

# Pyrenees 30th May to 8th June 2002, Ian Kinley and Dave Thexton

## General Comments

The weather in the first week was ideal; dry and sunny with cool mornings and warm afternoons but never too hot to bird. It changed dramatically on 4th June with spectacular thunderstorms and heavy rain that continued for much of the next day. The inclement weather influenced our decision to leave the Pyrenees a day earlier than intended in search of better birding conditions. Sunny but cool and windy weather prevailed on 6th and 7th and it was raining heavily again on our day of departure. Not what was expected for June in Spain!

There were many highlights: excellent views of Wallcreepers; Alpine Accentor; Black Woodpeckers; four species of vulture in a day and eight species of lark (including Dupont's) during the trip. Add this to the majestic scenery of the Pyrenees coupled with both bustards and both sandgrouse on the plains and it made for a memorable trip.

## Travel

We flew from Liverpool to Barcelona with EasyJet (£130 return, booked over the internet, very efficient and virtually hassle-free). At Barcelona airport we picked up a hired Citroen C5 Diesel from National Atesa (280 euros, booked over the internet with Carjet and again very smooth and efficient). We'd actually paid for a Citroen Saxo so had no complaints at getting a much larger vehicle at no extra cost; our only quibble being that, contrary to their advertising blurb, the National Atesa desk is not even in the same terminal let alone the arrivals hall!

We used the E90 toll motorway up to Fraga in both directions, which cost us about 12 euros each way; however, the alternative route, the toll-free N11, involves long sections of single carriageway roads choked with heavy lorries and very little opportunity to overtake.

## Accommodation

We had not anticipated any problems but struggled to find accommodation in the Candanos/Bujaraloz area. It took six attempts on our outward journey and five on the way back. It seemed that much of it was permanently reserved for lorry drivers using the N11. So be prepared for disappointment if, like us, you set off without booking anything in advance.

Some small hotels and restaurants would not accept credit card payments so make sure you have some ready cash available. Virtually no-one spoke any English. We got by with a handful of phrases - mainly concerning *cerveza* and *habitaciones* - but some basic Spanish and a phrase book would be useful.

Hostal Los Monegros at Bujaraloz - one night on way to Pyrenees and two nights on way back. Strangely we were charged 56 euros for a twin-bedded room first time and 45 euros the second time - cash in hand and no registration! Comfortable enough though overpriced which presumably reflects the general lack of alternative available accommodation in this area.

Hotel Aragon at Santa Cilia de Jaca - six nights; 40 euros a night for a twin-bedded room; nice people, bar restaurant attached; very comfortable and ideally

situated with central location for birding many of the sites in the Pyrenees. Added attraction was the view from our balcony from which we could relax after a hard day's birding and recorded, among others, Lammergeier, Griffon Vulture, Booted and Short-toed Eagle, Golden Oriole and Quail. Some late evening noise from the restaurant patio did not detract too much from the many positive features of this excellent base.

Hostal Aribau at Fraga - one night; 46 euros per twin room per night. Basic with hot water apparently not available and very overpriced but a lot cheaper than the nearby Hotel Cassanova at 90 euros per night!

May 30: Bujaraloz - Santa Cilia de Jaca.

May 31 - June 4: Based at Santa Cilia de Jaca

June 5: Santa Cilia de Jaca - Bujaraloz.

June 6: Bujaraloz

June 7: Bujaraloz - Fraga

June 8: Fraga - Barcelona.

the area between Bujaraloz and Sastago and the area north of Osera. We found the Candanos/Ballobar triangle the most productive plains area that we visited, having a richer variety of habitats and therefore more bird species than the rest, though the vicinity of Sastago and the Osera area also provided some good birding.

