

Holiday Highlights

Pyrenees

21-28 May 2016

Guides: Duncan Macdonald and James Shooter

Guests: Sue and Keith Waldron, Mervyn Wiles, David King, Gordon Stuttard, Jane Moore, Andrew Barnett and Stephen Evans

Day 1: After an early start at Gatwick airport we meet and greet our guests and there's a sense of excitement amongst the group about the week ahead. We're meeting David in Barcelona as he is travelling by train and Sue and Keith at the hotel as they've made a holiday of the journey and are travelling south in their campervan. Our therefore depleted group heads for the plane and it's not long before we're walking into the Barcelona heat a short journey later.

Outside the terminal as we wait for the car hire company to pick us up we have a few Common Swifts screaming overhead and Yellow-legged Gulls are flying across the roads outside the airport entrance. As we drive through the sunny city we arrive at the car hire depot and hear a Zitting Cisticola in the reeds beyond the fence. Cetti's Warbler is calling out loudly alongside it and just as James is asking where all the Monk Parakeets are, four of them do a screeching flyby! A Magpie darts in and out of the bushes and small parties of Spotless Starlings fly overhead as we pack up the suitcases and begin our long drive to the mountains.

In the confines of the city we pick up more Swifts and a few Swallows darting about, we head for the motorway where the traffic begins to thin out. We make good progress on the first leg of our journey and stop for a comfort break after a few hours. Ice-cream is the name of the game and as we enjoy them in the Spanish sun the song of a Nightingale accompanies us from across the road. A Serin sings in the tree next to us and House Martins have begun to mix with the Swifts and Swallows with their aerial displays overhead. Our first Griffon Vulture swirls high above us and a Red Kite soars in close – our guides assure us we're expecting much better views of these two species throughout the week. With a fair way still to go we decide to finish our ice-creams and climb back into the vans.

The scenery from here on in just gets better and better and the farmland begins to grow a mountainous backdrop. Corn Buntings start appearing on the telegraph wires singing away over fields of wheat and barley and we spot several Stork nests built on top of electricity pylons, a sturdy base for their huge constructions.

The road begins to wind and stretch as we climb higher and higher and the views continue to impress. Deep gorges with turquoise waters run alongside the vans and brick red cliffs of sandstone tower above us with Crag Martins darting back

and forth. As we reach the Valle de Hecho, we're stunned by the views and we eventually arrive at the Hotel Uson – our base for the week. It is based in a stunning scene and our lovely hosts Imanol and Lucia greet us warmly as the guides sort the suitcases to the allotted rooms. After a delicious meal and a sample of Imanol's beer brewed on site, we head for bed, tired, but excited for the week's events.

Day 2: Throughout the night there has been quite a bit of rain and some powerful thunderstorms overhead. With the forecast not looking too nice for the rest of the day and the long drive from the airport yesterday, our guides decide to stick locally and explore this beautiful area. As we climb into the vans there is a Garden Warbler, warbling in the garden no less!, an appropriate name. We set off on the back road to Berdún as the clouds thankfully begin to break and the mist starts to lift to reveal the high peaks and the rest of this gorgeous valley.

We stop at a Refugio de Pescerado by the river but it's quite quiet with the poor weather. There are a few Great Tits, Blue Tits and Chaffinches darting about in the canopy and as we walk a bit further down the road, a cliff face opens up in the trees and reveals Crag Martins nesting on the rock face. We move another mile down the road and the valley opens up further, a Western Bonelli's Warbler begins to rattle away in the trees and we eventually get good views of it, noting it's silky-white breast. Jane finds a Cirl Bunting in the trees and Stephen then spots another on the bridge which is slightly more confiding so we manage to get our scopes locked onto it. Duncan hears a Woodlark displaying somewhere and after a quick search we spot its display flight in the distance high above the vans.

