

Holiday Highlights
Pyrenees
27 May – 3 June 2017

Guide: Julian Sykes

Guests: Jennifer & Robert Hardy, Pam & John Hall, John McAlpine, Michele Wall and John Law

Day 1: After a slightly delayed flight we land safely in Barcelona and negotiate the rigmarole of passport control, baggage collection and renting the minibus. It is now just before 8:00pm when we set off for our hotel, high in the Hecho Valley and quite a long drive! As we have had a little time outside 'our list' gets underway with Michele pointing out a few Alpine Swifts along with Common Swifts and House Martin. Monk Parakeets fly swiftly across the car park calling noisily and all around there are Feral Pigeons, Magpies, House Sparrows and our first Spotless Starlings. We drive steadily west and then north-west on the excellent motorway system with Jennifer spotting a Black Kite along with Collared Doves, Woodpigeon and lots more hirundines including Barn Swallows. Julian sees a White Stork flying over the motorway but a little later he points out several pylons littered with occupied nests – a real White Stork city!

We stop for a comfort break and drink at a services near Balbastro with the Monastery illuminated in the starlit sky. A couple of Nightingales are singing in the bushes near here and Michele is thrilled to just listen to their beautiful chorus – however we need to continue our journey. Ready for the final leg we reach Huesca and set off on good single track roads over the pre-Pyrenees with Julian pointing out things we will see later in the week such as the Mallos de Riglos and Rio Aragon dam.

A little after 11:00pm we reach the bridge at Puente de la Reina and turn north up the Hecho Valley towards France, we cannot see the High Pyrenees but our guide assures us they are spectacular. Eventually we reach our hotel beyond the village of Hecho having glimpsed a Red Fox trying to cross the road but no other mammals sadly. Even in darkness this place looks fabulous with the sound of Cicadas and tinkling cow bells in the distance. We quickly get inside where we are greeted by a worried-looking Lucia who embraces Julian and passes on our room keys. We are all on the second floor and with Julian's help we are very quickly saying "goodnight" and looking forward to getting some very necessary sleep.

Day 2: Straight to breakfast at 8:00am after our long day and we are introduced by Julian to the last couple in our group John and Pam. They have driven through with their own car earlier the day before and got to bed at a reasonable time! Michele has

already been out and found her own Firecrest, Song Thrush, Chaffinch and a pair of cracking Short-toed Eagles. We all enjoy a good and varied buffet breakfast with an air of expectancy for the morning ahead on this lovely sunny day. Julian has already gone through the proposed day's itinerary and we are prepared for visiting one of the local sites, which is very well received especially as the fabled 'crimson butterfly' - Wallcreeper is our major target.

After breakfast we convene at the minibus and set off for the mountain enclave of Gabardito. We drive slowly up the winding road through the gorgeous dappled mixed woodland with Jay, Blackbird, Chaffinches and a couple of smart Bullfinches crossing our path as we climb higher. Julian spots a shape and applies the brakes as a lovely Red Squirrel climbs up a tree right next to the van looking much darker than the ones in the UK. At the top we park next to the new Refugio de Gabardito, a stark contrast to the basic shell the climbers and hill-walkers used to stay in a couple of hundred metres away across the alpine meadow. We step out of the minibus into glorious sunshine and to scenery that takes your breath away – bring it on!

Our guide explains the walk we face and the difficulties involved and when we are all completely ready we set off along the dirt track through this incredible coniferous and beech forest. This isn't just about the birds and we point out some of the more special plants along the route including the beautiful, vivid blue Trumpet Gentians, Green and Stinking Hellebore, Pyrenean Asphodel and Birds-foot Trefoil to name a few. As it is already warm we start to see a few butterflies with Wood White, Clouded Yellow, Southern Speckled Wood and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary. However, there are also a few new birds with Nuthatch, Crested, Coal, Blue and Great Tits, Red-billed Chough and Griffon Vultures. Eventually we exit the dense forest and there in front of us is Wallcreeper Rock but the way now is a little more difficult so we stay together and make sure we all make it in one piece..

All around this limestone massif fly good numbers of hirundines, which are mainly Crag and House Martins flying in and out of their nests and also a few impressive looking Alpine Swifts screaming by. A steady stream of Red-billed Choughs fly around calling which resonates around this beautiful valley and a Black Woodpecker calls briefly from the valley bottom, although it's a pair of stunning adult Lammergeiers soaring above the opposite rock face which creates some excitement and this is very much compounded when Jennifer announces they have landed on a ledge and we all get astonishingly good scope views – potentially our first magic moment. The 'crimson butterfly' is proving a problem but we are keeping the faith and continue to search and are happy with the appearance of two adult Golden Eagles with some Griffons. John L. finds time to photograph some of the butterflies while Robert spots a couple of Southern Chamois on a grassy ridge – a long way off but still decent views.