Rio Cinca south of Fraga - We discovered this area purely by chance. We had intended spending our final evening's birding at the Embalse d'Utexsa (DT had visited this site on a previous trip) but having a couple of hours to kill before our room at the Hostal in Fraga was free, we happened to travel south of Fraga on the N211 and found ourselves alongside a wide, lake-like stretch of the Rio Cinca. It was obviously worth exploring so we returned in the evening to bird the stretch between La Granja d'Escarp and Mequinenza. Access was easy from lay-bys and fishing areas on the main N211 and the minor road on the east side. There was a large mixed heronry (Cattle Egrets, Little Egrets and Night Herons) in trees opposite La Granja d'Escarp (overlooked by a hide that we didn't visit) and, in addition, we recorded Squacco Heron, Marsh Harrier, Hobby, Great Reed Warbler, Blue Rock Thrush and Bee Eater

Details and directions to all the sites can be found in Gosney's *Finding Birds in Northern Spain* and/or *A Birdwatching Guide to the Pyrenees* by Jaqui Crozier. Extra information was gleaned from trip reports available on the Birdtours website [www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports](http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports) and also the Boletas Birdwatching Centre website [www.boletas.org](http://www.boletas.org)

We used the Michelin map 443 1/400000 Catalunya/Aragon.

## Species List

We recorded a total of 146 species, listed below. The figures in brackets represent the number of days each species was recorded (e.g. 4/10 means that a species was seen on four days during our 10 day trip (we did no birding on the final day, travelling straight to the airport) and gives a crude indication of how easy each species was to see. More details are given of the rarer or more interesting species.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* (2/10)  
Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* - 1 at Rio Cinca south of Fraga on 7/6 (1/10).  
Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* - 30+ at Rio Cinca south of Fraga, including small numbers in the nesting colony (1/10).  
Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides* - 1 at Rio Cinca south of Fraga (1/10)  
Cattle Egret *Bulbulcus ibis* - A handful on the Zaragoza Plains; the commonest egret in the colony at Rio Cinca south of Fraga (3/10)  
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* - Good numbers, including nesting birds, at Rio Cinca south of Fraga (1/10).  
Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* (7/10)  
Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* - 1 flew over E90 en route to Candanos from Barcelona on 29/5 (1/10).  
White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* - Small numbers on the Zaragoza Plains, with nests in some of the towns and villages. (5/10)  
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* (5/10)  
Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* - 1 at Astun on 1/6 (1/10)  
Black Kite *Milvus migrans* - Very common in the Pyrenees; smaller numbers on the plains. (9/10)  
Red Kite *Milvus milvus* - Common in the Pyrenees (7/10)  
Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* - Widespread in the Pyrenees with c25 seen in total. Also 1 at Alcolea de Cinca. (8/10)  
Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* - Very common in the Pyrenees. Small numbers seen on the Zaragoza Plains, especially around Alcolea de Cinca and Sastago. (9/10)  
Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* - 1 in Hecho Valley on 31/5; 3 at Astun and 2 from Hotel Aragon on 1/6; 1 near Embalse de la Pena on 5/6 (3/10).  
Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus* - Excellent views of 1 adult on ground with c40 Griffons at remains of a carcass in upper Hecho Valley on 31/5 (1/10).  
Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* - Total of 8 seen at Hotel Aragon; Hecho Valley; Larues/Bagues; Embalse de la Pena; near Sarinena; Candanos/Ballobar triangle. (5/10)  
Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* - Small numbers at several sites on the Zaragoza Plains plus 2 at Larues/Bagues and 1 at Rio Cinca south of Fraga (5/10)  
Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* - Good views of a second-summer male at Larues/Bagues on 5/6. An adult male Montagu's Harrier and an unidentified ringtail were seen in the close vicinity (1/10).  
Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* - Small numbers on the Zaragoza Plains, and near Binies and Larues/Bagues. (4/10)  
Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* (9/10)  
Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* - 1 imm in the Candanos/Ballobar triangle on 29/5 and 7/6; 1 imm in upper Hecho Valley on 31/5; 2 ads at Astun on 1/6 (4/10)  
Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus* - Total of 6 seen in Pyrenees and Zaragoza Plains (4/10)  
Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* (10/10)  
Hobby *Falco subbuteo* - Total of 6 seen in upper Hecho Valley, Larues/Bagues, Candanos/Ballobar triangle; Rio Cinca south of Fraga (4/10)  
Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* - Singles at Foz de Binies and Riglos (3/10)  
Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa* - Recorded on Zaragoza Plains only (3/10)  
Quail *Coturnix coturnix* - Small numbers heard in all arable areas (4/10)  
Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* (2/10)  
Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* - At least 3 calling in Candanos/Ballobar triangle on 30/5, with excellent views of 2 displaying males (1/10).  
Great Bustard *Otis tarda* - 1 male in flight on east side of road south of Bujaraloz near junction of A2105 (Sastago) and A230 (Caspé) on 6/6 (1/10)  
Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* - A few seen on flooded rice fields near Sarinena and on small pond near Bujaraloz (3/10)

Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus* - Quite common on Zaragoza Plains (3/10)  
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* (1/10)  
Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* (4/10)  
Yellow-legged Gull *Larus cachinans* - 2 at Embalse de la Pena (1/10).  
Black-bellied Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis* - In Candasnos/Ballobar triangle, 2 in flight plus calling heard on 30/5 and 4 in flight on 7/6 (2/10).  
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles alchata* - In Candasnos/Ballobar triangle, 3 in flight on 29/5; super views of 2 on ground plus calling heard on 30/5; 8 in flight and close views of 2 on ground on 7/6 (3/10).  
Feral Pigeon *Columba livia* (9/10)  
Stock Dove *Columba oenas* (1/10)  
Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus* (8/10)  
Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* (10/10)  
Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* (5/10)  
Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius* - 1 in flight in Candasnos/Ballobar triangle on 7/6 (1/10).  
Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* (7/10)  
Scops Owl *Otus scops* - 1 heard calling in Candasnos/Ballobar triangle on early morning of 30/5 (1/10).  
Little Owl *Athene noctua* (5/10)  
Red-necked Nightjar *Caprimulgus ruficollis* - 2 heard calling in Candasnos/Ballobar triangle from 22.00 on 29/5 and 1 heard calling north of Osera at dusk on 6/6 (2/10).  
Swift *Apus apus* - (10/10)  
Alpine Swift *Apus melba* - Small numbers near Ballobar and Alcolea de Cinca. (2/10)  
Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* - 1 at Rio Cinca south of Fraga (1/10)  
Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* - Relatively small numbers seen, mostly on Zaragoza Plains (5/10)  
Roller *Coracias garrulus* - 2 in Candasnos/Ballobar triangle on 30/5 (1/10)  
Hoopoe *Upupa epops* - Fairly small numbers, mostly on Zaragoza plains (4/10)  
Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* - 1 heard calling at Puente la Reina on 3/6 (1/10)  
Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* (5/10)  
Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* (5/10)  
Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* - 1-2 heard at Monasterio de San Juan de la Pena on evening of 30/5; at least 2 drumming and calling frequently at Oroel, with flight views of 1, on early morning of 3/6; close flight views of 1 at Monasterio de San Juan de la Pena on early morning of 5/6 (3/10).  
Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* - Very common on Zaragoza Plains (3/10)  
Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens* - Fairly common on Zaragoza Plains (4/10)  
Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* - Quite common on Zaragoza Plains (3/10)  
Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* - Common (9/10)  
Thekla Lark *Galerida theklae* - Fairly common in suitable habitat (5/10)  
Dupont's Lark *Chersophilus duponti* - 2 heard singing intermittently from 21.55 on 30/5 at site north of Candasnos recommended by Gosney. In the afternoon of 6/6, we went to reconnoitre the site north of Osera recommended by Gosney for this species, intending to return at dusk. Having ignored a new-looking private sign going past an unfinished new house, we were soon accosted by an unsmiling local and "escorted from the premises". We didn't risk returning in the evening but instead tried another track leading off left from the Monegrillo road just before the "gas substation" mentioned in Gosney. Though we ended up in ideal-looking habitat not far from the Gosney site and stayed till well after dark, we heard nothing (except Red-necked Nightjar). Perhaps it was getting late in the season? (1/10)