We continue further down the road and thankfully the weather is improving with the forecast not living up to the downpours predicted. We pull over to let a large cycle race go past, impressed as they wind their way up the steep roads. We end up being grateful to the cyclists as we hear a Western Subalpine Warbler singing which can be tricky, so our guides are pleased when we all manage to get a view of this handsome little bird. As the sun begins to make an appearance we see our first Egyptian Vulture drifting overhead as we wind our way into a gorge. Now it's heating up the rain jackets are off and a swirling mass of Griffon Vultures criss-cross the gorge with a Chough amongst the flock, looking minuscule next to these giant carrion feeders. Stephen spots a Honey Buzzard going over and Duncan spots a distant Blue Rock Thrush high on the cliff top. James hears Dipper calling up and down the river but with trees standing guard either side we're unable to see it, what a place this is turning out to be and after a wet start the temperatures are warming up nicely with lots of life coming out of hiding.

After lunch we're heading to the bridge at Martes but the weather has changed again! The brave few head out of the vans as the rain really hammers down. We pick up a Yellow Wagtail that turns out to be one of our *flavissima* race birds that we find in Britain and not the *iberiae* that we would expect over here.

Iberian Water Frogs can be heard from the bridge and two Grey Herons fly by through the rain. A Common Sandpiper dips and darts on the large pebbles in the middle of the river and just as we're about to run back to the safety of the dry vans, a Hobby flies past giving great views! The downpour was worth enduring. We decide to take shelter in a local café at Punta la Reina and are impressed by the speed of the barista making five coffees at a time.

This really is a day of two seasons as we're back outside enjoying the coffee in the sun! It goes to show just how fast the weather can change in the mountains.

We take our chances whilst the weather is good and head to the quaint little village of Arrés. Along the back road James radios through to Duncan that there's a Honey Buzzard to the right of his van so we speed up a little to get in line with it. We get out of the vans and in close proximity it's an incredible sight. Arrés is a beautiful old village and with the sun shining it creates fantastic views so we're feeling optimistic. We head through the streets and towards the other side of the village where it opens up into a mixture of scrub and farmland where we start scanning the hillside. We're looking out for Rock Thrush that can sometimes be good here but there's also a high ridge that seems to be a raptor highway. There are lots of Griffon Vultures overhead and a pair of pale-phase Booted Eagles pass by. We pick up a few more Honey Buzzards in the distance and there are several warblers singing in the bushes close by. Western Bonelli's and Western Orphean Warblers are staying quite hidden but we see lots of Corn Buntings on the wires with Swifts and Swallows above.

With no sight of Rock Thrush we begin to head back up the hill, but then Stephen spots a Tawny Pipit which is kind enough to stay in one place long enough for us all to get our scopes fixed on it and appreciate its smart markings. We then get rewarded with views of two Melodious Warblers as they come back and forth out of the scrub. Further ahead, some of the group have got a beautiful pair of Stonechats on the slope next to the village and we watch them for a short while before heading back to the vehicles. Just before getting in we see two Short-toed Eagles that confuse us at first as they are lacking the darker bib around their necks, which means they could be juvenile birds. Before reaching the hotel we stop in the village of Hecho and find a pair of stunning Black Redstarts, a successful day after the forecast had originally suggested we might drown!

Day 3: It's a bright start to the day today so around half the group decide to take a walk pre-breakfast. James and Gordon find three Serin at one end of the car park, whilst the rest of the group are trying to pick out the Garden Warbler at the other end, doing its usual thing of singing out of sight. We begin our walk down the drive and due to the warm morning and yesterday's rain there is a lot of vulture action in the sky. A pair of Ravens fly over us honking away and another Serin begins to sing in the trees. Duncan finds a distant Sparrowhawk but it disappears quickly behind the pines so we start heading back to join the others for breakfast. At the bottom of the drive James hears Crested Tits calling and gets David onto them as this is a species he really wants to see. Back in the car park we also see a Short-toed Treecreeper entering its nest in the eaves of the hotel,

identified from the Eurasian Treecreeper not by looking at its toes, but by its unique song!

