

Spanish Pre-Pyrenees, Aragon

November

An EVENTS meeting at Via Digital in Madrid (Cuidad de Imagen) on Monday 18th November presented an opportunity to do some Spanish birding on the Sunday. Twice previously at this time of year I have headed for Gallocanta, but on this occasion I set my sights a little further afield. In May one of my crazy but unexecuted plans was to spend a day birding in the Pyrenees: John Muddeman had given me the name of a guide who knows the area well and could give me some tips.

As it turned out, Josele Saiz was away (guiding in Extremadura), and I went walking in the Sierra de Gredos instead. Now, in November, with key species such as Wallcreeper and Alpine Accentor wintering lower down in the pre-Pyrenees I did some homework and booked a night's stay at Casa Boletas and a day's birding with Josele.

My flight arrived into Madrid Barajas at around 8.30. Soon after 9pm I was on my way up the N11 towards Zaragoza in an upgraded hire-car - Renault Scenic – my quiet but excited smile to myself an outward expression of the feelings of space, freedom and anticipation that always accompany my long-distance birding trips.

Apart from some fog on the high plains midway to Zaragoza which necessitated some restraint, I was able to bomb along the route to Huesca at 120-140kmh without difficulty. Loporzano, where Casa Boletas is situated, is only a few minutes drive east of Huesca. I reached there soon after midnight, easily finding the keys Esther had left out for me. I snuggled down in a very comfortable room, various paintings and photos of cracking Iberian birds an immediate reminder of the prime birding area I was now in.

I was joined by Josele at 7am for breakfast and we discussed the day's plans: main targets, Wallcreeper, Lammergeier and Alpine Accentor, with Bonelli's Eagle a possible once the other three had been either ticked or confined to the "too hard" basket. With Josele at the wheel of my hire car, we headed up towards Vadiello, prime winter habitat for all three, and only minutes drive from Loporzano.

The spectacular limestone formation of the Sierra de Guara stretched out before us - in particular the Salto del Roldan which dominates the area and which we would visit again later in the day -

as we rapidly ascended from the plain. Scanning the cliffs at various points en-route yielded hundreds of Griffon, but no Quebranteosos yet (Josele reported seeing them roosting there from time to time), and stops at a couple of quarries where Wallcreeper have been seen were also unproductive.

Josele led me on foot past the dam, beyond a point where cars could go, the road having partially collapsed, and along a footpath to view a shaded cliff. A friend of his had reported Wallcreeper on this rock a few days earlier. Looking at the bare grey rock-face, shaded, damp and pock-marked, a slightly pessimistic sense that we were looking for a needle in a haystack came over me. Had I driven for 400km to dip on what had become my most-wanted species?



We both scanned for some time, maybe 10-15 minutes, when Josele announced he had a Wallcreeper. With some careful directions (his curious instruction to look near the ear-shaped hole turned out to be spot on) I was eventually able to lock onto a beautifully camouflaged slatey-grey bird, instantly revealing why it had been difficult to find. Unless it moved, it was virtually impossible to see unless you knew it was there. Once or twice, however, it pumped its wings giving tantalizing views of the scarlet beneath, like a ruby set in pewter.

Eventually it made a slightly longer flight across the rock face and I could see the little jewel in all its glory. The white winter throat of this bird made sexing it definitively impossible, though we formed a suspicion it was a male from a small dark spot on the throat which may have been the remnants of its summer plumage.

Despite at least 2 or 3 good opportunities when it stayed relatively still, all my attempts to photograph it were unsuccessful, barring one shot which even stretches the term "record shot". After these disasters I decided to give up with the camera and just enjoy watching it. For the next 20-30 minutes I was able to enjoy close-range scoped views of one of Europe's most desirable birds until its course across the rock-face took it out of view and we decided to head back to the dam.



Still high from the "Treparriscos" we walked along the road to the dam wall. As predicted by Josele a couple of Alpine Accentor were pottering about on the ground in the tunnel, and I managed some cracking photos of these surprisingly smart birds. The ease of this, and the compliance of the birds, put my eight hours of walking to the Laguna Grande in Gredos into stark relief.



As I emerged from the tunnel into sunshine at a platform to view the dam another Wallcreeper flew in and landed butterfly-like on the cliff wall metres away. Josele had seen it too, and excitedly I wrestled - in vain - with the camera as it pumped its wings. Before I had

untangled myself it had flown up the cliff face and out of sight, and despite careful scanning for the next 40 minutes we were unable to relocate it.

With two of the three main targets now already in the bag mid-morning, we started a placid descent back towards Loporzano, punctuated by a long stop to scan large column of Griffon which had taken to the air from their roosts on the limestone "fingers" since we had ascended. According to Josele, Lammergeier are curious birds and will often cruise past or join just such a group - but not on this occasion.



Another likely Lammergeier haunt was the Salto del Roldan and we drove up to S. Julian de Banzo (north of Loporzano) and along a farm track to a point where we were distant, but could readily scan a wide area. Here again, there were hundreds of Griffon as well as a pair of Golden Eagle. I had just locked onto a long-tailed raptor -- clearly not a Griffon -- when Josele announced Aguila Real, and we realised we were looking at the same bird. It was joined by another and landed in trees on another cliff east of the Salto.