Woodlark *Lullula arborea* - 2 at Larues/Bagues on 5/6 (1/10).  
Skylark *Alauda arvensis* (4/10)  
Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* (1/10)  
Crag Martin *Hirundo rupestris* - Common in Pyrenees (8/10)  
Swallow *Hirundo rustica* (10/10)  
House Martin *Delichon urbica* (10/10)  
Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* - 1 in Candasnos/Ballobar triangle on 7/6 (1/10).  
Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* (2/10)  
Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta* - Common in high ground in Pyrenees (4/10)  
Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* - 1 of undetermined race at Rio Cinca south of Fraga on 7/6 (1/10)  
Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* (6/10)  
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba alba* (8/10)  
Dipper (Black-bellied) *Cinclus cinclus* (3/10)  
Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* (7/10)  
Dunnock *Prunella modularis* (3/10)  
Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris* - 1 near top end of ski-lift at Astun on 1/6. One of the gates to an access road to the top of a ski-lift had been left open and we drove the track until it became undrivable, leaving just a short, though steep, walk to reach suitable habitat. Later in the day, we saw another car being stopped from entering this track so presumably we were just lucky that it was both unlocked and nobody was around to stop us - otherwise seeing this species would have entailed a long hard uphill slog. (1/10)  
Robin *Erithacus rubecula* (7/10)  
Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos* (9/10)  
Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* - Common in Pyrenees (7/10)  
Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* (1/10)  
Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* (2/10)  
Stonechat *Saxicola torquata* (5/10)  
Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* (4/10)  
Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* - Quite common on Zaragoza Plains (4/10)  
Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucura* - 1 at Riglos on 5/6 (heavy rain and lots of noisy climbers); excellent views of at least 4 from track below cliffs at Sastago on 6/6. This now appears to be a better site to see this species than Riglos due to the quieter nature of the area. (2/10).  
Rock Thrush *Monticola saxatilis* - Easy to see in Pyrenees, singing from obvious perches such as pylons. Total of 10+ (2/10)  
Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* - Surprisingly, the only one of the trip was a singing male next to the N211 alongside the Rio Cinca south of Fraga on 7/6 (1/10)  
Blackbird *Turdus merula* (8/10)  
Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* (3/10)  
Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* (1/10)  
Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* (5/10)  
Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* (2/10)  
Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* - Heard at Embalse de la Pena and Rio Cinca south of Fraga (2/10)  
Melodious Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta* - Just 3 recorded (3/10)  
Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* - Just 4 recorded on Zaragoza Plains (3/10)  
Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* - Just 2 recorded (2/10)  
Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis* - 1 seen near bridge over Rio Veral near Binies on 1/6 and 4/6 (2/10)  
Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* (1/10)  
Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin* (6/10)  
Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* (9/10)

**Western Bonelli's Warbler** *Phylloscopus bonelli* - Quite common and heard singing in suitable habitat (5/10)

**Common Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita* - All song heard sounded like this species i.e. not Iberian (4/10)

**Firecrest** *Regulus ignicapillus* - Common in suitable habitat (3/10)

**Spotted Flycatcher** *Muscicapa sriata* (1/10)

**Long-tailed Tit** *Aegithalos caudatus* (1/10)

**Crested Tit** *Parus cristatus* (5/10)

**Coal Tit** *Parus ater* (4/10)

**Blue Tit** *Parus caeruleus* (3/10)

**Great Tit** *Parus major* (6/10)

**Nuthatch** *Sitta europaea* (3/10)

**Wallcreeper** *Tichodroma muraria* - Having spent several fruitless hours at the Boco del Inferno site in the Hecho Valley, we were fortunate to bump into two English birders who put us on to an occupied site at nearby Gabardito. Excellent views of a nesting pair here on 2/6. Follow signs to Gabardito from the Hecho Valley, between Siresa and Boco del Inferno, and continue to the end of the road. Park by the mountaineering refuge and take the track off to the right through the trees past a "No Vehicles" sign. Keep going for c.30 minutes (climbing a barrier placed over the track possibly to deter off-road motorcyclists) to view the obvious crag on the right not long after emerging from the forest (the last part of the track is quite rough and steep). The site was obviously well known as a minibus party were arriving as we left. We were told that the Inferno site had been occupied by at least one bird up to early May but there had been just a couple of sightings since and that had been 500m north of the tunnel (1/10).