It's sunny and bright out today but a bit cooler after the thunderstorms so we decide to give the higher mountains a miss and head a little further south to the monasteries of San Juan de la Peña. We set off down the road and enjoy good views of both Egyptian and Griffon Vultures that haven't got to high altitude yet. As we reach the main road it's just the two guides that spot a suicidal Golden Oriole that almost flies into Duncan's van, so it goes down as a double DLT (Dodgy Leader Tick)! As we get closer to the monasteries we start winding our way up the hill and the views are getting better and better through the gaps in the trees. James pulls over and calls back the front van as he's spotted a couple of Red Squirrels in one of the trees. The first one is really quite dark and almost black and the second one is a lovely deep red much like that of a Red Panda. As Duncan reverses slowly into position we then spot a Nuthatch just below the squirrels and both vans get good views of both mammal and bird.

We continue a short way up to the old monastery and it's a fascinating structure built into the side of the cliff face. Pyrenean Saxifrage covers the rocks but sadly they are not in flower here as they look stunning when out. The group explores the outside edges of the monastery and we then drive around the corner up to the site of the new monastery to park amongst the pine forest. This turns out to be a great idea as we're getting onto birds as soon as we step out. Two Short-toed Treecreepers are flitting around in the trees and then a pine cone drops near our feet – Crossbills! We look up and there are a few of these lovely birds at the top of the pine feeding away. Firecrest are calling from the opposite direction so we spin around and manage to get great views as they display to each other with flashes of that magnificent orange crest. An extremely tame Robin enjoys the company of Mervyn as it comes and stands by his feet and a Western Bonelli's Warbler begins to sing as it teases us with quick views.

We begin our woodland walk and it's safe to say we've already done pretty well at the car park! We're heading to a viewpoint high over the old monastery and the beech forest below where Black Woodpecker had been seen the previous year. Coal and Blue Tits are seen making use of hanging nest boxes, presumably so woodpeckers can't get a good platform for pecking into their nest holes. Along the route we hear more Western Bonelli's Warblers which seem to be doing really well this year and see signs in the woodland floor of where Wild Boar have been snuffling in the undergrowth.

At the viewpoint, the scenery is again breath-taking as it stretches over forest and distant mountains. Griffon Vultures are forever present and provide us with very close views overhead, but we can also see them landing in large craggy nests on the opposite cliff with giant offspring inside. There is no sign of Black Woodpecker in the forest below but a lone Alpine Swift shifts by called out by James. We wander back to the picnic benches by the new monastery and find a Black Redstart on the ground with Common Swifts and Crag Martins whizzing

round the spires. Just as Duncan is explaining he hasn't heard Black Woodpecker here for a while, he picks up the call of one from the woods behind! We rush over but unfortunately it doesn't call again so we head back to enjoy our bocadillos. A party of Long-tailed Tits passes by in the trees adjacent to the benches and the loud calls of Iberian Frogs are ringing out from a pond close by.

With Martes a bit of a wash out the day before, our guides decide to take a trip back there as the walk along the river can be fruitful so they tell us it's worth the return. Immediately on pulling up there's a party of stunning Bee-eaters, their colourful plumage making them look like they've flown through a rainbow. Good choice guides! We walk across the bridge and there's an army of House Martins diving underneath us to collect mud for nest building. Cetti's Warbler sings out from the island of trees and more Common Sandpipers dart amongst the pebbles as they did the day before, although looking a little less soggy!

As we head down to the banks of the river Aragón we're listening out for the different birds of the scrubland. Nightingale appear to be singing from every direction but are forever hidden, we wait for one that sounds extremely close and it eventually comes out quickly before retreating again but David, who's desperate to see one, sadly misses it!

As we round the corner Stephen picks out a very distant Red-backed Shrike, a bird we should have seen more of so far and even this one was an impressive find as it's small even in the scopes. As we reach the end of our walk, another Bee-eater is seen perched in a tree on the other side of the river and a Western Subalpine Warbler is picked up closely as we glimpse its narrow white moustache. We also get good views of a Little Ringed Plover and can see its bright yellow eye ring through the scope. We're all pleased that we revisited this beautiful place as we head back to the vans once again, picking up a Turtle Dove as it darts past us in the opposite direction over a field of poppies. Just before we climb into the vehicles, a Short-toed Eagle flies over really closely and we get to appreciate its pale underside and darker bib.

