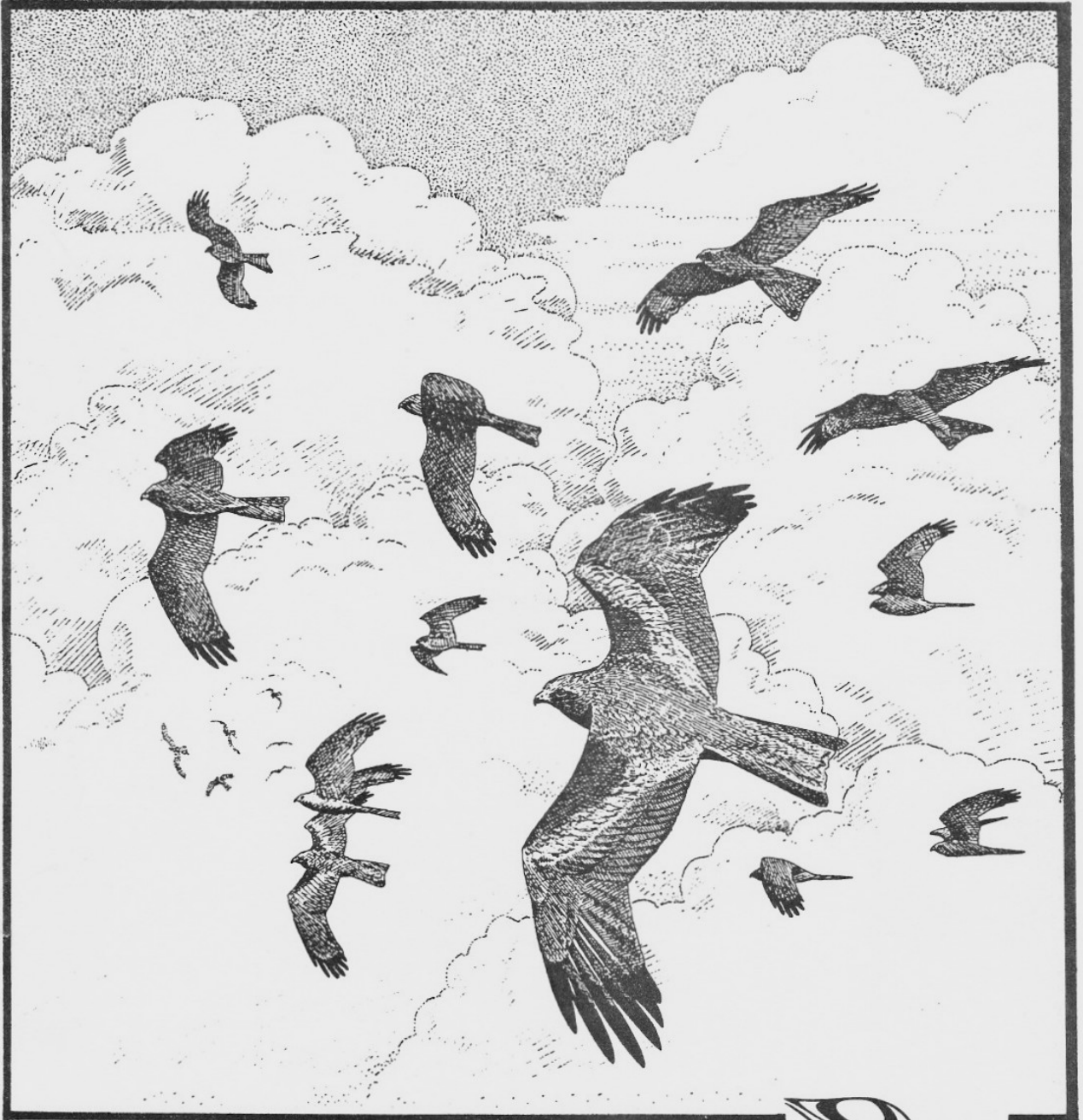


RSPB

PYRENEES HOLIDAY TOUR REPORT



18-25 May 1985



RSPB TOUR TO THE SPANISH PYRENEES

18 – 25 May 1985

Chris Durdin

Saturday 18 May - Heathrow to Berdún

Our flight left Heathrow soon after 2.30 pm and was in Bilbao in one and a quarter hours; a much easier trip than many of us had had to Heathrow. At Bilbao we were met by John Boucher, our host at Berdún's Painting School, and we set off eastwards towards our destination.