**Treecreeper** *Certhia familiaris* - 1 at Foz de Binies (1/10)

**Short-toed Treecreeper** *Certhia brachydactyla* - Singles at Monasterio de San Juan de la Pena on 30/5 and 5/6. (2/10)

**Golden Oriole** *Oriolus oriolus* - Small numbers heard singing but the only one seen flew across the E90 on 29/5 (8/10)

**Red-backed Shrike** *Lanius collurio* - Quite common in the Pyrenees. We saw a total of 12+ (4/10)

**Southern Grey Shrike** *Lanius meridionalis* - Relatively small numbers on the Zaragoza Plains (4/10)

**Woodchat Shrike** *Lanius senator* - Surprisingly scarce with just singles at Santa Engracia and Candasnos/Ballobar triangle (3/10)

**Jay** *Garrulus glandarius* (3/10)

**Magpie** *Pica pica* (10/10)

**Chough** *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* - Common in Pyrenees with flocks of up to 40 seen. Widespread in small numbers (usually pairs) on Zaragoza Plains (9/10)

**Alpine Chough** *Pyrrhocorax graculus* - Disappointingly small numbers in Pyrenees. Up to half a dozen together seen at Astun and Portalet, plus 2 in upper Hecho Valley. (3/10)

**Jackdaw** *Corvus monedula* (4/10)

**Carrion Crow** *Corvus corone corone* (7/10)

**Raven** *Corvus corax* (10/10)

**Spotless Starling** *Sturnus unicolor* (9/10)

**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* (10/10)

**Rock Sparrow** *Petronia petronia* - Widespread in small numbers. Seen at most sites. (5/10)

**Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs* (9/10)

**Serin** *Serinus serinus* - Particularly abundant (10/10)

**Greenfinch** *Carduelis chloris* (6/10)

**Goldfinch** *Carduelis carduelis* (9/10)

**Citrel Finch** *Serinus citrinella* - Common and easily seen at most sites in the Pyrenees. Monasterio de San Juan de la Pena especially favoured with family parties of up to 20 around the picnic tables (6/10)

Siskin *Carduelis spinus* (2/10)  
 Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* (8/10)  
 Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* - Small flock at Oroel on 3/6 (1/10)  
 Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* (3/10)  
 Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* (4/10)  
 Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus* - Quite common in the Pyrenees (4/10)  
 Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* - Surprisingly, a single male in the upper Hecho Valley on 31/5 was our only sighting (1/10)  
 Ortolan Bunting *Emberiza hortulana* - A singing male at Larues/Bagues on 5/6 (1/10)  
 Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra* (7/10)

We also saw Chamois, Marmots and Red Squirrels in the Pyrenees.

Comparison with previous visit by Dave Thexton and Derek McAlone in July 1999.

A previous visit by DT and DM covering roughly the same itinerary, though in mid-summer, produced the following differences in species lists:

**Species seen in 1999 but not 2002:**

Great Crested Grebe Sandpiper	Lesser Kestrel Penduline Tit	Green
Black-necked Grebe Marsh Tit	Coot	Subalpine Warbler
Greylag Goose	Lapwing	Dartford Warbler
Ruddy Duck	Wood Sandpiper	Fan-tailed Warbler

**Species seen in 2002 but not 1999:**

Squacco Heron Lark	Stock Dove Firecrest	Dupont's
Black Vulture Wagtail	Great Spotted Cuckoo Wallcreeper	Yellow
Hen Harrier Accentor	Scops Owl S.T. Treecreeper	Alpine
Peregrine Dunnock	Red-necked Nightjar Siskin	
Little Bustard Warbler	Wryneck Crossbill	Orphean
Great Bustard	Black Woodpecker	Whitethroat

Clearly 2002 yielded more species than 1999, as might be expected when comparing a late spring visit with a mid-summer trip. However, the lists do not take into account the overall abundance of birds, with some of the species on this

year's list being single bird sightings on one day only. The overall impression was that we saw more birds in total, including many fledged juveniles and family parties, on the July trip, with better weather conditions (though very hot). For example, the sky seemed full of raptors and vultures in July with 12 Lammergeier sightings compared to only 7 this time and many more Short-toed Eagles. On the other hand, the near-absence of song in July meant that it was much more difficult to locate some of the more elusive species and this accounted for many of the discrepancies in the two lists. Another factor in the higher species total achieved this time would undoubtedly be the experience gained on the previous trip enabling us to concentrate on the more productive areas located last time. Does a longer list outweigh the sheer enjoyment of seeing a superabundance of birds in fantastic weather? That's clearly a matter of personal preference. However, this is obviously a wonderful area and, with the advent of low-cost travel and simple organisation, it is always going to be tempting to repeat these trips.