It is getting towards lunchtime and just when Julian is considering abandoning the Wallcreeper quest he announces the immortal words "found one!" and directs us to a ledge high up on the rock wall. Thankfully it is in a good position and not moving too much so we all manage to find this gorgeous montane bird and it's a stunning male. In fact we even manage to see it through the telescope before it moves position, which is incredible. We watch this beauty fly around for a wee while searching for insects when it flies back into the huge crevice and is joined by its mate an equally stunning individual being very similar. These then interact for a short while before disappearing out of sight – what a fantastic event and perfectly timed.

It is now lunchtime and we set off slowly back towards the refugio, stopping periodically to rest and also enjoy our surroundings with loads more fabulous butterflies and montane flowers. Eventually we reach the alpine meadow where the van is parked and Julian dishes out the picnic, which is most welcome. We sit out on the meadow, surrounded by pine forest and fabulous mountains in bright sunshine and thoroughly enjoy our sandwiches, biscuits and fruit. John and Pam see a Common Wall Lizard on their 'tree stump' seat and overhead we see Booted Eagle, Kestrel, Raven and more Griffon Vultures. We could have sat here all day!

Julian is keen to get to the 'hidden valley' so we collect our things and climb back into the minibus setting off back down the mountain to our hotel for a quick comfort break. Soon enough we set off again, this time down towards Siresa, then over into the Val d'Espetal, parking sensibly at the head of the wooded valley. We now set off on a gentle walk along the flat metaled road, constantly scanning the walls, bushes and trees for things of interest. A pair of Common Wall Lizards scurries along the vegetated wall along with lots of butterflies such as Southern Scarce Swallowtail, Silver-wash Fritillary, Brimstone, Small Copper and Common Blue. Julian says this place is good for raptors and he is not wrong as we scan the ridges either side, the ubiquitous Griffons are around along with a few Egyptian Vultures, a couple more Booted Eagles are joined by a Black Kite and Common Buzzard with a Red Kite appearing later in the afternoon. However, one of the highlights of the walk are two Short-toed Eagles searching for snakes and lizards, hovering on their immense wings. We are enjoying the challenge of raptor identification and get through the afternoon with a better idea and a modicum of success – thanks to our guide's tips and hints.

The hot afternoon and long previous day are beginning to tell on us and we are pretty tired so around 5:30pm we return to the hotel for a welcome refreshment or relax. This is followed by freshening up before meeting in the hotel's comfy sitting area to do the daily checklist with some ale that is brewed on site and unique to this region. This is then followed by our evening meal, which is both excellent and full of conversation on how we had done brilliantly this day and the pleasure of seeing a couple of the Pyrenean specialty key species so well – Wallcreeper and Lammergeier. How will it be surpassed?

Day 3: Wow, its day three already. Julian joins the group outside at 7:30am for a short pre-breakfast walk, with Pam already searching out Burnt-tip and Greater Butterfly Orchids from the top of the hotel garden. It is a cooler morning but the birds are in full song with Chaffinch, Song Thrush and Wren dominating the beautiful cacophony. We are slow in our progress and initially start around the parking area where we find the usual Robin, Blackbird and a couple of Greenfinches, which are new to the list. Michele hears a Serin singing, which Julian soon finds in one of the Scots Pines and shows very well sat on a low branch. We walk out on to the quiet road and head towards the Gabardito turning but soon realise we need to turn back as it's nearly time for breakfast. Julian hears a familiar song and soon has us all watching a stunning Firecrest flitting around the conifers in front of us. Jennifer is thrilled with this having wanted to see one for so long. We now start back to the hotel and as we walk down the drive Julian hears another memorable song – Cirl Bunting, and it's close. We try to locate it but we have to wait until it drops into the grass where it disappears. We are fairly patient and eventually it takes off and lands again on an exposed branch. This time we all get a view, which is brilliant and a fabulous way to finish this short event.

Breakfast is most welcome and really nice, especially as Julian has stretched the meeting time to 9:00am, which gives us plenty of time. We set off in good time and drive down to Hecho village before turning off towards Anso, the next valley west of us, and the relatively new and very well maintained road means our progress is good despite the plethora of twists and turns. We reach the Tyrolean-looking town of Anso after passing areas where we see Common Buzzard, Egyptian Vulture and Griffin Vultures. We then head up towards the border of Aragon and Navarra briefly seeing a Rock Bunting at the side of the road before dropping down through another quaint village, Garde. Eventually we reach the lovely Roncal Valley, turn north and make our way towards the French border, calling for fuel near Isaba, which also allows for a very welcome comfort stop. Before getting back into the vehicle a couple of us check the river and Jennifer spots a Grey Wagtail followed by Julian finding a pair of Dippers that fly downstream towards us. Great start but we need to crack on, so north towards the French border we continue, winding our way alongside the Belagua River.

