

Aragon and Catalunya, 16-22 April, 2005

In 2000 I had missed out on the lab jolly to the International Conference on Pattern Recognition in Barcelona, despite having two papers in the proceedings, because of the impending birth of Erica. When I realised that the 2005 International Conference on Robotics and Automation was to be held there I hastily cobbled together a paper based on 4th year student Charles Bibby's project. When, somewhat to my surprise, it was accepted I made plans for some birding along with conference activities. With conference proper getting underway on Tuesday, I decided to fly in on Sat and bird whatever remained of Sat, all day Sunday, and most of Monday with the aim of being in Barcelona early-mid evening on Monday.

Saturday 16th

When almost everyone else on my flight had left, and with the flight number removed from the board, I began to suspect the worst, that my case had been lost. Birding-wise this was not a complete disaster since I had bins and scope in hand-luggage, but the lab Coolpix, these days a permanent companion, was in the case along with all of my clothes. I reported the loss and returned towards the exit doors, only to see my case had now magically appeared and was sat by the belt, a huge relief. The next hurdle, picking up the hire car was easily accomplished and I was on the road in a VW Polo, only an hour or so behind the tentative schedule I had arranged for day one.

Despite many previous visits to Spain since my first in '98, at least six of which have involved some birding, and despite various specific trips to known sites (Serandilla near Monfrague, Sierra de Fuentes nr Caceres and the Sierras de Villuercas all in Extremadura, and Salto de Roldan in Aragon) I had yet to see Bonelli's Eagle. Reading my own reports from 2002, even three years ago it was already my Spanish bogie bird, and I had been very gripped by Steve Young's reports of several in a trip to Andalucia in October '03.

While various places in the coastal ranges near Barcelona such as the Sierras de Garraf and Tarragona are reputedly Bonelli's strongholds, I had no firm knowledge of birding sites or good accommodation in these areas. Instead I decided to drive the 3 hours or so up to Casa Boletas, a wonderfully accommodating pension for birders in the Aragonese pre-Pyrenees, and where I had birded in November '02 and again with Steve in March '03. This would give me two cracks at Bonelli's: at the Salto de Roldan, still good for it according to Josele, despite my dips on both previous occasions, and at another site Josele had told me about in March '03 that I had filed away mentally for just such an occasion as this. This alternative was near the village of Candanos south of Los Monegros, and not a big detour en route from Barcelona. Though our itinerary in March '03 then had taken us close by, we did not have the time for what seemed like a rather outside bet and had bombed past on our way from Los Monegros to Barcelona.

With Bonelli's the clear number one, and perhaps only target bird for the few days I had at my disposal, I decided this was to be my first stop, and bombed along the A2 from Barca at a fair rate. Some two hours after leaving the airport I was turning off the main road at Candanos having already noted Swallows, Swifts, Spotless Starling and, on the outskirts of the village in small pond, the ubiquitous Cigueluela, or little Stork (Black-winged Stilt). On the minor sealed A2410 down to the Rio Valcuerna an interesting looking flock of passerines took off from an irrigated field. I stopped for a brief scan, delighted to find about 30 Blue-headed Wagtail.

The track along the Valcuerna was unsealed but relatively easily passable in my two-

wheel drive. Numerous Lesser Kestrel were noted as the river gradually descended into a steep-sided valley, the track finally reaching a small white hut, the Refugio.



Unfortunately birding conditions were far from ideal and it seemed like I would be in for a tough time. The sun was shining, but the wind was very strong and gusty, to the point where once or twice my scope nearly went over. I positioned myself behind the Refugio to keep out of the wind as much as possible and scanned the area. The ridge to the south across the lake seemed like the best bet and I concentrated mainly on this. Within minutes a pair of Griffon Vulture came into view from the south-west and drifted directly overhead. An unidentified Eagle then worked its way gradually along the ridge from east to

west, but I was never able to pin down an id. This may have been the elusive Bonelli's but the status it had now acquired in my mind ruled out even the tiniest amount of string. Even though the wind kept up, the site did prove a decent raptor spot: after the unidentified eagle another began to frustrate me until it showed itself to be Short-toed, and not long afterwards a pale-morph Booted Eagle put in an appearance. Not a bad start to the trip, but late afternoon I decided to make a move.