During the three-hour drive before our stop for supper we had our first taste of the richness of the area for birds of prey, with buzzard, a male hen harrier and black kites all seen. The best bird of the coach journey, though, was the white stork on its massive nest on the church at Gamara Mayor. On the return journey when we paused briefly at the traffic lights, two large but still downy young could be easily seen.

Our first taste of Spanish cooking was quite a treat with a choice of starters followed by, among others, rabbit cooked with garlic then fruit or ice cream, all washed down with lashings of red wine. Some of the wine was spilt generously on the paper table-cloth; the first of many we were to ruin during the week! An hour or so's drive later we were in the fortified hilltop village of Berdún. Soon after we were tucked up in bed with our hot water bottles. But it was, in fact, no cosy, quiet first night; quite the reverse. A fiesta was taking place, and shouting, drunken singing and a horn carried on for most of the night!

Sunday 19 May – around Berdún – to the Río Veral and the Río Aragón

A pre-breakfast walk along the parapets for some showed us that the abundant local nightingales could be seen as well as heard. The first of hundreds of serins were seen and corn buntings heard, and spotless starlings were on the buildings and elsewhere. Other birds that morning included blackcap, great tit, chaffinch, goldfinch, swift and swallow.

After breakfast at Prudencia's and a few introductory words from John Boucher, we set off down the rough track across 'the Badlands' towards the Río Veral. The gauntlet of local dogs we'd expected came to nought; the few that were regularly around barked a little but were a likeable friendly lot, very happy to be made a fuss of.

With the sun coming up we set off – shirt-sleeve weather already – so the birds of prey started to move on the thermals and updrafts. Five honey buzzards circled overhead, the first two being particularly pale birds, then a buzzard - excellent for learning the difference in the air. Then Egyptian vulture, followed by griffon vulture, plus black and red kites - almost too much to take in. An Alpine swift appeared with the swifts and raptors above. Nearer ground level, crested larks, nightingales and serins were seen by most people, plus black redstart, woodchat shrike and linnets. The wheatears encouraged a little controversy, but all appeared to be common wheatears, and we failed to find a black-eared wheatear the whole trip.

From the bridge over the Río Veral there were common sandpipers and among the scrub and hedges on the other side, spotted flycatchers, white wagtails, garden warblers and that rather elusive bird on the continent - a robin! On the rough slopes beyond the river we searched briefly for ortolan buntings which only Jeremy found at this stage, though many of us saw them later in the week. On the way back we found the first of many Early Spider Orchids at the bottom of the slope, and up the hill we added turtle dove and subalpine warbler.

Lunch at Prudencia's was a wonderful seafood paella – surprising, perhaps, so far from the sea. Then we moved off down the road towards the Río Aragón. Quails were calling in the cultivated fields and whitethroats from hedgerows. We enjoyed wonderful views of scarce swallowtails. As the road curves leftwards down to the river, there is a good patch of scrub where we found subalpine and melodious

warblers and stonechats. A sparrowhawk flew overhead. A singing skylark was followed by two woodlarks on the ground by the road. There cannot be many places where you can find skylark, woodlark and crested lark within such a small area.

On the Río Aragón, as well as common sandpipers again, little ringed plovers flew round and landed on the rocky island in the river, then virtually disappeared from view. A Cetti's warbler sang loudly from the scrub - we never were to actually see one, but that's not unusual for this species. The Río Aragón turned out to be one of those unusual places where three species of wagtails can be seen: grey wagtails, so typical of mountain or fast flowing rivers, white wagtails and some splendid Spanish yellow wagtails.

Then, extraordinarily, a large bird of prey with a pointed tail appeared. As it disappeared up and away, it became clear that it was the elusive lammergeier, miles from the mountains. Fortunately, this was not to be our last. John Boucher collected us from the other side of the river, and while he ferried us, car load at a time, bee-eaters appeared; some saw as many as seven. Also in the area, seen only by some, were woodchat shrikes, a hoopoe and golden orioles, calling from the poplars.

Before supper, we joined the crowd in the square to watch a group of dancers, castanets and all, accompanied by rather over-amplified Spanish folk singers.

After supper, a few of us gathered in the churchyard, hoping to see a scops owl. After persistently imitating its whistling, monotonous "piu" call, one briefly alighted on a wire. Just to confuse matters, a midwife toad was also calling, which is remarkably similar! A barn owl flew from the church and into the darkness. Funnily, after working hard for a brief glimpse of the scops owl, they then called continuously most of the night within easy earshot. Certainly preferable to last night's fiesta!