Day 4: The early risers get up and take their usual stroll around the hotel grounds and further down the road. The usual sight of Griffon Vultures is welcome company and we get lovely views of a couple of Red-backed Shrike that are much closer than the previous days sighting. We manage to get Crested Tits again close to the area we saw them previously so perhaps they're nesting in some dead wood close by. House Sparrows are making a racket in an old farm building, which is a familiar sound from home, and a Black Redstart darts in a broken window.

After a relaxing breakfast we're heading to the high hills today, walking out from the Refugio de Gabardito in the hope of finding one of the absolute gems of the Pyrenees – Wallcreeper. It's certainly not an easy bird to see but we're confident we've picked a good day for it, as the weather is warm and settled. On the drive over, the front van get views of a Red Deer as it crosses in front of them and runs into the forest across the road. We pull up in the car park adjacent to the main

refugio and there's a party of Citril Finches picking up gravel off the track. Three Crossbills then join them and we enjoy the close views of both species, noting two of the Crossbills are male and one is female. This is a great start and we're not even out the vans yet!

As we start out on our walk we're informed part of the path is steep and unstable so we change into walking boots and a few of us take our walking poles. It's a nice day though and we're not in any rush taking in the birds of the forest before we reach the clearing. A Mistle Thrush is singing from the canopy and we get great views of Firecrest again as it flits around the branches above us. As the trees begin to span out we can see right across the valley to the other side and are high enough to be in line with any raptors that turn up. Duncan then calls out that he has a Lammergeier across the valley. "No wait, there's two he says... and another!". Three of these incredible birds are seen in the same scope view at times and there's plenty of 'oohs' and 'aahhs' from the group.

As we continue up the steeper part of the path we eventually reach the site where we'll begin looking for the beloved Wallcreeper. We assume the position! Lying down on the rocky mountain path enables us to look directly upwards without the need for the neck aching angles. A group of birdwatchers we passed on the way up the valley told us they had managed to see it so it fills us with hope. As time passes we get a little nervous that perhaps they had just had fleeting views and it disappeared out of sight again. Eventually, James shouts he's got one! Trying to avoid mass panic we all take in the directions laid out to us and one by one we get onto it. It's amazing how well this bird blends into the rock face, as it stays stationary for a good ten minutes with its crimson wings tucked in. Eventually it begins to move higher up and using its wings for balance we get sight of its beautiful markings. Sue then shouts that she has a second one above it and we enjoy fantastic views as they interact on the wall. Suddenly, one takes off and it's great to see it in flight as it darts across the cliff and into a crevice to the left. For the next 20 minutes or so we watch in awe as both birds fly back and forth carrying nesting material into a small hole just above where we first laid eyes on them. James gets many a 'thank you' as the whole group were desperate to see this incredible species.

With that in the bag, we had back to the refugio and Duncan picks out a Eurasian Treecreeper, the harder of the two species to see in the area. We enjoy our lunches with a herd of horses and foals that are walking down from the hills for a drink and a stroke, their bells ringing as they do so.

As we drive back towards the hotel we stop just down the road from the hotel for a spot of 'buttying' as now the week has warmed up there's plenty of butterflies on the wing. Jane finds a stunning Escher's Blue and along with Brimstone, Duke of Burgundy, Little Blue, Small Tortoiseshell and the delightful Spanish Swallowtail we're not doing too badly! James spots a Red-backed Shrike singing which we get great views of and Duncan finds a rather confiding Garden Warbler that is singing in view so we rush back to get Keith as he's wanted to lay

eyes on one since the start of the trip. We pick up a beautiful male Bullfinch before moving on again.