My plan from here was to do some steppe birding in Los Monegros, revisiting some of the areas Steve and I had covered in '03. We had found it quite hard work then, and today was even tougher - one pair of eyes, limited time, still a strong wind, and little prospect of a lifer to drive me on. After a few detours from the A2214 when I noted Wheatear, Chough, Black Kite, Red-legged Partridge, and Montagu's and Marsh Harriers, I headed north to Ontiñena and the A131.

I made one further detour, to the Laguna de Sariñena where Josele had reported a staggering 20 booming Bitterns in early spring '03. The water level was high, as was the wind, and without knowledge of the best access points I decided to carry on to Loporzano which was now not far. A single Glossy Ibis with a large flock of Cattle Egret as I left Sariñena was noteworthy, and Black Kites were numerous over the remaining 30 km or so. I arrived at about 8.30, just after a French party also staying, and joined them for a hearty meal before retiring to bed in the same room I had first occupied for one night in November '02.

Sunday 17th

I had no firm itinerary for the day other than a plan to do some raptor watching at the Salto de Roldan. A walk before breakfast through the village up to the gorge yielded various characteristic Iberian passerines: Sardinian Warbler, Subalpine Warbler, Corn Bunting, Black Redstart, Serin, Nightingale and Spotless Startling, along with Griffon and Raven. I had held out no hope of seeing Wallcreeper, the middle of April being a transition period, when this most desirable of species has left its lower wintering grounds such as Vadiello and Riglos, but before territories have been established in the high Pyrenees. Over breakfast, Esther mentioned that two birders had had Wallcreeper at Vadiello on Friday. I therefore decided that I would make Vadiello my first stop of the day for an outside chance at the elusive Treparriscos.

Sadly, a couple of hours at Vadiello failed to turn up a Wallcreeper, and it was the same story at Riglos later in the day. Nice pics of Crag Martin in a small quarry, and good views of Blue Rock Thrush up at the dam rescued the time from being a complete waste.



Still with thoughts of Bonelli's Eagle in my mind, I decided to head to San Julian de Banzo, a short diversion from my route back to Loporzano from Vadiello where I spent another couple of hours scanning up to the Salto de Roldan. This exercise again was largely unproductive, other than for great views of Alpine Swift in the valley between the farm track where I had parked and the Salto. The diversion was, however, made worthwhile by the cracking close views of Golden Eagle as I approached the village. The sight of a couple of long-tailed raptors as I cruised slowly down the newly surfaced road to San Julian caused me to slam on the brakes and in my haste, leave the car parked up in the middle of the road. I jumped out and landed the bins straight on an adult Golden Eagle less than 100m away being harassed by a Red Kite.

Over the next few minutes I watched with bins, enjoying my best ever views of this majestic raptor, as it was driven further away by the attentions of its smaller cousin. As they gradually moved further away I briefly scanned back to where they had come from (and where I had driven from) and was staggered to see the unmistakable silhouette of another eagle perched on a pile of rocks on the side of the road. Realising I must have driven within metres of this bird without noticing, I simultaneously noticed two guys on quad bikes approaching from below. I would need to move the car. Having rolled the car to the side so they could pass I got out the scope and filled the frame with the fantastic sight of another adult Golden Eagle, surveying the valley below. What a photo opportunity but before I even had a chance for my customary wrestle with camera and adaptor it took off, down the valley where (presumably) its mate had gone, probably spooked by the quad bikes which had just passed noisily with 20 metres of its roost.

A trip to Riglos, 40mins drive NW of Huesca, failed to produce Wallcreeper in an hour or so of scanning, the best birds here being Egyptian Vulture and Blue Rock Thrush, and I decided to spend the rest of the afternoon back at the Salto de Roldan. A brief diversion to the small wetland at Cuarte in yielded several hundred Swallow, Black-winged Stilt, Corn Bunting, Cuckoo and Cetti's Warbler (heard only) and a short while later I had driven the narrow, winding track along the cliff face to the western buttress of the Salto de Roldan.

The weather had deteriorated somewhat during the day. Though there was no sign of the rain here that had blighted my hour at Riglos, the wind was strong enough to be a major

irritant. I found a spot that afforded a reasonable view eastwards along the ridge that is the start of Sierra de Guara, and sat down in the lee of the wind to scan.