Monday 20 May - Sotonera and Riglos

Those who came on today's breakfast walk saw, for the first time, the village rock sparrows. It's a difficult species to get to grips with, but at the far end of the village where the pine trees and scrub below us are replaced by a rocky and grassy area, there they are, sitting on telegraph posts and wires. They were there to be seen on many occasions; probably everyone found them at least once. Other birds on this morning's walk were garden warblers (at least ten), a wood warbler and a distant male redstart.

An hour's coach drive took us to a point on the main road where we could view the impressive cliffs of Riglos. Vultures overhead, as usual it now seemed, crag martins, a mystery falcon (probably a peregrine) and a distant short-toed eagle on a post.

Next stop was the lake at Sotonera. Julio took us to the wrong bit at first, before being redirected to the marshy side on the north of the lake. Walking down the muddy track towards the lake, out best bee-eaters to date perched on a dead bush, and a little owl flew by. The lake was not as good as it had promised as the water level was very high; there were tamarisk bushes poking out of the water. Nonetheless, we were able to see several new species, as well as some familiar ones like mallard, coot and black-headed gull! Great reed warblers perched obligingly at the tops of reeds, Cetti's warblers sang noisily from thickets and one fan-tailed warbler was heard. Corn buntings were everywhere. On the field near the lake we found a stone-curlew which sat fairly still while many people looked at it through Richard's telescope. The only other warbler was a passage whimbrel; the water level was too high even for the hoped-for stilts and avocets. One or two found a distant calandra lark; we all had good views of more Spanish yellow wagtails.

We returned, optimistically perhaps, to where we'd seen the bee-eaters for lunch. They had gone but a woodchat shrike appeared instead. Rather more in evidence were far too many mosquitoes for comfort.

To Riglos, after lunch, where we parked below the village, and walked past the washhouse and up to where the church is practically built into the cliffs. The promised rock sparrows were there, on the

church, plus black redstarts. A black wheatear perched, half hidden most of the time, on a rock above us. Even more neck-straining was a blue rock thrush up there somewhere; sometimes near that patch of pink flowers, sometimes not. Turning right along the bottom of the cliffs we found a rather easier blue rock thrush, our first and best Sardinian warblers, subalpine warbler, choughs overhead and lots of vultures. After sheltering from a quick cloud burst we wandered down again, finding tassel hyacinth in a field, and four of us watched black redstarts disappearing into a nesting hole in a house. The return journey, in Julio's safe hands as always, took one and a quarter hours.

Tuesday 21 May - Arbayún and Lumbier

An early start today with breakfast at 8 am, leaving at 8.45 am so no pre-breakfast walk. The reason for the early start was to be early at the Hoz de Arbayún, a spectacular gorge, and good for raptors which emerge as the sun rises and the air starts to move. There is even a viewing area provided. As we arrived, a splendid adult Bonelli's eagle circled low over us, obligingly showing us both its white underside and the white patch on its back. Griffon vulture after griffon vulture soared or glided over us - too amazing for words. Egyptian vultures were around too, and a fluffy young griffon on the cliffs. Also seen were blackcaps below us, crag and house martins, alpine swifts, and subalpine warbler. A rock bunting perched for a while on a small tree and then was replaced by a circling bunting.

The plants here were excellent too, including some wonderful Lady Orchids, Globularia, Asphodels, Blue Aphyllanthes and Pyrenean Hyacinth.

After an hour and a half here, John Boucher guided us to the start of the Hoz de Lumbier, a walk along a lovely narrow gorge that once had a railway going through it. From midday until Julio picked us up at about 5.30 pm at the other end of the gorge, we pottered slowly in the warm sunshine, looking at birds, flowers and butterflies. We had torches with us for two short railway tunnels, but they were by no means essential. First discovery was both house and crag martins nesting on a rocky overhang. It's not often you see house martins nesting anywhere other than on a house, but even here, house sparrows had taken over one nest. Spectacular Pyrenean Saxifrages were throwing out their columns of flowers from their basal rosettes on the rocks above. Ravens, Alpine choughs, griffon and Egyptian vultures were flying overhead; subalpine and melodious warblers were both seen and, by some, a Dartford warbler in the scrub on the hillside. A wryneck called persistently below the Dartford warbler spot and eventually it was located in a hedgerow between us and the river. But probably best bird of the lot was a male golden oriole, seen at last by most of us at least, in a riverside poplar. Finally, Richard and Wyn found a tawny pipit in a field just before the village. Wandered through the village, turned right over the bridge to where Julio met us with the coach. Not that we left straightaway - a well-earned drink in the conveniently situated bar came first! A coach journey of about three-quarters of an hour brought us home to Berdún.