This whole area is littered with picture postcard scenery and photographic opportunities, especially as we climb up towards the border with fields of impressive Dog-toothed Violet, Elder-flowered Orchid and Spring Gentian. The stops are plentiful as we climb up towards the unique and sparse krumholtz forest seeing our first Northern Wheatear of the week plus vividly red Linnets, Water Pipit and some close roadside Alpine Chough. The weather is changing as we climb, with the cloud and mist rolling in, along with the odd clap of thunder, the signs are not good. John and Pam were here a few days earlier and mention a place where they had seen Alpine Marmot and sure enough they are there again, so we pull over. This time we climb out and get fabulous views of these moving 'carpet slippers' along with

a small flock of Common Crossbill and good flight views of Ring Ouzel – both male and female. It is now a little after midday and the weather seems to be improving slightly so Julian suggests we move to the Col de la San Martin (French border) for lunch and look for Alpine Accentor.

It is a short journey to the top but sadly the views over France are poor because of the low cloud and now it's spitting with rain! However it's not too bad so we don our wet weather gear and walk a short distance to look over a small scree slope, which is reputedly good for our target species. We are getting fabulous looks at very close Alpine Choughs, plus Jennifer and Robert find a few raptors below us in the valley that turn out to be a single Red Kite with a couple of Black Kites – brilliant. John L. quips about the dark cloud approaching us but we all know things are going to deteriorate and they soon do. Julian abandons the idea of lunch here and we walk quickly back to the van seeing a Dunnock in full song on a stunted pine – at least we have experienced one 'accentor species'. We head back down through the 'krumholtz forest' as the rain starts in earnest, stopping at a small (closed) visitor centre where we can shelter under the eaves of the building. This proves to be very productive as Michele spots a couple of Siskin and there are also more Citril Finches flying round. As we sit out of the intermittent rain we do really well seeing Ring Ouzel, Common Crossbill and a brief Red Squirrel seen by John, Pam and Michele. Julian and John Mc. are sat nearest the parking area and get a fantastic treat as a few Citril Finch drop in close by and start feeding on the ground – just superb.

When we have finished the picnic with John L. carefully dividing up the choccie biscuits among us, we return to the minibus with heavy rain starting once we're inside – Julian's timing is pretty good! Our guide smiles knowing 'if only...' and sets off back down the 'ruta de Belagua'. The weather is now pretty poor but we make minor stops for Water Pipit, Northern Wheatear and some more lovely orchids before driving on to the valley bottom and back south. Julian decides to take a different route back and turns off towards Zuriza stopping as John (H) has seen a Red-backed Shrike fly across the road. It has stopped raining here so we get out and spend some time watching this pair of fantastic wee predatory birds. Although Pam spotting a delightful Lady Orchid at the side of the van creates a quandary for the photographers as they both vie for our attention. Once we are back in the bus, we carry on to a small refuge next to the River Anso where we again alight and check the immediate area. Crag Martins are flying round as they are nesting close by and eventually we find both Dipper and Grey and White Wagtails on the river. A small fenced corral is productive with a family party of Black Redstart plus Goldfinch and Serin but the highlight for us all is an over-flying Honey Buzzard – another new raptor to the list.

We are now all a little tired, cold and damp so Julian suggests a hot drink and nibbles at a local bar/restaurant that is greeted with a unanimous 'aye'. It's only a short distance up the valley and a lovely place to visit with lots of wildlife photos on the

walls. Just before 5:00pm we leave the bar very happy with this short(ish) interlude and we now start back down along the river back to the village of Anso. Julian sees a Great Spotted Woodpecker in a tree but only he and John H see it as they are in the front. Back at Anso we negotiate the narrow roads and head out back the way we had come earlier that day, up and over to Hecho. It is now a familiar drive back up to the hotel and it is evident the weather has been poor here and continues to be so. When we get back we head to our rooms for a freshen up before reconvening for the checklist at 7:30pm. Julian has been on tenterhooks all day as his home team of Huddersfield Town are playing at Wembley in the championship play-off final and he is keen to see the result. We are actually back for him to listen to the last half of extra time and then a penalty shoot-out. The cheer goes up as Huddersfield are victorious – an amazing achievement and their first time with the 'big boys' of the Premier League. Happy days!

Day 4: The pre-breakfast walk produces the usual species along the road including fabulous views of Firecrest, Dunnock and Serin. After another healthy breakfast we convene at the minibus at 8:45am with the forecast in the mountains poor but further south much better. We set off and head down through Puente de la Reina, over the pre-Pyrenees and down past the fabulous Mallos de Riglos. As we get south of Ayerbe we start to see Crested Larks at the side of the road and a few Corn Buntings on the overhead wires. We near Huesca and there are White Storks in their nests on the pylons nearby – Michele is very happy about this. About one and a half hours into the journey and just beyond the city we turn off the main road to the impressive Castillo de Montearagon. On the road this site starts well as we follow a pair of Red-legged Partridge along the tarmac and a few Egyptians Vultures overhead.