Too often when raptor watching in Spain I have been tempted by an unpromising start to move on. Here dozens of Griffon and Chough circled about the cliffs, as well as the occasional Gyppo. Despite the absence of anything more exciting I was content to stay put in the knowledge that I didn't need anything local (other than Bonelli's of course). Twice as I scanned the ridges a more upright silhouette on the horizon was discernable in the scope as a Golden Eagle. The two birds found were almost certainly the ones I had seen much closer earlier that day.



After an hour or more a long, narrow-winged, very long-tailed raptor cruised the ridge leading up the valley. At a distance it appeared very brown above and I took a while to clock that I could add an adult Lammergeier to the trip list. This fantastic bird sailed back and forth along the ridge regularly, periodically coming closer and once even lighting on the cliff face, but not in view, so no photo opportunity. As the sun got lower in the sky the temperature dropped and I decided to head back to Casa Boletas, still short of a lifer for the trip.

Another great meal, washed down with some lager I picked up at a service station on the way back, rounded off a really enjoyable if not absolutely bird-filled day. The clear highlights were the Lammergeier in the late afternoon at the Salto and the crippling views of the pair of Golden Eagles at San Julian mid-morning.

Monday 18th

At the start of today my only real plan was to make my way back to Barcelona in time to catch up in the evening with colleagues at my conference.

After a slightly early breakfast I headed off in the car up to Vadiello again, not really expecting Wallcreeper, but feeling an obligation to give it one last shot. The scenery, in any case, is breath-taking. As expected no Wallcreepers, but an adult **Lammergeier** with a supporting cast of **Booted Eagle** and **Egyptian Vulture** made it worthwhile. Four **bee-eaters** on the drive back to Loporzano were also a welcome and colourful sight.



The next hour and a half was spent in the car, bombing down to Zaragoza and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way around the ring road to find the roads to Belchite, famed for its surrounding dry steppe areas with abundant populations of both sandgrouse and Dupont's Lark.

My plan was to go to El Planeron, the reserve to the east of Belchite. As I approached Belchite, however, a sign for La Lomaza attracted my attention and I realised that this supposedly permit-only reserve was right next to the road 100m in front of me. I slowed, pulled the car into the deserted car-park, and got out of the car as the time approached midday. To my amazement, despite the time of day and fair old breeze, I could hear the unmistakable song of a **Dupont's Lark** drifting towards me from the other side of the road. As I walked to the edge of the carpark where a track seemed to go off east into the reserve another bird in the reserve answered the song of the first. I set off with bins and scope and within a few minutes I had seen a small brown lark scuttling between rocks and low scrub, giving views not dissimilar to my first ever on a long frustrating stake-out with Steve at the Hoces del Duraton in May '99. This was surprisingly promising and I wandered further into the reserve about 3-400m along the obvious track, noting various lark sp. and a Hoopoe (first and only of the trip). Periodic scanning of the tops of small rocks and bushes eventually yielded stunning views of an unusually bold Dupont's at incredibly close range. The customary frustrations with camera ensued and in the end, though I got some shots of this bird, it was only when



I relocated it much more distant about 15 minutes later.

I returned to the car somewhat reluctantly but feeling rather smug that I'd had such a supposedly difficult bird with such apparent ease, surely a reflection of my outstanding birding ability (yeah, right!)

I saw no new birds at El Planeron, but it was a useful recce for perhaps a future visit (especially if planned collaborations with Uni of Zaragoza materialise). The highlight non-birding was during a sudden downfall the road turned to mud and I realised I had no control over the steering of car and slid back and forth across the track down a slope until I managed to bring the car to rest. A quick look outside revealed the cause as a layer of two inches of mud that had stuck to the tyres turning them into rather slippery slicks.



I cruised away to the east and noted **White Stork** in the irrigated fields near El Planeron. At the earliest opportunity I headed north-ish, doubling back on myself so I could get to the Ebro to cross it, and then bombed back to the Refugio near Candasnos for another shot at Bonelli's.

It was quiet - nothing of note about - when I arrived, and I cracked open the picnic lunch Esther had packed. Regular scanning revealed only a single Griffon for at least $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour; an inauspicious prelude to what would become some of my most successful raptor watching ever.



