is except for the goats! One rustle of a lunch bag and they were among us! Soon deterred they let us carry on more or less undisturbed, with only the occasional brave beast venturing into a boat to taste the bespoke sandwiches made that morning.

The cape was fairly quiet for birds in the heat. An Audouin's gull took an occasional fly past while tawny pipits sat on the rocks in the heat haze. The lighthouse on the edge of the cape was a good place to watch Cory's shearwaters but they were sometimes difficult to pick out against the sea. Here too were pied flycatcher resting and feeding and blue rock thrush perched proud against the skyline. In among the rocks the fading plants of dragon arum *Dracunculus* took shade from the fierce heat, as did we. The first minibus had a brief but close fly past of osprey on the way back and our intrepid walkers put up three stone-curlews as they trekked back to join the buses for the drive back to Matchani Gran where a cool pool and ice cold beer awaited.

A small celebration in the bar for a keen Chelsea fan, who returned to be told that they had just won the cup, wound up the day rather well. Cheers Kathleen!

Day 3

An early rise for a stroll before breakfast when the air is full of the scent of fennel and the calls of quail, stone-curlew and hoopoe.

One of the visual delights of the island are the dry stone walls. These were truly amazing at times and home to numerous small birds and reptiles. This morning also saw them being gently scaled by Jim as we attempted to find a way out of some of the fields around the farm.

A drive to Son Bou followed breakfast. This is the last large area of marsh left on the island. It sits right in front of a large tourist development and immediately behind a splendid beach. Pressure to drain and develop the area has been strong but so far it remains. This was another very hot day. Before lunch we explored the dunes and beach side of the marsh, finding many interesting sites such as wonderful cluster of bug, serapias (small-flowered tongue orchid) and bumblebee orchids, dung beetles making short work of dung and lots of wheatears and stonechats and a lone woodchat shrike.

A delightful lunch of salad and perfect home-made quiche and we set off for a small gorge at the edge of the marsh. Here the walk took us along side fields and up a hill overlooking a hidden wet area with garganey, black-winged stilt and black-tailed godwit. Flocks of yellow wagtails fed among the cattle as did a splendid group of cattle egrets.

Into the gorge and Graham came across a large area of pyramidal orchids, while below a purple heron again sat out in the open for all to see. A peregrine sat among the rocks of the gorge while in the small stream were pond terrapins.

Arriving back at the farm, Graham stepped out of the bus and looked over one of the walls to be greeted by a large Hermann's tortoise sunning itself. These wild beasts of the island can be difficult to see and disappear from view remarkably quickly when disturbed. Everyone saw this one well and then left him in peace to retreat to the bar and pool after a very hot day.

Day 4

Another pre-breakfast stroll with the stone-curlews. Departure was somewhat delayed this morning due to one of the leaders who lost the keys to the bus! After much searching by everyone, including our hosts, Jane came to the rescue and had the nous to look deep into my rucksack (brave lady!) where she found them. Apologies to all for the delay. So with thanks to Jane we set off for a look at Mahón and the chance to pick up some gifts. After buying what seemed to be a considerable selection of local pottery we were ready for lunch before the afternoon trip to S'Albufera, a large lake on the northern coast.

This is another area where conservation and development came into conflict, but this time the conservationists won and managed to keep this area special. Those supposedly difficult to see purple herons were here again along with the little egrets. Surprise bird was a lone mistle thrush feeding on the path. This may not sound much but at this time of year on Menorca this is a rare bird. Patricia, resting her ankle while we walked round, also had the luck to see a large snake slide past her, proving that often the best way to see wildlife is to sit quietly and wait and see what happens. Not easy with a group but well worth it when on your own.

Day 5

A short drive to the coast before breakfast. And then on to Mongofre Nou, a private area opened up for us by the local GOB representative. The drive to the reserve took us past cultivated fields and low hills where the first bus put up a stone-curlew feeding near the road. We stopped and watched from the bus as it flew to join its mate only a few metres from where we watched; superb views by all of these rather special birds, a species on the endangered list in the UK.

The reserve is a private area of old salt pans, a type of habitat famous for its wildlife and here was no exception. Booted eagle and red kite made regular appearances overhead while down below little ringed plovers, yellow wagtails, Kentish plover and greenshank all put on a good show in the very warm but windy conditions. On the open water a group of mallards had our only spring migrant duck for company, a lovely male garganey. On the breeding grounds these delightful ducks can be very hard to see as they keep close in among grasses and reed but here he was right out in the open giving prime views to everyone. Whinchats too were on ceremony in best plumage and numerous chiffchaffs were moving among the pine trees.

Dragonflies darted and hunted along the dykes as we headed back to the bus for another gourmet picnic to the sound of nightingales. Overhead three adult Egyptian vultures circled very low in terrific light giving unbeatable views.

A short drive to the Cap de Favoritz was interesting but very quiet. This almost moonscape area was very dry and shallow pools that normally provide a feeding area for waders were now dry. Cory's shearwaters were seen in the distance while one intrepid paddler waded in to the cooling water.

Afternoon tea at Fornells was followed by a walk to the headland for osprey. OK, so no osprey, despite them nesting 'just around the corner', but lovely views out to sea in glorious afternoon light and very obliging blue rock thrushes darting about on top of the rocks, actually showing off their dusky dark blue colour in the low sun. Taking advantage of the good weather we drove back via Monte Toro, Menorca's highest hill, complete with monastery, car park and military base, none of which could take away the magnificent view and atmosphere. From here you could see all the island, pick out the places visited and generally just soak up the atmosphere of a very peaceful Island.