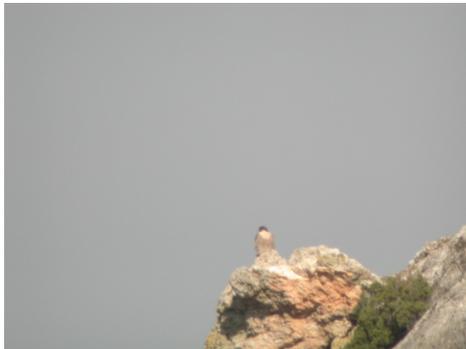
Our Lammergeier "hunt" was unsuccessful here too, but Josele was surprisingly upbeat and continued to be confident we would eventually connect with his favourite bird.

We now retraced our steps back past Lopozano and then beyond en route to yet another potential spot. As we approached Coscollano, a distant raptor seemed worth checking out, and as soon as Josele had his bins to his eyes he was announcing the hat-trick. We drove on a little to intercept it and the fantastic adult Lammergeier – looking surprisingly pale underneath, almost white/cream to my eye – cruised past close enough for me to make out the moustache in my bins. A second also passed by close enough for cracking views but both, with barely a wing-beat between them, cruised straight through, in no time diminishing to be nothing but highly distinctive specks in the scope.



As we scoped them in the distance a Merlin flew past across a field (and out of sight), and soon after we carried on this road to another dam at Calcon. Immediately I located a Peregrine perched on a cliff-top. We munched the picnic Esther had prepared for us and formulated a plan for the afternoon. One possibility was to go up to the French border to look for Alpine Chough and Snow Finch, but

when Josele called Astun to see if there had been any snow they laughed at him! With no snow to encourage the birds into the resorts we would have no chance and would be better staying in Guara.



Our descent from the dam involved a detour to a beautiful wooded valley in a private hunting estate. Josele is on good terms with the owner, and was giving me good value guiding, bringing me to out-of-the-way places that never appear in trip reports. I failed to note properly where this was and have not been able to relocate it on my map of the Parque: for later reference we drove along a straight sealed road to a roundabout with a low building ahead (which seemed familiar -- had we been there earlier in the day too?), then left at the roundabout up an unsealed track past a hunting lodge and eventually right through a gate.

After a brief, unsuccessful tape-luring session at the bottom of the gorge, we decided to make our way back to the Salto for perhaps another crack at Bonelli's Eagle. Yet another adult Lammergeier surprised us as we were leaving, repeatedly circling the gorge apparently holding something in its talons, making the detour unexpectedly worthwhile.



Josele drove us now to the Salto del Roldan via Huesca and Apies. En route he claimed a Hen Harrier, unseen by me, but bringing the day's raptor total to 6. The weather, up to now, had held off, but as

we approached the foothills via the plain below in sunshine, it was raining on the top. I stopped for a photo of the fantastic rainbow this was creating ahead of us.



The steep track that leads up to the Salto became progressively narrower, rougher, and bordered by ever increasing sheer drops, but eventually we reached a platform behind the main western buttress and parked. The purpose in coming here, apart from admiring the sweeping views across the plains below and the Salto del Roldan itself where the xxx river has sliced its way through the limestone with spectacular results, was to stake it out for raptors, and in particular a Bonelli's Eagle that Josele knew roosts here. Thin drizzle with occasionally heavier rain persisted, reducing visibility, and with no sign of it abating we took the decision to go back down to the plain which we could see from our elevated vantage point, was bathed in early evening winter sunshine.

We visited a wetland site south-west of Huesca which Josele reported was good for various species in spring and summer, but was rather dead now. Our circumnavigation of Huesca then took us to the Embalse de XXXXX, with various wildfowl of little note (Pochard is about the only bird I recall from here). By now we could see that the rain had cleared up in the foothills, and with little daylight left, I suggested that we might have one last crack at Bonelli's. There wasn't time to get back up to the top, and instead we headed back through San Julian de Banzo, to another viewpoint (though slightly different) up to the Salto.

As the rocks gradually turned a stunning pink in the cold November sunset, we scanned the right hand side of the canyon without locating our quarry. Josele briefly picked up a possible which

immediately slipped behind the rockface, and in a sense I was glad not to have seen anything, and therefore not have the mental anguish of a stringy tick and thoughts of what might have been.

Final call was Lopozano cemetery, a good site for listening to (and apparently seeing according to various trip reports) the Eagle Owls which live in the canyon below, but which were not to be heard this evening. A Thekla Lark sang briefly nearby, the final bird of the day.

A fabulous meal was waiting at Casa Boletas when we returned, well satisfied with the day's birding and determined to return at the earliest opportunity. Having eaten my fill I packed up and was on my way back to Madrid.

After my meeting at Via Digital on Monday I couldn't resist the opportunity for one last bit of birding, and drove out towards Valdetorres de Jarama. I had no map and tried to find my way there from memory. This was not totally successful and by the time I arrived I had less than 30 minutes before I needed to leave. A flock 60 little bustards made the diversion worthwhile. But it almost cost me my flight, as the traffic to the airport was unexpectedly heavy and my arrival there cut things very fine, even by my usual standards.