A golden 15-20 mins began with as I picked up a **Goshawk**, noting its deep chest and rounded tail edges, flying across the valley north of the Refugio then back again, hassled by a **Kestrel**. A couple of minutes later I finally picked up a raptor cruising the ridge to the south that had seemed most promising two days earlier. This time the prominent head, and pale unders of a large but slightly ungainly **Short-toed** were readily seen. I watched this for a bit with scope and then stood up for another scan. There didn't seem to be anything else other than a speck where the Short-toed had been, so I swung the scope back towards the speck. As I hunted around where I thought it should be a large raptor

came into the field of view, but I was blown away as I realised this was not the Short-toed, but an immature **Golden Eagle**. The golden nape, bulging secondaries and large white primary panels were all obvious in the good afternoon sunshine. Again I watched for a couple of minutes, then rested and scanned again. This time I picked up a bird that initially I assumed was the imm. Golden Eagle again, but decided to scope it for want of anything else in the sky. As a raptor entered the scope, incredibly, I immediately realised from a sleeker, almost falcon-like, overall impression that this was not the Golden. Moreover, though a lifer, I knew instantly that it was my most-wanted **aBonelli's** at last!!! Unequivocal, but still I wanted to clock the other key identification details. As it banked I noted the diagnostic unders -- pale belly and flight features contrasting with dark underwing coverts, and a dark terminal band on the tail. I watched for a couple of minutes as the feeling of relief and joy that only a fellow birder could understand swept through me, and I started chuckling and singing to myself. But still there was one angle I wanted. Fortunately before it drifted out of sight behind a ridge to the south-east, I was able to complete the set of observations as it banked towards me and the pale scapular patch was obvious in the otherwise unremarkable brown uppers.

As soon as it disappeared from view I decided to get cracking for Barcelona, with probably enough time left for some nice wetland birding at the Llobregat Delta before sunset. A couple of brief stops on the unsealed track back to Candanos yielded great views of **Black-eared Wheatear**, and even a couple of half-decent digiscoped shots taken by balancing the scope and camera on the window-sill of the car.



I made good time on the motorways and pulled off the C242 into the narrow road that leads to the main entrance to the compact but rich reserve. Immediately I picked up a **Green Woodpecker** (Iberian race) on a palm tree across the channel from where I had parked (in fact the same tree in which Steve and I had feral Monk Parakeets two years earlier). A nice start, but then to my horror, I discovered the gate locked: reserve closed at 6pm.

Remembering Steve's similar experience in '04 I decided to take a leaf out of the Youngster's book, and, when the camp-site security guys seemed to be distracted, I

carefully placed my optics through the gate and launched myself over it. Avoiding the visitor centre where someone appeared still to be working, I headed for the hides and screens. One and a half hours of birding here (taking care to avoid getting myself locked into any hides!) yielded some nice early spring birding: **Grey Heron, Squacco Heron, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Swallow, Common Swift, House Martin, Black-winged Stilt** (dozens), **Avocet** (6), **Wood Sandpiper, Herring Gull, Whiskered Tern** (several), **Flamingo** (6), **Marsh Harrier, Cetti's Warbler, House Sparrow, Mallard, Red-crested Pochard, Teal, Shelduck.**



Whiskered Tern, a lifer, was a clear highlight. Six birds bounded in across the water from the direction of the airport and, like the Bonelli's Eagle of a few hours earlier, my ID was instant, despite it being a lifer. The much darker unders than on Common, and the consequently contrasting whisker made it immediately obvious what they were. Though one bird settled on the ground in front of the hide, my attempt to take a pic in the evening light still great for birding, but getting too low for digiscoping was disappointing. Luckily I would make up for that on my return visit in a couple of days.

As I made my way back to the exit, well satisfied with the day overall, I bumped into the guy at the visitor centre. Though I was embarrassed at being found out, he apparently was also embarrassed since he had not, as would have been customary, checked the hides when the reserve closed and assumed I had simply been locked in. It was in fact very lucky I did meet him, since I had not fully comprehended the consequences of being locked in: it turned out the gate up at the main road had been closed and locked and my car would have been stuck there overnight. Fortunately he was able to summon a colleague who drove down to the gate with me to let me out. Before I left, I was also given some great gen: a Little Crake had been seen regularly over the last couple of days at one of the screens. I resolved to return at the earliest opportunity.

Wednesday 20th

Charles' paper was scheduled for noon on Wednesday. I therefore decided to have an early morning stab at Little Crake, then back in time to give him some moral support. Though my taxi driver had no idea about the reserve's existence, I was able to direct him and arrived later than hoped but still with a couple of hours before I'd need to head back to the conference.