After supper was our most determined attempt at scops owling. After failing to see them in the churchyard, we moved towards the calling male beyond Prudencia's. As we stood looking over the edge, two small owls, lured in it seems by my persistent imitation, landed briefly in the grass in front of us. We backed off, in the hope that they would land on the rail and be silhouetted in the twilight. The two small owls flitted past us, perhaps just fifteen feet away. We didn't see them well enough to be certain that they were scops owls on shape, but I think none of us really doubted what they were.

Wednesday 22 May - Hoz de Biniés

An early morning walk for some through "the Badlands" to the slopes on the other side of the Río Veral. The ortolan bunting was speedily located - a singing male.

An easier day today with a trip to the local Hoz de Biniés. John and Viv Boucher ferried us by car to the start of this splendid gorge. As we arrived in fits and starts the group did not really gather together at any point, but we all explored and watched at our own pace. The butterflies were outstanding, with Scarce Swallowtail, Moroccan Orange Tip, Spanish Festoon and Cleopatra (like a brimstone with orange on the fore-wing). New birds for the trip were long-tailed tits and jays, but probably the best birds were delightful, dancing grey wagtails and black-bellied dippers towards the far end. Rivalling

them were the griffon vultures, often seen ten or more at a time round the large rock part-way up the gorge.

After a paddle, for some at least, we meandered back down the gorge where John and Viv met us in their cars. Just down the road, between the end of the gorge and Biniés village, we stopped for bee-eaters, feeding and perching near the river. Some went home at that point, but most of us were dropped on the other side of the river (to Berdún) in Biniés. We wandered along the track, round some fields and back onto the track which brought us eventually to the other side of the Río Veral from Berdún, then across the bridge and up the hill through the Badlands to return. The star turn on this walk was a pair of Dartford warblers, perching obligingly on top of some scrub. The golden orioles were less helpful; great efforts were made to see them well, in a small poplar plantation with thick undergrowth, with mixed results; poor views of shapes in the tops of the trees for some and outstandingly good views for the patient few who stood and stared.

Thursday 23 May - High Pyrenees - Col de Portalet

The two-hour trip to the pass at Col de Portalet seemed to pass remarkably quickly with wonderful scenery to admire. We stopped briefly a mile or two below Formigal to photograph an abandoned village by the lake. Then, just below Formigal, there was an unscheduled stop due to a wonderful male rock thrush, conveniently on a lay-by. The botanists, in the mean time, found a group of elder-flowered orchids, mainly pale yellow ones but also several of the purple form.

From there we went to the very top of the pass at the Col de Portalet which last year's trip had been unable to do. The souvenir shops were open but the frontier appeared not to be as cars were turned away. We wandered through the Spanish border post (but they did not want to see passports) and climbed the hill round the back of the French frontier post and made our way towards the cliffs above us. It was wonderful to see bulbs pushing through as the remaining snow patches receded. As well as the wild narcissi, prominent in meadows around Formigal, Spring and Trumpet Gentians were in bloom. Other flowers included Parnassus-leaved Buttercup, Yellow Whitlow-Grass and Yellow Saxifrage.

Then, as we paused by a rock for lunch, the cry went up "Lammergeier". Not everyone saw it, but for a brief moment it was a wonderful view of this special Pyrenean bird. Other birds at the high tops were ravens, Alpine choughs, water and meadow pipits, honey buzzard overhead and black redstarts. However, it was the mammals that stole the show. At least two Alpine Marmots, a large thick-set rodent with small ears and a long bushy tail, grey and sandy brown in colour. This exclusively European species originates in the Alps but has been introduced into the Pyrenees. And, feeding at the bottom of the cliff among the scree at the bottom of the cliff, a single chamois - also known as isard in the Pyrenees.