We reach the natural amphitheatre below the castle and stop on what is now becoming a very warm day. The scopes are set up and we start scanning the sandstone rocks and crags finding new birds in all directions with Michelle spotting a male Northern Wheatear, Julian then seeing a cracking Black Wheatear and John and Pam then pointing out a gorgeous pair of Black-eared Wheatears – all three Spanish breeding 'oenanthe' in the space of thirty minutes - superb. Julian then sees a male Blue Rock Thrush on the turrets of the castle and this prompts the decision to continue up there. However, overhead Jennifer points out a lovely kettle of Griffon Vultures followed by Julian and John H. getting surprised by a Black Stork circling with them, a species a bit out of its range! There are also butterflies around and we are finding ones not normally seen at higher altitudes such as Spanish Marbled White, Spanish Gatekeeper, Small Skipper and Berger's Clouded Yellow.

We wind our way the short distance to the parking area below the large castle and prepare for a short walk around its perimeter before lunch. There are plenty of Rock Sparrows calling on the castellated walls and Julian hears (then finds) the male Blue Rock Thrush singing in full view. There are (probably) genuine Rock Doves flying around and a couple of Red-rumped Swallows are also a bit of surprise

to Julian in this area. John H. hears a Bee-eater call and we get good views of a pair flying around followed by our first Woodchat Shrike sat on an overhead power line. John Mc. has gone on ahead to get out of the hot sun and finds a Crag Martin nest complete with chicks demanding food, which is brilliant to watch. It is now getting to lunchtime and we continue round the castle back to the minibus, collecting our picnics and finding a shady spot to enjoy them. Julian is out scanning the ridges seeing mostly Griffin Vultures and Black Kites but there are also a couple of Egyptian Vultures, Red Kite and very distant young Golden Eagle. After lunch we pack up all our things and climb into the wonderfully cool air-conditioned van and leave for another castle – this time at Loarre.

The drive back north takes about 45 minutes and the journey is pretty quiet being the 'heat of the day' on this now very hot day. We climb up to the Castillo de Loarre, another impressive hilltop building commanding a tremendous view over the 'Embalse de Sotonera.' We get out of the van to the song of Woodlark but cannot locate it and then Julian hears a Spotted Flycatcher and that cannot be located either although a brilliant family party of Crested Tits distracts this quest followed by good close views of a singing Western Bonelli's Warbler – great start again. This is a popular destination in May and we encounter bus loads of school children who are distinctly less than quiet so we head to a vegetated corner away from the main crowds. This proves fruitful as there is a Melodious Warbler in full song and after a bit of searching we finally manage to get some views of this migrant. This is then followed by a Sub-alpine Warbler singing from within a bush but this proves more difficult and we have to abandon this bird as the children have dispersed and a comfort break is needed. Just before we leave there is a Booted Eagle overhead followed by a Hobby that simply zips through and sadly disappears before good views can be gleaned. At the bar/visitor centre we really enjoy our drinks and ice cream before we ourselves have to leave and walk slowly back to the car park.

Our final destination on the way back to the hotel is the mirador that overlooks the Mallos de Riglos where we parked and admired these 100m tall red sandstone pillars. There are several climbers on the walls that look tiny against this backdrop and overhead we see plenty of Griffon Vultures that breed on the ledges of the cliffs. Ever vigilant John H. spots a Peregrine Falcon over the cliffs that quickly disappears but thankfully comes back into view minutes later. This heralds the completion of another excellent day and we jump into the bus and drive all the way north into the Hecho Valley where there is strong evidence of precipitation during the day – a good move heading south.

Day 5: Another pre-breakfast walk produces great views of a family party of Crested Tits and a lovely singing male Serin. Although what causes some excitement is a singing Western Orphean Warbler (hurdy-gurdy bird according to Julian) nearby, not something our guide expected this high in the mountains. Sadly we don't have time to search for this migrant warbler before heading back to the hotel on this beautiful

morning. After breakfast we meet at the minibus for 8:45am and drive south down the valley towards Puente de la Reina seeing Common Buzzard and Black Kites sat on the roadside telegraph poles. At the village we cross the river and drive a short distance, turning to an area of wheat and barley fields bordered by juniper scrub. This habitat is specific for certain species and almost immediately after stopping the minibus Julian hears the song of Ortolan Bunting. However, the first birds we see are Corn Bunting and a gorgeous male Stonechat found by John H. We are searching the trees and bushes for our target bunting when a Tawny Pipit flies up and gives its flight display right in front of us before landing in full view, where we get cracking telescope views. Julian now announces he has found the Ortolan but sadly it flies before the telescope is trained on it but we do get a passable view through the binoculars. It is already getting hot as we get back into the minibus and drive towards a very quaint and lovely Pyrenean village seeing a nightingale fly across the road.