I made immediately for the screen where the Crake had been reported and staked it out for the next 45 mins. Once or twice my heart started to pound as at least two individuals of its Spotted relative trotted out, but there was no sign of the Little. After an hour or so I

met up with the chap who had given me the gen a couple of days earlier. Rather sheepishly, he now admitted that he had mistranslated the Crake's name into English: *Polluela chica* is in fact Baillon's Crake! A great bird, but not the hoped-for lifer. I had previously ticked off the '98 Grove Ferry Baillon's in Kent (undoing a stringy tick at Herdsman Lake in Perth '94), and seen a juvenile in Vendee in '00. I decided to wander to the other hides to see what else was about.

It turned out to be a great morning: as I approached the main hide in the NE corner a thin slightly metallic call caught my attention and soon I was scoping a fabulous adult **Penduline Tit**. From the hide a beautiful male **Garganey** was dabbling within a few metres, and shortly afterwards a pair of **Whiskered Tern** settled nearby allowing crisp, clear digiscoped shots.





A pair of **Audouin's Gull** was a nice addition, as were **Flamingo**, passage **Ruff** and **Wood Sandpiper**. No need for digiscoping the final good bird of the day as I wandered back towards the visitor centre on my way out, the guys attracted my attention and showed me their ringing catch of the morning: Iberian **Pied Flycatcher**. Though I had intended to catch a bus to the airport (or even if possible to the centre of Barcelona), I ended up getting a taxi; not least because of the slightly surreal and rather disturbing encounter with a prostitute who was dropped off by her pimp a few minutes after I arrived at the bus stop. Nice body, and clad in only mini-skirt and bra, but horrendously ugly, she proceeded to retrieve a chair from a drain nearby, sit back and smoke a fag while waiting for her next client .





Friday 22nd

Without a burning desire to see the last two sessions of the conference, on Space Robotics, I decided to spend my last morning back at the Llobregat Delta and catch a taxi back to the airport for my midday flight.

I deposited my luggage at the airport, and got to the reserve around 9am. I headed straight down to the beach to look for **Kentish Plover**, a notable omission from my Mon/Wed list. Thirty minutes on the beach was excellent, producing great views of all three *Charadrius* plovers as well as **Common Sandpiper**.



Later, when I spoke to one of the reserve wardens I would slightly regret not have gone straight into the main reserve, since that morning (at around 9am as I was arriving) they had recovered and ringed three Scop's Owl in their mist-nets. What a sight that would have been, Scops Owl in the hand!!! Nevertheless, when I did go into the reserve proper I added some nice birds: **Woodchat Shrike**, **Glossy Ibis**, male **Ruff** in breeding plumage, **Red-crested Pochard**, **Spoonbill**. I failed to get a decent pic of the Ruff, but one was kindly provided on email by a fellow birder from the hide, who also obliged with a lift to the airport.



Ebro Delta, July 7-15th

Three months later I would return to Catalunya on a family holiday. The place we had booked, a restored farmhouse, was just outside the small and little known village of El Perello, midway between l'Ametlla de Mar and l'Ampolla on the Costa Dorada, just north of the Ebro Delta. I had only one evening when I did any birding; nevertheless I saw some tasty birds in spite of this and in spite of the time of year.

Though I failed to get a photo, the commonest gull in the region was one of the world's rarest: Audouin's, seen regularly in l'Ampolla and when lying on the beach at St Jordi and Cala Forn. Sitting out by the pool in the evenings may have been the cause of terrible mosquito attacks, but I did score a flock of **Bee-eater** over-flying each night; a family of **Woodchat Shrike**; a **Nightjar sp.**, almost certainly Red-necked two consecutive evenings on the ground next to the pool!; **European Nightjar** churring distantly.

My one trip out after the girls were safely in bed, was primarily to see **Gull-billed Tern**, one of the few potential lifers in the region. It turned out to be relatively easy; one was picked up over almost the first set of rice-paddies I came to and a short while later I found a few on a pond that I were sufficiently close and stationary to permit passable record shots. **Whiskered Tern** were almost the commonest birds, hundreds seen bounding over rice fields. **Purple** and **Squacco Herons** in the fields also great, and the Heron highlight, **Little Bittern**. At Canal Vell I clocked one in flight, then as I was about to leave another landed on reeds in full view. Though the light was poor I turned up the sensitivity on the Coolpix to ISO800, set the self-timer and kept my fingers crossed. The results were not bad considering.