Our next destination is the hidden valley or the Bal d'Espetal, a stunning lush green, flat bottomed valley. The sun's starting to come down nicely now so we pack water and hats as there's little shade. A slow start on the bird front but we start to get a few birds with Stonechat, Kestrel and Common Buzzard seen near the start. We scan the trees for more shrikes but can't find any. A Western Bonelli's Warbler is rattling in the trees once again and a Jay flies across our path. As we reach the end of the track the guides decide to walk back and collect the vans so the others can wait in the shade. Stephen and Andy join them and enjoy views of two distant Goshawk and then a swirl of Egyptian Vultures

We head back now as we're out late tonight so we enjoy our meal and get ready quickly. We head off in search of our twilight targets down a scrubby lane. As we step out there's Midwife Toads in the stream making their electronic calls and sounding a lot like our target for later in the evening: Scops Owl. We hear the churring of Nightjar from across the slopes and Gordon picks one up as it flies across his head and over to the other side! We're squinting in the low light now as Eagle Owls have been seen here in the past but we're told it's unlikely. James then spots a bird flying over the trees and Duncan confirms its presence! Sadly only a few people get onto it before it disappears over and out of sight, but not to worry, if we've missed out on Europe's biggest owl the guides are determined to show us one of its smallest.

We head off around the corner to the delightful Santa Cruz de la Serros where we park up and start to listen. After about ten minutes or so Duncan hears the first beep from the owl and we look around on the rooftops but can't find it. After a short wait it then flies out of a tree over our heads and onto the church roof lit up by the floodlights. Thankfully we all get great views as the lights then cut out and it's left in the darkness. Talk about timing! We'll be getting back about midnight now so we head back off to the hotel for a well-earned kip!

Day 5: After our late night we decide it's all in our best interests to meet at 8:00am instead of going for our usual stroll around the grounds otherwise we may fall asleep birding a bit later on! Today we're heading to high altitudes in search of some very special birds that actually get us crossing borders and just edging into France. We set off on the winding roads and pull up at a fantastic viewpoint over the forests either side of the road at Borda de Foria. We immediately get Wood Lark singing away on top of one of the telegraph poles on the bank which we manage to get scope views of, a very pretty bird close up. Duncan then hears a familiar sound as we pick up our first Tree Pipit singing from (you guessed it!) a tree in front. Sue then finds a Great-spotted Woodpecker flitting about at the base of a pine. Not a bad stop!

We carry on climbing and down the other side and stop again at the delightful village of Garda as there's a small river running through. Duncan gets the group onto a confiding Spotted Flycatcher at the top of a tree and Stephen spots Grey Wagtail in the river. Black Redstart are on the wires connecting the houses and James tries to get a photo of one but it flies just as he gets himself into position. We head back to the vans and continue our journey and pull over near the high mountains where an old refugio stands guard, it's a shame to see its gone a bit to ruin as the location is grand. We start listening out for birds as two souped-up BMWs throttle by and pull over for a photo-shoot in front of the mountains! As their engines stop we start hearing our first Water Pipits of the trip as they breed in the high tops and Gordon picks up Northern Wheatear by the old building, again our first so far. We have enjoyed the fantastic views but as it's fairly quiet we press on to our main stop in the high mountains, picking up a surprising Red Fox scampering up the hillside along the way.

As we pull over once again we're at 1800m now and we have a nice area to check for some special birds. On exiting the vans we pick up the three note whistle of Ring Ouzel as it sings from a tree, half the group get onto it before it flies off behind the bank but we're hopeful of more. At these altitudes there are mixes of Red-billed and Alpine Chough and two of the alpiners are perched very closely allowing us great views of their very yellow bills. Andy then shouts down to us from somewhere up high that he's got Alpine Accentor! We rush to the small quarry like area he's seen them in and find two are darting around the rocks and even copulating! These birds are similar to Dunnock in appearance but the chestnut streaked breast really stands out along with dark panels across the wing.

We decide to walk along the road where we get a nice view over the steep scraggy area below where we're hoping to pick up Ring Ouzel again. The choughs are flying about in form with their acrobatic displays beneath and then two more Alpine Accentors come into view offering even closer views than we've already had! We're scanning as much as we can for signs of Rock Thrush and Ring Ouzel but its not to be so we head back to the car park for a spot of lunch where two Pyrenean Rock Lizards join us on the rocks.

It's mid-afternoon now so we decide to up sticks and head off for another beautiful valley called Zuriza. We momentarily stop at a small wooded enclave where Duncan informs us it feels like good Ring Ouzel territory. David then shouts that he's got one as we all hone in on the male bird singing from the top of a half fallen tree. It stays the whole while we're there so we get fantastic views and a few people even manage photographs. You were right Duncan!