We park and ready ourselves for a walk with lots of Common Swifts, Barn Swallows and House Martins whizzing around above us, along with both Red and Black Kites that are great for comparison. We wander through the quiet lanes and out into another open area seeing several Black Redstarts, a Cuckoo is calling in the distance, Nightingales are in full song, there's Goldfinch and Serin and Jennifer does well finding herself a Chiffchaff. Julian now is concentrating on something in the distance quickly getting his telescope set up and announcing "Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush", another of the day's major targets. We are still a long way off but we can clearly see this gorgeous blue and orange bird illuminated in the sunshine. On we walk hoping the bird will stay in view, finding a male Cirl Bunting on an overhead wire and the thrush stays perched, singing occasionally. We halve the distance and now get fabulous looks through the telescopes trained on it. It is smiles all round especially from our guide, who now can hear (again) Western Orphean Warbler, which is quite close. Pam and John are ahead and find this large 'white-eyed' warbler almost straight away in a small Juniper and eventually we all get tremendous views of the normally skulking species. On we slowly walk in the heat and without much shade, to a lovely small chapel and associated cemetery with a pair of nesting Sub-alpine Warblers feeding young within the bramble hedge. It is now that Jennifer says "I've got a lizard on a rock" and Julian goes into panic-mode as he sees it's actually a Green Lizard and not the more likely Ocellated, which is fantastic – getting quite animated in his excitement which Robert thinks is hilarious! The lizard moves off the rock slowly and disappears but there is much more to see and hear with a Quail making its distinctive "wet-my-lips" call from a nearby wheat field. It is glorious now and the butterflies are out in force with Spanish Fritillary, Spanish Chalk-hill and Small Blues. A brilliant Short-toed Eagle flies over and we also get to see Ortolan Bunting and Melodious Warbler through the telescope – what a wonderful morning.

It is now well past noon and Julian is keen to get back to the bus and go for our picnic lunch, which we do and also notice grey clouds starting to build in the distance.

We reach the bus and are thankful for some air-conditioning as we drive away from the village having had another brilliant view of the male Cirl Bunting singing from an overhead line. Our lunch stop is close but the speed of weather change is incredible because as we arrive the rumble of thunder sounds and drops of rain start to fall. Thankfully the tables are covered and we settle down to our meal of tortilla, quiche and olives which is delicious, watching the walkers of the 'Camino de Santiago' pass by. It's just a passing shower and the sun returns with Pam finding a beautiful, delicate Woodcock Orchid next to our benches and gives some of us an opportunity for some macro photography. After lunch and with the weather now looking decidedly dodgy we head off back over the Rio Aragon-subordan out to the hilltop village of Berdun, stopping at the Martes Bridge. Despite the slightly inclement weather we set off for a walk, stopping on the bridge where we find Little Ringed Plovers, Common Sandpiper, Grey Heron and Mallard. We continue to walk along the edge of the river hearing more Melodious Warblers and finding both Bee and Lax-flowered Orchids. A Woodlark sings but we cannot see it but generally it's quiet until we reach the Bee-eater colony. Julian is amazed to see so many, which is excellent as they are clearly nesting in the sandy banks nearby. John H. finds a marsh tern hawking up and down the river and after much deliberation we agree it's a Black Tern, this is another first for Julian in this area. We stay here watching the activity of the fantastic Bee-eaters with all of us commenting on just how colourful this scarce migrant is and how brilliant it is to see so well, not always an easy task. The weather is becoming quite threatening so Julian suggests we head back to the minibus and on the return journey there are three Booted Eagles circling round and a Western Yellow-legged Gull on the river.

We set off back towards our hotel with a plan to stop in Hecho at the river bridge to look for Dipper but as we head up through the valley the heavens open and heavy rain begins. It is slightly earlier than normal but no-one is complaining when Julian suggests we abandon this final stop and have a leisurely break before the main event of the day – our brewery tour! John L. has been looking forward to this all day and Imanol does not disappoint with Julian assisting with some of the translation. Our host is obviously very passionate about this side-business and also very knowledgeable on beer production with the 'proof of the pudding' being in the tasting, which most of us manage to do during the checklist that follows. It has been another excellent day and with the forecast favourable it looks like it will continue to be so.

Day 6: It is going to be a long day and night so the morning walk is abandoned as an official activity but still a few of us go outside before breakfast but nothing new is seen and heard by Michele. We meet at the minibus at the usual time on this fine morning and drive south out of the valley then east towards Jaca turning off for Santa Cruz de Serros and the monasteries of San Juan de la Pena. We wind our way up the mountain where both the old and new are located not stopping until we reach the

parking area adjacent to the new Monastery – a very impressive building reconstructed a few years earlier.

