

# TRIP REPORT

## SPANISH PYRENEES – JULY 2006

**Kenny Musgrove and Wayne Geater**

### **DAY 1 – Monday 24<sup>th</sup> July 2006**

We arrived at Bilbao Airport at 10.15 a.m. and after collecting our hire car set off on the long journey to Jaca (our base for the trip) at just after 11.00 a.m. The first part of the journey was relatively quiet with sightings of **Buzzard**, a pair of **Ravens** and a single **Black Kite**. The first birds of note were the **White Storks** nesting on the church near Vitoria Gasteiz as reported in the trip by Nick Bray et al from 2004. The nearer we got to Pamplona the sightings of raptors from the car increased. **Black and Red Kites** were numerous and we also got two very good views from the car of **Short-toed Eagles**. After nearly two hours of driving we decided to stop at the Lumbier area, just off the N-240. A quick look from the “vulture feeding station” hide produced **Griffon and Egyptian Vultures** on the ground and flying **Black and Red Kites**. We then drove through Lumbier village to the viewpoint at Arbayun, where an hours birding produced numerous **Griffons** and small numbers of **Egyptian Vultures**. Also seen from here were **Crag Martins, House Martins, Swallows** and small numbers of **Alpine Swift**. Consulting the guide by Crozier we decided to drive up to the television mast. However, the drive up to mast was interrupted when I spotted a large vulture over the ridge to the left of the viewpoint. Jumping out of the car, we were rewarded with our first sighting of **Lammergeier** as it drifted along the cliff face and over the ridge. Buoyed by this sighting we continued up to the television mast where we had spectacular views but the only new bird being a **Lesser Kestrel**. We decided after this to make our way back down the valley and carry on to Jaca. We arrived at Jaca at around 7.00 p.m. and decided to familiarise ourselves with the town and have our evening meal.

### **DAY 2 – Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> July 2006**

Today we had decided to visit the Hecho Valley, and following breakfast we set off. On the road between Jaca and the turn off for the Hecho Valley drive-by sightings of **Black and Red Kites** were numerous. We stopped after several kilometres into the drive up the valley when a **Short-toed Eagle** sat on a telegraph pole gave an excellent photographic opportunity, and the fields around this area produced **Cirl Bunting, Rock Sparrow** and both **Grey and White Wagtails**. We continued on up the valley and turned off for the Garbadito Refuge. The meadows around the refuge produced a

**Chaffinch, Coal Tit** and a small party of **Citril Finches**. Following the trail past the wooden hut to the cliff face, which is supposed to be a regular nesting site of Wallcreeper, we stopped at the first meadow which produced a fly past **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. From this point we decided to scan the cliffs opposite, and this proved extremely beneficial as we telescoped two **Lammergeiers** sitting on rocks near the top of the cliff face. For the next ten minutes we had exceptional views of these magnificent vultures as they performed in flight and sat on the cliffs on the opposite side of the valley. With our spirits high we carried on to the cliff face hoping for a sighting of Wallcreeper. On reaching the cliff face we sat and scanned the cliff for over two hours, but unfortunately no sightings of our target bird. However, there was plenty going on to keep us occupied. **Black Redstarts** flitted around the top of the cliff-face and Wayne picked out a single **Alpine Accentor** continually coming to a nest site near the top, with food for its young.

A mixed flock of **Alpine and Red-billed Chough** continually harassed the numerous **Griffons** and a pair of **Ravens** also performed well for us. **Crag Martins** and a sizeable group of **Alpine Swifts** were continually overhead, and a **Black Woodpecker** was heard calling from the opposite side of the valley, but sadly we were unable to get any sightings of these large woodpeckers. A single **Common Buzzard** and a **Common Kestrel** were also seen. We made our way back to the refuge a little disappointed (but not too much) where a large eagle performed above us while we were having a drink. This really close view of a **Golden Eagle** again raised our spirits and we made our way back to the village of Siresa, where we had a flyover **Short-toed Eagle** and fine lunch in the Castillo d'Acher hotel.