After three hours up there, we moved a little way down the valley, back to the rock thrush lay-by. We explored meadows near the road, which from a distance I thought would be good for birds but poor for flowers. New birds for the trip here were tree pipit, yellowhammer and booted eagle, the last seen by several, in the company of a shepherd. However, it was the flowers here that were a real knock-out, contrary to my earlier thought. There were more elder-flowered orchids, astonishing shows of spring and trumpet gentians, cowslips, and in a damp patch in the field by the road, an astonishing show of birds-eye primroses along with some large-flowered butterworts. By the coach we found *Androsace villosa* (a rock-jasmine).

We left there and headed out of the mountains until I spied a red-backed shrike in the village of Escarillo. We all enjoyed excellent views, first of a female and then the male.

Half a mile down the road, Ann discovered her lack of spectacles, and three of us jogged back to the red-backed shrike site to search for them. We found black redstart and a wheatear on route, but no glasses. But in the meantime, just opposite the shop by which we'd stopped, a way through to some

lovely pasture by a craggy outcrop had been discovered. A firecrest was seen by many and a red squirrel posed obligingly on an ivy-covered tree.

It seemed quite a short hour and a half back from there. John Boucher kindly showed us some slides of the area that evening and we learned about a great variety of local matters, from buildings and farming methods to the mayor's duties and profession (a baker).

Friday 24 May - St Juan de la Peña

The drive to this local historic and natural history spot took us through scenery as good as any that we had seen so far. We stopped to admire the view, not far from the monastery, and all saw a magnificent soaring golden eagle. Some also saw rock bunting, perched on the dead tree below us, a firecrest, and, for a couple of lucky folk, a brief but good view of the elusive black woodpecker. We found our first Hepatica under the trees, a curious white-flowered shrub which I now believe to be Amelanchier, and mistletoe growing on Scots Pines.

We passed the 'old' 12th century monastery and went up to the 17th century monastery on top of the hill. The area is a national park, run by ICONA, the Spanish national parks/nature conservancy organisation. We'd heard that citril finches had been seen in the area, and they took no trouble to find; one perched for all to see on a barbed wire fence. Later, six or so fed near the cafe. Rock sparrows were there, as predicted, on the monastery roof, along with black redstarts and coal tits going into a nesting hole between two bricks.

Passing through the meadows and by a pond full of frogs we went into the pines. More Hepatica here, and a great spotted woodpecker called. What appeared to be a grassy knoll was not as grassy as it seemed, but was still an ideal spot for lunch in the sunshine. Ravens, griffon and Egyptian vultures were around us as we ate, with song thrush and chiffchaff singing in the wood below. Two golden eagles drifted into view in front of us, mobbed by ravens. Then one closed its wings, and stooped halfway across the sky. It didn't deter the ravens, who resumed mobbing immediately. Then, over the monastery, a short-toed eagle appeared for all to see.

After lunch we split up and explored the forest. A close examination of a treecreeper showed pale flanks and a distinct eye-stripe over the eye, and so, as expected at this height and among conifers, was our own treecreeper and not the continental short-toed tree-creeper. Other birds in the woods included chaffinches, tits, great spotted woodpeckers, nuthatches, robin and firecrests. Beyond the conifers, a few of us heard a Bonelli's warbler singing. But best of the lot were the lovely crested tits, seen well by almost everyone. After refreshment at the cafe, John Boucher showed us round the old monastery, built into the rock below.

John and Viv Boucher joined us for our final supper, with champagne as well as wine, plus speeches, and a presentation and a kiss for Prudencia. Then our last chance - on this trip at least - to hear the local scops owls again and then to bed ready for the morning's drive to Bilbao.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

Daily log of birds seen. H = heard.

	Bilbao to Berdún	Around Berdún	Sotonera & Riglos	Arbayún & Riglos	Hoz de Biniés	High Pyrenees	St Juan de la Peña
All dates are May 1985	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Great crested grebe			✓	✓			
Grey heron			✓				
White stork	✓						
Mallard			✓				
Tufted duck			✓				
Honey buzzard		✓	✓			✓	
Red kite		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black kite	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sparrowhawk		✓					
Buzzard	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Booted eagle						✓	
Bonelli's eagle				✓			
Golden eagle							✓
Short-toed eagle			✓	✓			✓
Hen harrier	✓	✓					✓
Marsh harrier			✓				
Egyptian vulture	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Lammergeier		✓				✓	
Griffon vulture		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Peregrine			?		✓		✓
Kestrel	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-legged partridge	✓	✓	✓	✓			H
Quail		H	H				
Coot			✓				
Little ringed plover		✓				✓	
Lapwing			✓				
Redshank			✓				
Common sandpiper		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Whimbrel			✓				
Stone-curlew			✓				
Black-headed gull			✓				
Woodpigeon			✓			✓	
Turtle dove		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Feral pigeon/rock dove			✓	✓		✓	✓
Cuckoo	✓	H		H	H		H
Barn owl		✓		✓	✓		
Scops owl		✓	✓	✓	H	✓	✓
Little owl			✓				✓
Swift		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Alpine swift		✓		✓	✓		✓
Bee-eater		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Hoopoe		✓	✓				✓
Wryneck				✓	✓	H	
Green woodpecker		H			H		
Great spotted woodpecker							✓
Black woodpecker							✓
Calandra lark			✓				
Crested lark		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Woodlark		✓	✓				
Skylark		✓	✓	H	H	✓	✓
Sand martin		✓					
Crag martin			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