We ready ourselves for a walk around the ancient woodland surrounding the building and before we set off there are several Nuthatches in the trees above us. There are also Coal, Great and Blue Tits around and Julian can hear a Great Spotted Woodpecker in the distance. It is a lovely morning and we chat as we wander past the grand hotel associated with this church into another part of the forest. There is bird song all around with Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit and lots of Western Bonelli's Warblers making their whereabouts known. Michele spots a Red Squirrel that sadly disappears before we all get to see it but we actually do manage to find a few of the species moving through the dense foliage. We turn off the tarmacked road into a fantastic tree-lined avenue, dappled in sunlight, where evidence of Wild Boar is noticeable. There are plenty of butterflies here too with Southern Scarce Swallowtail looking resplendent amongst the White Asphodel. We are nearing the viewpoint and hearing Firecrest when a heavy knocking comes from nearby – has to be Black Woodpecker! Unfortunately we cannot find this primary target species so on we go down to the 'mirador' that looks out over the wonderful 15th century 'old Monastery'. We see Griffon Vultures sailing around and a pair of Ravens 'cronk' as they fly along the opposite ridge. Michele and John H. then spot a large black bird flying through the extensive mixed forest below – it has to be our target. Julian starts to search the area and suddenly says "I've got it" and quickly tries to get some of us on to the largest woodpecker in Europe. He then gets his telescope positioned on the bird and we eventually all get good looks at a fabulous male Black Woodpecker. This is superb and soon enough the 'pecker' flies to another tree and disappears, which heralds our departure back towards the minibus. We wander back to the tarmac road and slowly walk back on the circular route seeing Black-veined White and being given the run-around by a singing Black Redstart that refuses to show itself. Across the meadow we walk, seeing Chestnut Heath (another new butterfly) and at the vegetated reedy pool, John H. sees an Iberian Water Frog along with Southern Hawker, Red-veined Skimmer and Common Blue Damsel.

It is now lunchtime so we have our picnics sat at the tables in this fabulous location followed by a visit to the reception area at the monastery where Michele sadly has her baseball cap stolen from the church's facilities! After this we climb back into the van and drive the short distance down to the 'old Monastery' where Julian affords us twenty minutes to look around its ancient façade. We actually don't need this long and quickly enough we are back driving past our original parking place and out the other side – it is really hot now. Our first stop on the way to the Rio Gallego is at a small stream in a vegetated valley, where Jennifer finds a Spotted Flycatcher, which quickly disappears. We walk along the road hearing Woodlark and getting a brief view of a Sardinian Warbler before we leave. On we drive to the river and we follow it seeing Grey Heron along the bank before stopping at a large phragmite

bed. We attempt to do some birding here but get thwarted by the heavy duty mosquitos craving our blood.

It is mid-afternoon and with time on our hands on this hot day, Julian heads for the impressive Foz de Binies, a steep-sided limestone river gorge. We are all very impressed by this natural wonder and stop at another mirador to look back at the gorge with its nesting Griffon Vultures. Soon enough we move on and drive around the narrow winding roads until we reach Anso before heading up and over to Hecho. We have one last stop before the hotel at the vulture feeding station where we wander along the track seeing Common Wall Lizards but little else. At the feeding area we get fabulous views of Egyptian Vultures sat in the pines along with a few Griffons – a good way to finish our day out but it's now time to return.

Back at the hotel we get a little time before an early dinner as we are going owling tonight. After our meal around 8:30pm we set off back down the Hecho Valley and again turning east towards Jaca. This time we head along another minor road and park in a known spot to Julian for European Eagle Owl and European Nightjar. It is still fairly light so we listen to a Cuckoo in the distance and the frogs in the stream before John H. hears the 'churring' of a Nightjar. We cannot find the bird but it's lovely to hear its very distinctive song, then an Eagle Owl calls as dusk is falling. We can pin-point the area and Julian spots it leave the tree and fly out across the valley now in full view to us all – superb. It is getting late as we leave this site and head for our second place, a large church in the middle of a small village. We get here to the sound of celebration from a nearby bar but no Scops Owl. Julian takes a walk to the back of the church and accidentally disturbs one from a small hole in the wall and it disappears into a tree. We now hear another back at the front of the church and go to sound out one of Europe's smallest owls. This time it is successful as we see this diminutive night bird fly out and land on the church roof in full view, which is incredible and it stays there long enough for a great view and even some photos. It is now quite late and once the owl departs so do we, making haste back to our hotel in the Hecho Valley getting back just before the start of a new day – all very tired but all very satisfied.

Day 7: This is our final full day in this wonderful area and after the previous late night it is straight to breakfast at 8:00am. Our guide confirms the usual meeting time at the minibus and 45 minutes later we are ready to leave, although Julian delays us a little as he has found a Short-toed Treecreeper nest in the eaves of the building. We get brilliant views of an adult but it seems reluctant to enter the nest crevice while we are all watching so we leave them in peace and comment on another good start to the day. It is a lovely morning but the forecast is (as always) changeable so off we drive up the Hecho Valley. In a contrast to previous years and with the forecast in mind Julian decides to head straight to Selva de Oza at the head of this stunning valley. The journey is fabulous, punctuated with stops for Grey Wagtail,

Yellowhammer and a couple of very confident Alpine Marmot. Eventually we reach the parking area.