After lunch we tried our luck at the Boca del Infierno, but the only bird seen was a **Robin**. Driving further up the valley we eventually came to some Alpine meadows where we added our first **Red-backed Shrike** as well as **Yellowhammer, Goldfinch, Linnet** and another flock of **Red-billed Chough**. We then drove back down the valley and across to the Anso viewpoint, which proved to be disappointing with only **Common Swifts** and a single **Black Kite** seen. We decided to head for the impressive Binies Gorge where we heard but did not see **Blue Rock Thrush** as well as **Crag Martin** and numerous **Griffon Vultures**, one of which flew straight at us down the road, passing at head height. Further down the road towards Berdun the scrub area produced a **Spectacled Warbler**. Earlier in the day we had made the decision to try for the Eagle Owl at the site mentioned in several trip reports, so we headed back towards Jaca on the N-240. After stopping for something to eat we turned off towards and parked at the bridge as suggested. Here we

met an English couple who lived nearby and a Dutch birder who had been at the site for the three previous evenings. From this conversation we were given details of an area around the airport of Santa Cilia and that the Gabardito sight had not been occupied by Wallcreeper this year. We were also told that the owl had not been seen for over a week. However, luck was with us and just before 10.00 p.m. the giant **Eagle Owl** flew right in front of us and perched on a rock. Despite the light we were able to scope the bird for several minutes before it flew off to continue its hunting. Several **Nightjars** were also seen in this area and a **Scops Owl** (heard but not seen) was also in evidence.

### **DAY 3 – Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> July 2006**

Following our discussion with the English couple the previous evening we tried the area around Santa Cilia as suggested. In the area around the river we had **Common Sandpiper, Woodchat Shrike, Melodious Warbler, Blackcap, Nightingale, Garden Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher, Spotless Starling, Linnet and Greenfinch**, with **Golden Oriole** heard but not seen. Further on around the airfield we had more **Woodchat Shrikes, Crested Lark, Red-backed Shrike, Serin and two Hoopoes**.

After a decent hour or so in this area we decided to head back to Jaca and then onto the ski resort of Candanchu. Stopping at one of the villages for Café con leche we sat with our drinks and watched numerous **Griffons, and the odd Egyptian Vulture**, take off from the mountains to begin their daily search for food. We arrived at Candanchu and with one chairlift working we headed for the tops of the mountains where **Black Redstart and Alpine Chough** were spotted on the slopes on the way up. Following a wide track beyond the café it was soon apparent the most common bird on the high tops were **Northern Wheatear**. However after walking for 15 minutes or so we were rewarded with two flyover **Snow Finches**, which were followed soon after by a single flyover bird. We stopped in one of the many meadow valleys to check out some movement and along with more **Northern Wheatears** we picked out several **Water Pipits**. We sat for half an hour in this area scanning the numerous **Griffons** which were continually flying over us, and were rewarded with the sight of both **Short-toed and Booted Eagle** passing right above us. We made our way back to the café and walked off following a track to the right. A small group of **Citril Finches** were feeding just around the corner from the café along with a few **Linnets**. More **Northern Wheatear and Water Pipits** were in evidence and a single **Egyptian Vulture** was spotted flying along a nearby rock face. On making our way back to the chair lift a larger Pipit was observed which at first was thought to be a **Tawny**

**Pipit** (but the bird despite being the correct size and pale underneath had no head markings and a much darker back – any suggestions welcome). Making our way back down on the chairlift we had excellent views of more **Citril Finches**, some of which were sat on the wires of the chair lift itself, and at the bottom near the chair lift building **Serin** were singing and **White Wagtails** flitted around the buildings.

The time now was 5.00 p.m. and we decided to try our luck at the nearby resort of Astun. Again one chairlift was working so we made our way up the slopes to the tops, where on descending from the chairlift were amazed to be in a natural bowl, which contained a small lake. We did not have much time on the tops here, so we scanned the surrounding ridges and peaks and were rewarded with three **Lammergeiers** in the air together towards the southeast. With this sighting we caught the last chair back down the mountains and decided to make our way back to Jaca.

We stopped to observe the derelict railway station (now being renovated) in the hope of seeing Black-bellied Dipper as mentioned in Nick Bray's report but no such luck. However the trees lining the stream/river in the village produced **Nuthatch, Spotted Flycatcher, Melodious Warbler, Great Tit, Blue Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker**.