The clear skies over the island allowed us all excellent views of Hale Bopp comet this evening as it made its way through our solar system. A scops owl was not too keen on us being out in his hunting area, however. In the fields around the farm at night small mammals ran through the dried grasses, chased by the farms cats to be revealed as corpses in the morning. Dead garden dormice were regular finds on the grass, as were the occasional bird such as Sardinian warbler and redstart.

Day 6

A longer trip before breakfast; to Punta Prima. This southern headland can be very good for migrant birds. The journey also allowed some of the group to take in the architecture of waste water management on the island's houses.

The point itself was a little quiet but very pleasant at this time of day. However this time everyone got excellent views of Cory's shearwater through the telescope.

Following breakfast we headed for Algendar Gorge. The walk along the bottom of the gorge was a real delight; nightingales singing a few feet away (but still invisible!); Egyptian vultures soaring overhead; firecrest flitting along the branches; goldfinches, greenfinches and Cetti's warbler in the undergrowth. Common blue and speckled wood butterflies flew alongside the path and as the sky became overcast the damselflies settled down and allowed very close views (however still unidentified!). The black specimen may have been a melanistic variety or perhaps a vagrant from Africa).

Lunch was taken at a viewpoint high on the cliffs overlooking Cala Galdana, again stunning views this time also enlivened by a lone alpine swift making the occasional flypast. After lunch we drove to the town of Ciudadela on the far east of the island for coffee and a stroll around the old town. As the skies darkened even more there was one last stop at a very ancient burial mound. These relics are still shrouded in mystery but serve as reminders of an ancient culture on the island. Around them large flocks of

swallows were feeding over the wheat fields as corn buntings rattled their songs in the quiet air.

Day 7

A change in the weather overnight and we awoke to strong wind and heavy rain. Shaun, our host, was prepared, as ever, and appeared with umbrellas for all as we set off for Tirant to see what a difference the week had made to the area. The rain also allowed us to watch the novel drainpipes in action!

Bad weather is usually good for birds at this time of year and here we saw a big difference from our last visit. Ruff and wood sandpiper had joined the gang and seven whiskered terns flew over as we watched. Just behind the area we were watching, the road climbed a small hill and allowed us to look over another wet field. A few weeks earlier a lesser white-fronted goose flew in and seemed to have settled in for the spring. This is thought to be a wild bird and is causing quite a stir among Spanish birdwatchers. As we watched, a marsh harrier flew past very close and quail called almost from under our feet but again without showing themselves. A short drive for coffee and warmth and then back to the same spot where now there was also a small group of red-throated pipits! These birds, no doubt brought down by the bad weather, were feeding among the long grass but came so close as to give very good views in the telescope for everyone. A hoopoe also came out to play to everyone's delight.

Lunch was back at Matchani Gran, inside this time. The air was alive with the excitement of spring migration and a few of the party decided to explore the fields in front of the house.

Rarely have I spent a more productive hour. The first bird was a very smart male collared flycatcher. He stayed a while and then disappeared. Pat was keen to find him again and while searching the trees she suddenly found a male golden oriole in a fig tree! Then another flew in and the two superb birds spent 15 minutes or so perching in the outer branches searching for insects on the ground. A woodchat shrike put in an appearance and four very bedraggled kestrels flew over, while on the ground Pat then spied an odd wheatear. After some searching it showed again and turned out to be a male black-eared wheatear, with two others nearby! Pied flycatchers were appearing all around and in the distance a marsh harrier sailed past. Wet, windy weather may be a pain but it certainly brings in the birds!

Day 8

Departure day. We packed and spent time saying goodbye to our home for the week. A place full of bird song and very pleasant memories. Goldfinch, stone-curlew, nightingale or corn bunting; I couldn't choose the bird that best summed up the place. Perhaps it was the chance to hear them all together in such numbers. Something that should not be impossible in parts of the UK but also something I doubt we will hear in the same way back at home.

Thank you all for your excellent company. I hope to see some of you on future Honeyguide trips.

Bird List

Cory's shearwater	Thekla lark
Mediterranean shearwater	Swallow
Shag	House martin
Little egret	Sand martin
Grey heron	Tawny pipit
Purple heron	Meadow pipit
Glossy ibis	Tree pipit
Mallard	Red-throated pipit
Garganey	Yellow wagtail
Lesser white-fronted goose	White wagtail
Red kite	Wheatear
Black kite	Blackedared wheatear
Egyptian vulture	Nightingale
Marsh harrier	Redstart
Booted eagle	Stonechat
Osprey	Whinchat
Kestrel	Blue rock thrush
Peregrine	Blackbird
Quail (heard only)	Mistle thrush
Coot	Cetti's warbler
Black-winged stilt	Sardinian warbler
Stone-curlew	Fan-tailed warbler
Little ringed plover	Blackcap
Kentish plover	Garden warbler
Little stint	Wood warbler
Redshank	Chiffchaff
Greenshank	Willow warbler
Ruff	Firecrest
Wood sandpiper	Collared flycatcher
Common sandpiper	Pied flycatcher
Audouin's gull	Golden oriole
Yellow-legged gull	Great tit
Whiskered tern	Woodchat shrike
Rock dove	Raven
Woodpigeon	House sparrow
Scops owl	Serin
Swift	Chaffinch
Pallid swift	Greenfinch
Alpine swift	Goldfinch
Hoopoe	Linnet
Short-toed lark	Corn bunting

And not forgetting.....Hale Bopp!