Julian has already informed us that the walk could be a couple of hours and to cater for inclement weather as it's the mountains, which is good advice. Once prepared, we set off towards the French border with Pam enjoying the beautiful Elder-flowered Orchids littered across these lush hillsides. We are scanning the ridges and valley bottom for signs of life and finding more Yellowhammers plus Black Redstart, Chaffinch and a distant Kestrel. The song of Blackcap fills the air and the views back down the valley are simply spectacular – what a place - John L. admits this is his favourite so far! John H. is continually searching the slopes and delivers with a couple of distant Southern Chamois (the Pyrenean form known as Isard). It is starting to warm up and there are butterflies around with a lovely Clouded Apollo plus Dingy and Southern Grizzled Skippers, Southern Scarce Swallowtail and Berger's Clouded Yellow. Pam is enjoying these with Julian and finds a lovely Common Butterwort in full bloom. Michele is keen to find some raptors (especially Golden Eagle) and does so with several Griffon Vultures, Common Buzzard and a cracking Short-toed Eagle. As it gets towards noon the grey clouds are starting to build and before long we have rain so Julian offers to run back for the van, which we accept gratefully.

Whilst Julian is gone, a few, Jennifer, Robert and Michele walk on a little further to get a good view of the fabulous waterfall on show and John L. decides he needs the exercise and walks down too. Soon Julian returns with the bus and in we all climb, picking John up on the way down. The rain is becoming intermittent so we drive slowly down to the picnic area stopping for a couple of superb male Red-backed Shrikes. Julian is also keeping an eye on the channel of water stopping occasionally to pond-dip, which produces a couple of Palmate Newts and a tiny Iberian Frog-let. Our guide explains this could easily be the rarest thing we will see this week due to its very restricted range!

Thankfully the rain stops by the time we reach the picnic tables and we are able to enjoy our lunch in warm sunshine. Jennifer spots another Short-toed Eagle along with a continual stream of Griffon Vultures overhead. Around 2:00pm we are replete and ready for the second half of the day and back south we slowly drive.

The first stop is at a lovely spot where a bridge crosses the Rio Aragon Superior in the Upper Hecho Valley. We spend some time here unsuccessfully looking for Dipper but we do see a couple of Grey Wagtails, male Black Redstart and a couple of Raven, however it's the seriously big bulls (plus cows with calves) nearby that attract our attention the most. On we continue, towards the hotel and about a kilometre away we park again at the famous Boca del Infierno (mouth of hell) where we admire the raging torrent passing through this narrow limestone canyon. Whilst we are busy taking photos Julian looks around and finds our only Pyrenean Saxifrage in flower, which looks very impressive, with Pam again really enjoying this. It is now

late afternoon and Julian promises us all a drink and ice cream so we head down to Hecho village (muy pronto). We stop at a bar with great outside space and park ourselves looking out over the far ridge in hope of raptors. Julian sorts the drinks and says we have to wait for ice cream but we are happy with this. There seems to be Egyptian Vultures everywhere with at least ten being seen here, this is unprecedented even to Julian, as it's a declining species in Spain. Once the drinks are finished and with some time before the supermarket opens for ice creams Julian suggests a walk to the river in the hope of a Dipper. This is great and on the way Michele hears a Cuckoo and Nightingales are in full song. A fly fisherman is in the river, which interests John L. greatly but it's generally quiet, until Julian decides to look in the telescope. He finds a pair of adult Golden Eagles, very distant but still discernible through the scope and a great way to end this detour to the river. Just after 5:00pm we walk slowly back into the village and Julian keeps his word by purchasing ice creams along with others stocking up on provisions – a win/win situation.

There is packing to do, so without delay we walk back to the minibus and return to our hotel with enough time to do most of our packing before meeting up to do the checklist and our three special categories, which highlights what a terrific and varied week we have had. The meal is again excellent but we soon retire knowing we have an early start the next morning, saying “thank you and adieu” to our wonderful hosts Imanol and Lucia.

Day 8: An early start sees us leaving the hotel before breakfast on a cool, pretty grey morning. Julian creates a bit of a stir but not from bed as he manages to sleep in but we are only five minutes behind schedule by the time we leave – he is very grateful that we are such a supportive and helpful team. The drive is quiet as the time and lack of refreshment dictate a sombre mood. John L. keeps the conversation flowing with Julian in the front as we head out of the mountains for one last time. We reach our breakfast café at Barbastro about two hours into the journey and Julian orders up a veritable feast, which is most welcome. Totally refreshed and invigorated we continue towards Barcelona along the fairly traffic-free motorways. We arrive at the airport in perfect time and sadly bid Julian farewell and a massive "thank you" for a great week, with a safe onward journey - not that we aren't a little jealous of him having another week in this marvellous corner of Spain. It has been fantastic!