#### **DAY 4 – Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> July 2006**

On this our third full day in the Pyrenees, we had decided to try our luck to the south of Jaca. We set off for Riglos on the Bernues road, calling first at the Oroel site just outside of Jaca. We were hoping to at least hear Black Woodpecker, but this sight was extremely quiet and the only bird seen was a **Jay**.

Continuing on our journey we stopped to scope a large raptor sitting on the top of a tree, which turned out to be a **Common Buzzard**, but our luck was in when at least 50 calling **Bee-eaters** flew overhead. Further stops on this road produced **Spectacled Warbler, Wood Warbler, Melodious Warbler, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Firecrest**, and the area around La Pena produced more **Bee-eaters** and a **Turtle Dove**, with a single **Yellow-legged Gull** and **Mallard** on the reservoir.

After café con leche and something to eat we drove into the village of Riglos. As stated in the guide we parked before the village and walked to the church and took the track to the right. Apart from **Griffons** and a single **Egyptian Vulture** the only other bird seen was a male **Black Redstart**.

Somewhat disappointed we made our way back to the car and decided to make our way back to the monasteries at San Juan de la Pena. The lower monastery produced a very photographic male

**Black Redstart** while the woods around the entrance to the first track by the upper monastery yielded **Treecreeper** (I presume Short-toed), **Crested Tit, Firecrest and Long-tailed Tit**. We parked at the suggested parking area and made our way through the woods to the viewpoint. This short walk only produced **Blackbird, Robin and two more Firecrest**.

Despite our earlier report on the Wallcreeper we decided to give the Gabardito site another go and drove up the Hencho valley in the early evening. We first tried the Boca del Infierno (just in case) and then the stream above (for Dipper) but no luck in both cases. In fact the only birds seen were a huge group of Common swifts screaming up the valley – perhaps they knew what was to come! Up we went to the Gabardito refuge. The trees around the refuge were alive with birds, which included **Crested, Great and Coal Tits and Nuthatch**, but just as we were about to set off for the rock face it started to rain. We decided to have a coffee until this passed over, but the sky darkened, the rain became more intense and thunder rolled around the mountains. After 40 minutes we decided to call it a day and drove back to the excellent Castillo d'Acher for an evening meal. The storm worsened and the drive back to Jaca later on was undertaken in the middle of the most ferocious thunder and lightning I have ever witnessed – both impressive and somewhat frightening. (We had planned to try the park in Jaca that night for Scops Owl).

### **DAY 5 – Friday 28<sup>th</sup> July 2006**

With our flight back to England not due to take-off until 9.00 p.m. we decided to pay another visit to the ski slopes in the hope that Wayne could photograph the vultures. First though we spent an hour around the river below Jaca, where we had **Spotless Starling, Melodious Warbler, Bee-eater, Common Sandpiper, Grey Heron, and a singing Quail** (not seen). A quick visit to the Citadel in Jaca gave us **Rock, House, and Tree Sparrow**.

We then went up the valley to Astun and the same chairlift to the tops. We had made a plan to make our way to a ridge some 800m from the chairlift. On the walk there we had **Northern Wheatear and Water Pipit** and an exceptionally close view of a flyover **Lammergeier**. I set up the scope and Wayne his camera equipment on the ridge from which we had a magnificent panoramic view. During the next two hours we had close views of **Griffons** and regular sightings of two distant **Lammergeies** as well as **Alpine Chough** and numerous **House Martins**. However the greatest spectacle was of some 100 plus **Black Kites** passing over our heads moving from north to south. Time was pressing and we made our way back to the chairlift, where just before the upper station we

found two **Black-eared Wheatears**. After descending and on reaching the car park, the two (I presume the same) **Lammergeiers** appeared over the ridge to the left and gave us fitting farewell views as they hunted along the mountainside.

We drove back to Bilbao stopping again at the Lumbier area but the drive back produced no new birds.

### **(87 Species)**

To sum up I would say that bird watching in the Spanish Pyrenees is spectacular but not easy. Raptors are everywhere, but smaller birds are somewhat scarce on the ground and take some finding. The scenery is breathtaking and the plant life and abundance of butterflies is apparent. We were also lucky enough to catch a glimpse of Chamois and Marmot on the slopes near the ski centres.

All in all a very enjoyable trip, and I would be interested in any reports of Wallcreeper sightings in the area this year. Apparently we heard that one was seen at the Boca del Infierno in May.

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