We wind our way to lower altitudes and towards the viewpoint at Zuriza where we're overlooking a river, beech forest and high ridges. There's a Grey Wagtail strolling across the rocks in the river and then Keith tells us he's got a Dipper that has just dipped beneath the surface. Most of the group pick it up just before it flies around the corner. We start scanning the high ridges and there are Kestrel and Honey Buzzard at altitude, James shouts out he has a small party of Chamois

on the distant ridge and we scope them to watch as they amble across the high tops. Half the group has taken a stroll down the road to enjoy the views of the river so when Duncan shouts his next sighting, it has to carry far. GOLDIE!! The word echoes down the valley, but just to make sure he jogs down to point it out before it disappears once more, much to the appreciation of the group.

We start our drive back towards the hotel down the stunning Anso valley, a deep gorge like valley with high tops and blue rapid waters. The views are simply breath-taking so we stop several times to take photos along the route. Once we reach the other side we stop again at the viewpoint at Bordia de Foria as a Red Kite soars incredibly close overhead and we pick out every detail with the naked eye. Who needs binoculars?!

Day 6: Today the forecast has said it could be wet again in the Hecho valley so we assign this day to go further south. Although the forecast is wrong and it's a nice and sunny start to the day and we're looking forward to heading to two castillos where the bird life can be fantastic. A few people have gone for their usual pre-breakfast walk and have had nice views of Dipper from the bridge down the road and the Crested Tits have returned once again.

As we set off in our vans for the day the scenery begins to morph back into farmland as we head out of the mountain valleys it gets considerably flatter. Corn Buntings adorn the overhead wires once again and Crested Larks can be seen at the sides of the roads. Woodpigeon and Collared Doves join the buntings sat out on the telephone wires and the huge Storks nests come back into view with a few of the cumbersome birds flying either sides of the vans. Red Kites seem to outweigh the numbers of Black Kite this week, which is unusual for this area.

We make good time on our way south and are soon coming into sight of the Castillo de Montearagón, an impressive fortress built in 1085 on a defensive mound. Not only is it an impressive site for history, it is an impressive site for natural history with a fantastic array of birdlife. After driving closer and alongside poppy lined roads we pull up at the base of the fortress which opens out into an amphitheatre like structure of rock and cliff. We start scanning the hillsides and hawk-eye David picks up one of the target species for this location: Black-eared Wheatear. These smart birds are perched on the edge of large boulders and stay in the same area long enough for the scopes to be used. James then shouts he has a Black Wheatear, another target of the day and we all then hone in on this. When it flies to a nearby rock we get a view of its sharply contrasting white rump and tail-base.

Duncan says he can hear Quail calling out from the fields behind and soon after James sees one flying across the fields. He calls it out but no one gets onto it before it dips out of view, it goes down as another DLT! Some of the group go off in search of it but they're notoriously shy and it doesn't get seen again, however after photographing some of the poppies nearby, James brings back a photograph of a Quail chick that he almost stood on with its fantastic

camouflage. Thankfully, he avoided it and left it in place!

We walk round the hillside to the top of the castle picking up Northern Wheatear as we do so. That's three species of wheatear in the space of about half an hour! As we walk close to the castle walls there's a family of Dartford Warblers in one of the bushes with three fledglings being fed by an adult.

There's a mixture of Rock Dove and Feral Pigeons on the battlements and Rock Sparrows call out here too. We begin to scan the dry valley below, determined to find a Rock Thrush or two. Several Bee-eaters are keeping us entertained as they switch between perches and James calls out a Woodchat Shrike which we again manage to scope.

Meanwhile a few of the group are looking round the corner and call out a flyby from a Blue Rock Thrush – it's all go! With no time to spare we start scanning the area again and with more eyes on the target, we pick it out again and enjoy good views. David then calls out what we've all been searching for – Rock Thrush! As we all try and note down where he's looking, one by one we manage it and what a bird it is. Blue headed, orange breasted, brown winged with a rufous tail and a white back. Fantastic! As a party of Linnets fly over we decide to have lunch then move on, as this isn't the only Castillo worth a look at from a birding point of view.