May 1985	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Swallow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House martin	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tawny pipit				✓			
Tree pipit						✓	
Meadow pipit						✓	
Water pipit						✓	
Yellow wagtail		✓	✓	✓			
Grey wagtail		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
White wagtail	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-backed shrike				✓		✓	
Woodchat shrike		✓	✓	✓			✓
Dipper				✓	✓		
Wren		✓	✓	✓	✓	H	✓
Dunnock				H			✓
Cetti's warbler		H	H	H	H	H	
Sedge warbler		✓					
Reed warbler			H	✓			
Great reed warbler			✓				
Melodious warbler		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Blackcap		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Whitethroat		✓		✓			✓
Lesser whitethroat			H				
Sardinian warbler			✓	✓			
Subalpine warbler		✓		✓	✓		✓
Dartford warbler				✓	✓		
Willow warbler		✓					
Chiffchaff			H				H
Bonelli's warbler			✓				✓
Goldcrest							✓
Firecrest				✓	H	✓	✓
Fan-tailed warbler			H				
Pied flycatcher			✓	✓	✓		
Spotted flycatcher		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Whinchat			✓	✓			
Stonechat		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wheatear		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black wheatear			✓				
Rock thrush						✓	
Blue rock thrush			✓	H			
Black redstart		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redstart			✓				
Robin		✓			✓		✓
Nightingale	H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blackbird	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song thrush							H
Mistle thrush						✓	✓
Long-tailed tit					✓		
Coat tit							✓
Blue tit		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great tit		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Crested tit							✓
Nuthatch							✓
Treecreeper							✓
Corn bunting	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yellowhammer						✓	
Rock bunting				✓			✓
Ortolan bunting		✓			✓		

May 1985	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Cirl bunting		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reed bunting			✓				
Chaffinch		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Serin		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greenfinch		H	✓	✓	✓		
Goldfinch	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Linnet		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Crossbill							✓
Bullfinch						✓	✓
Citril finch							✓
House sparrow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tree sparrow		✓					
Rock sparrow			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spotless starling	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Golden oriole			✓	✓	✓		
Jay					✓	✓	✓
Magpie	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chough			✓	✓	✓	✓	H
Alpine chough		H		✓	✓	✓	
Jackdaw	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Carrion crow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Raven			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Total for day	20	66	80	72	64	59	75

Grand total for the holiday: 133

Holiday participants

Joyce Corway	Bill and Jackie Hummel
Rosemary Richards	Molly Dyer
Jeremy Hicks	John Abbott
Wyn Robinson	Jim Camden
Angela Smith	Nigel Brotherton
Dick and Joan Appleby	Eric and Ann Barbour-Mercer
Paul and Eva Weston	Marjorie Hosier
Mary and John Whitbread	Richard Bailey

Leader

Chris Durdin, RSPB East Anglia Office, Aldwych House, Bethel Street, Norwich NR1 1NR

Our host

John Boucher, The Painting School, Calle Mayor 30, Berdún, Huesca, Spain

Postscript, 32 years later

This holiday report records my first visit to the Spanish Pyrenees as a holiday leader. It was scanned from a printed copy with Optical Character Recognition, and the daily log of birds was re-typed. Apart from some very light edits, it appears much as the original did, including Rob Hume's splendid line drawing of black kites on the cover and the old version of the RSPB logo. The typeface is Palatino Linotype, similar to Palatino then used by the RSPB: if it looks familiar, it might be because the *Honeyguide* on every brochure cover is in Palatino italic. The RSPB address above is kept for historical interest: the regional office in Norwich has moved twice since then.

Chris Durdin, November 2017