Species of the Trip

John H. Lammergeier
Pam Lammergeier
John L. everything!
Robert Firecrest
Jennifer Yellowhammer
John Mc. all the butterflies
Michele Lammergeier
Julian Green Lizard

Place of the trip

John H. Gabardito
Pam Arres
John L. Selva de Oza
Robert San Juan de la Pena / Imanol's Brewery
Jennifer Selva de Oza
John Mc. Selva de Oza
Michele Selva de Oza
Julian Arres

Magic Moment

John H. the two Lammergeiers sat together
Pam finding the Lady Orchid
John L. first morning opening the shutters / Imodium...
Robert Julian's reaction to seeing the Green Lizard
Jennifer the two Lammergeiers sat together
John Mc. Bee-eaters flying round
Michele stepping out of the hotel on the first morning.
Julian finding the Wallcreeper

BIRDS

Grey Heron
Cormorant
White Stork
Black Stork
Mallard
European Honey Buzzard
Black Kite
Red Kite
Lammergeier
Egyptian Vulture
Griffon Vulture
Short-toed Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Golden Eagle
Booted Eagle
Common Kestrel
Hobby
Peregrine
Red-legged Partridge
Common Quail (heard only)
Little Ringed Plover
Common Sandpiper
Western Yellow-legged Gull
Black Tern
Rock Dove
Feral Pigeon
Wood Pigeon
Collared Dove
Turtle Dove
Monk Parakeet
Common Cuckoo (heard only)
European Eagle Owl
Scop's Owl
European Nightjar (heard only)
Common Swift
Alpine Swift
Common Kingfisher
European Bee-eater
Hoopoe
Iberian Green Woodpecker (heard only)
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Black Woodpecker
Crested Lark
Thekla Lark
Woodlark (heard only)
Crag Martin
Barn Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow

House Martin
Tawny Pipit
Water Pipit
Grey Wagtail
White Wagtail
Dipper
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Nightingale (heard only)
Black Redstart
Stonechat
Northern Wheatear
Black-eared Wheatear
Black Wheatear
Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush
Blue Rock Thrush
Blackbird
Ring Ouzel
Song Thrush
Cetti's Warbler (heard only)
Melodious Warbler
Sardinian Warbler
Sub-alpine Warbler
Western Orphean Warbler
Garden Warbler
Blackcap
Western Bonelli's Warbler
Chiffchaff
Firecrest
Spotted Flycatcher
Crested Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Nuthatch
Wallcreeper
Short-toed Treecreeper
Red-backed Shrike
Southern Grey Shrike
Woodchat Shrike
Eurasian Jay
Magpie
Red-billed Chough
Yellow-billed Chough
Jackdaw
Carrion Crow
Raven
Spotless Starling
House Sparrow

Rock Sparrow
Common Crossbill
Chaffinch
Serin
Citril Finch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Linnet
Bullfinch
Yellowhammer
Cirl Bunting
Rock Bunting
Ortolan Bunting
Corn Bunting

MAMMALS

Southern Chamois
Alpine Marmot
Red Fox

REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS

Green Lizard
Common Wall Lizard
Iberian Wall Lizard
Iberian Marsh Frog
Iberian Frog
Palmate Newt

BUTTERFLIES

Southern Grizzled Skipper
Dingy Skipper
Small Skipper
Swallowtail
Southern Scarce Swallowtail
Small White
Large White
Black-veined White
Wood White
Western Dappled White
Bath White
Orange-tip
Clouded Yellow
Berger's Clouded Yellow
Brimstone
Painted Lady
Red Admiral
Clouded Apollo
Spanish Marbled White
Silver-washed Fritillary
Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary

Knapweed Fritillary
Spanish Fritillary
Small Tortoiseshell
Comma
Small Copper
Blue-spot Hairstreak
False Ilex Hairstreak
Wall Brown
Meadow Brown
Southern Speckled Wood
Spanish Gatekeeper
Common Blue
Adonis Blue
Small Blue
Spanish Chalk-hill Blue
Chestnut Heath

Common Sheeps-bit
Sempervivum
Campanula
St Bruno's Lily
White Asphodel
Pyrenean Asphodel
Bird's foot Trefoil
Vipers Bugloss
Wild Columbine
Pyrenean Hyacinth
Wild Gladioli
Alpine Ladies Mantle
Ramonda

OTHER INSECTS

Hummingbird Hawkmoth
Six-spot Burnet
Common Clubtail
Red-veined Darter
Common Blue Damsel
Carpenter Bee
Great Green Grasshopper
Red-winged Grasshopper
Dung Beetle
Glow Worm
Pill Millipede

PLANTS and FLOWERS

Elder-flowered Orchid
Lax-flowered Orchid
Greater Butterfly Orchid
Lesser Butterfly Orchid
Burnt-tip Orchid
Early Purple Orchid
Lady Orchid
Bee Orchid
Late Spider Orchid
Pyramidal Orchid
Fragrant Orchid
Green Hellibore
Stinking Hellibore
Pyrenean Saxifrage
Trumpet Gentian
Spring Gentian
Common Butterwort
Star of Bethlehem
Dog-tooth Violet
Devil's Bit Scabious