Onwards to Castillo de Loarre. This impressive building is in a much better state than the last castle even though it was built around the same time across the 11th and 12th centuries. As a result, it has a visitor centre and is popular with school groups and Spanish school children wishing to practise their English on us instantly round us up! After lots of questions on where we're from and who we are, from the young visitors, we head down the paths and amongst the scrubland. It's usually good for warblers here and it doesn't disappoint with Melodious, Western Subalpine and Sardinian Warbler all enjoyed. Duncan then hears the song of a warbler we didn't really expect to hear and a few of us get to see it. The Spectacled Warbler is similar to Whitethroat in appearance but with a blue-grey head and rufous wing.

As we circle back to the visitor centre our guides spot a lone Rock Bunting singing from a perch in between two bushes and James particularly enjoys this as they missed out on this species last year. Common Swifts are doing their aerial acrobatics again around the castle walls and they're in much bigger numbers than back home so its great to see. After enjoying an ice-cream from the shop we walk back towards the car park where we pick up another Blue Rock Thrush and a Hoopoe calls out from the trees. Overall it's been a great day and we stop by a viewpoint over looking the Mallos de Riglos on the way home. These impressive 300m tall conglomerate rock formations stand out as sandy pillars amongst the scenery. Vultures circle the high peaks and we wonder how great they must look from the climbers' perspective as they soar close to the structure.

Day 7: It's the last full day of our travels around the stunning Pyrenees today and with a long drive tomorrow our guides assign today as a fairly local affair. Come rain or shine, we will be heading to the upper Hecho valley. Thankfully, like the vast majority of the week, it is a sunny morning and some of the warmest weather we would have. We start our day exploring a road close to the hotel in an area called La Boca de la Infierno – the mouth of hell.

You can soon see where this name comes from as the deep gorge meanders through the rock and round tight corners where you can no longer see the bottom. It's a stunning location and we also get to see Pyrenean Saxifrage in flower on the rock face, it is a beautiful cone like structure all peppered with little white flowers. Crag and House Martins cling to the crevices of the cliff and zoom about in the sky above. Keith spots a Dipper in a small section where you can look back and see the river and it flies up and down this stretch several times. James spots a Red Squirrel once again, another dark individual and it's amazing how different they are in colour to the Scottish ones he's used to seeing.

Near the top of the road, our guides leave us to enjoy the scenery as they head back for the vans and inform us they'll be back to pick us up shortly to avoid walking back on ourselves. Ten minutes later and they're here and ready to continue higher into the Hecho valley. We drive further along until we come off the tarmac and start on a rough track into the hills, driving slowly to avoid the potholes and listen for birds! Our first Yellowhammers can be heard singing from the vans and it's a strange place to visualise them when we're so used to seeing them in the lowland farms of the UK.

We pull over at a picturesque scene to take photographs and explore the slopes. The banks are covered in yellow and red Elderflower Orchids carpeting the grassy areas. Chaffinch, Serin and Great Tit all sing out from the trees and Honey Buzzard, Egyptian Vulture and Griffon Vulture soar high above. This truly is a special place. There's a parking area further up the track so we set off again and pull the vehicles to the side of the road and continue on foot. Just over the ford in the track, Sue is waiting to show the guides an Adder she's found. Unfortunately it appears to be dead but on closer inspection there's a second snake close-by. This one is most certainly alive and is basking in the sunlight but retreats back and forth into the shade. When it reappears Duncan takes some photos for identification and we later find out it looks most like an Asp Viper. A beautiful reptile and a surprise encounter, which is always great for both guests and guides.

We start the walk in the heat of the day and enjoy the views either side of the valley, Duncan starts scanning ridges and it's not long before he picks up a Lammergeier across the way. This one is a lot closer than our previous encounters and as it's flying against the hill and not the sky, we can really pick out the colours of this bird with its rufous underbody and contrasting dark wings. Duncan informs us the colour isn't actually part of the plumage and the underbody is usually a lot lighter as it is acquired through sand bathing. Through

the scope you can see the classic T shaped flight pattern with narrow, pointed wings and a long wedge-shaped tail.

James then calls out he has an Alpine Marmot in view and it's rather close. We scope up and enjoy the detailed views of this funny looking creature. The near individual is sprawled across a boulder facing us with front legs dangling either side of it. It looks to be a lazy life when the suns out in the high mountains! Jane spots a couple more on the hillside behind chasing each other and they let out some strange calls – a bit like a Yorkshire terrier yapping! As our eyes begin to wander again James calls out an immature Golden Eagle on the high ridge but it's dipping in and out of view behind the summit. He explains it looks to be a 1st winter bird with its large white patches on the under wing clearly visible when in flight. Duncan then calls out that it's landed and we all get our scopes fixed on this almighty of prizes. With the heat haze shifting in and out of view with the winds we all enjoy a good look at this most magnificent of birds. Soon after a Griffon lands behind it and spreads its wings out as if to say its worth looking at too!

A few of us head onto the next corner as there's a nice view of a large series of waterfalls as the rest of the group turn back for the car park. After grabbing a few photos we catch up with the group and decide it's a good idea to start heading back early so we can pack up and enjoy the rest of the evening relaxing. We enjoy a delicious final dinner at the Hotel Uson and Imanol gives us a tour of his micro brewery to which James gets a little nervous when he's told he's been assigned translator! His school boy Spanish scrapes him through and we all find it very fascinating, especially after enjoying it in the hotel all week.

Day 8: We wake up early and have breakfast whilst our guides take our bags to the vans. After filling up on food and coffee we bid fair well to our lovely hosts and also Keith and Sue who are taking a leisurely drive back to the UK in their campervan. We leave in good time and head for Barcelona where we get our flight back to London Gatwick. The drive back delivers a unique moment that has some of the guests wishing to change their already chosen 'magic moment' of the trip – a Black Kite swoops low across the road and picks up a snake right in front of us all! A reminder that this place is always full of surprises!

As we land and collect our luggage we're full of praise and thanks to our guides who have surely delivered the goods on what has been a truly fantastic week. This place has incredible wildlife, stunning scenery, fantastic accommodation and when the weather's good also, as our guide James would say, "That's not too shabby at all!"

Birds

Grey Heron
White Stork
Mallard
Honey Buzzard
Black Kite
Red Kite
Lammergeier
Egyptian Vulture
Griffon Vulture
Short-toed Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Goshawk
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Golden Eagle
Booted Eagle
Kestrel
Hobby
Peregrine
Quail
Little Ringed Plover
Common Sandpiper
Yellow-legged Gull
Rock Dove
Feral Pigeon
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Turtle Dove
Monk Parakeet
Cuckoo
Scop's Owl
Eagle Owl
European Nightjar
Common Swift
Alpine Swift
European Bee-eater
Hoopoe
Iberian Green Woodpecker (h)
Black Woodpecker (h)
Great Spotted Woodpecker

Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark
Sand Martin
Crag Martin
Swallow
House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Water Pipit
Tree Pipit
Yellow Wagtail
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Alpine Accentor
Robin
Nightingale
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Northern Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Black Wheatear
Rock Thrush
Blue Rock Thrush
Ring Ouzel
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Cetti's Warbler
Zitting Cisticola
Melodious Warbler
Dartford Warbler
Western Subalpine Warbler
Spectacled Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Western Orphean Warbler
Garden Warbler
Blackcap

Western Bonelli's Warbler
Chiffchaff (h)
Firecrest
Spotted Flycatcher
Long-tailed Tit
Coal Tit
Crested Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Nuthatch
Wallcreeper
Eurasian Treecreeper
Short-toed Treecreeper
Golden Oriole
Red-backed Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Jay
Magpie
Alpine Chough
Red-billed Chough
Jackdaw
Carrion Crow
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow
Rock Sparrow
Chaffinch
Serin
Citril Finch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Common Crossbill
Bullfinch
Yellowhammer
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Corn Bunting