

Birding trip report from North Eastern Spain

23.04. – 04.05.2019



Upper Ebro near Alborge (Aragon)



Greater Flamingo in the Ebro Delta (Catalonia)

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Why North East Spain?

For my 50th birthday I got as a present a financial contribution for a birding trip. A destination within Europe was within my budget. I wanted to have as much birding time as possible within a limited time window of about one and half week in spring. Due to expectable more or less stable and dry weather conditions I favoured the Mediterranean region which kept for me a good array of species I had not seen before. I finally did research in the internet for literature and other sources about descriptions of birding itineraries, which were as detailed as possible to allow efficient birding. Latter meant for me on the one hand to see as many lifers as possible or species which I had seen in my lifetime only once more than 20 years ago, but on the other hand still to have enough time for detailed observations (no bird race).

As a result of my research I decided for North Eastern Spain, particularly the provinces of Catalonia and Aragon. For this region I found good descriptions of itineraries covering many of my target species, with emphasis on the steppe birds and raptors (see below).

For preparation I made a cross table with my target species opposite to all sites and itineraries where my targets – according to the sources – should occur on a more or less regular basis. With this background I compiled my own trip bearing in mind not to spend too much time on the road. So I realized for example, that I had to restrict the Pyrenees on only one site where to get the Lammergeier for sure (one of my high priority species), whereas getting my alpine targets (wallcreeper, a lifer though, but long long ago; ptarmigans and grouses) would probably had turned out to be too time consuming with still uncertain success. I felt that the Pyrenees were rather a birding destination on its own.

Literature and other sources

Ernest Garcia & Michael Rebane (2017): *Where to Watch Birds in Northern & Eastern Spain*. ISBN: 9781472936752, Edition: 3, Paperback. <https://www.nhbs.com/where-to-watch-birds-in-northern-eastern-spain-book>.

The book covers Spain except Extremadura and Andalucia. Probably now the up-to-date standard for the area. Gives good descriptions and informations, however, the itineraries could be in my opinion more detailed with respect to where to find specific birds within the particular birding site or along the described trails and roads, respectively.

Birdinginspain.com

<https://www.birdinginspain.com/birding-sites-and-itineraries-in-ne-spain.php>

Webpage run by Steve West, a tour operator, offering guided birding tours, especially in NE Spain. It is remarkable that a tour operator gives rich informations of more than 25 birding sites with detailed descriptions of one or several itineraries within each site. Often, it is described, so to say, at which corner along the itinerary one should see which birds. The descriptions leave a bit the optimistic impression that one could tick all the target species within a relatively small amount of time, which of course is only rarely the case. However, the descriptions draw your attention to certain habitats or parts along the itinerary which is very helpful in the search for particular species.

For me, this webpage was my first hand source of information to plan my trip. All the sites described are also covered by Garcia & Rebane. Latter covers even more sites though, but the sites covered by both sources are the main sites one will concentrate on during a birding trip with a limited time budget, anyway. On the other hand Garcia & Rebane seem to be a bit more up-to-date. Whereas Birdinginspain.com describes the Dupont Lark as distinct in Catalonia after it vanished from its last breeding grounds south of Lleida, Garcia & Rebane report the recolonization of this area by the Dupont Lark since 2015. This was confirmed by a local Spanish birder I met during my trip.

Ornitho.cat

www.ornitho.cat

Back home from my trip I discovered ornitho.cat in the internet, a data bank in which every registered person can enter its observation. It is equivalent to the German version ornitho.de. One can login in ornitho.cat with email-address and password used for ornitho.de and start the search engine to screen the data bank for species and sites.

Itinerary overview

Date	Site (AR+Nr or CAT+Nr = site code according <i>Garcia & Rebane</i> ; only Nr = site code according <i>birdinginspain.com</i>)	Accommodation
23.04.2019	Arrival at Barcelona airport, drive to Ebro Delta by rental car	Càmping L'Eucaliptus, Carrer Eucaliptus, 43870 Amposta
24.04.2019	Ebro Delta (CAT 9) South (1)	Càmping L'Eucaliptus, Carrer Eucaliptus, 43870 Amposta
25.04.2019	Ebro Delta (CAT 9) North (2)	Hostal Monasterio de Rueda, Joaquín Costa 17, 50780 Sagunto
26.04.2019	Monegros (AR 13), Bujaraloz itinerary (7), in particular Laguna la Playa and surroundings, and cliffs at the river Ebro close to Alborge	Hostal Monasterio de Rueda, Joaquín Costa 17, 50780 Sagunto
27.04.2019	Belchite Steppes, El Planeron (AR 12; 6)	Hostal Monasterio de Rueda, Joaquín Costa 17, 50780 Sagunto
28.04.2019	Belchite Steppes, El Planeron (AR 12; 6); Monegros (AR 13), from Candanos to Alcolea (8)	Hostal Sant Miquel, Ctra. de Tremp 2, 25600 Balaguer
29.04.2019	Drylands of Lleida, itinerary Bellmunt and Belianes (10) Itinerary Alfés (CAT 7; 10)	Hostal Sant Miquel, Ctra. de Tremp 2, 25600 Balaguer
30.04.2019	Drylands of Lleida, itinerary Alfés (CAT 7; 10) itinerary Bellmunt and Belianes, in particular Montgai (10)	Hostal Apolo XI, Av. Sudiera 34, 22330 Ainsa
01.05.2019	Ainsa: Revilla mirador (Lammergeier) and Anisclo gorge (21; AR 4), and Buerba	Hostal Apolo XI, Av. Sudiera 34, 22330 Ainsa
02.05.2019	Cap de Creus (CAT 3; 15)	Camping at Alfés
03.05.2019	Drylands of Lleida, itinerary Alfés and Castellanos (CAT 7; 10) itinerary Bellmunt and Belianes, in particular Montgai (10)	Drive to Barcelona
04.05.2019	Departure from Barcelona airport	

Day by Day report with comments to target species and itinerary

23.04.2019

I arrived at Barcelona airport at 6 PM and picked up my rental car at Sixt located at terminal 1 and 2, where I made my reservation via the ADAC a couple of months in advance. The reservation I made, was for the smallest categorie (Ford Ka or similar with 2 doors) and I received a Opel Corsa with 4 doors for the same price (289 € for 12 days). Good deal.

I started from the airport at 8 PM and arrived at the Campground of L'Eucaliptus at 10:30 PM. I got in touch with the campground two or three weeks in advance via email telling them that I might arrive at their place after the opening hours of the reception desk. In response to my request the operator arranged a check in via the restaurant of the campground which is directly opposite to the reception and still open after closing time. Everything worked out fine and I had a place to put up my tent and even got something to eat in the restaurant.

Actually, I also had asked the other two campgrounds in the Ebro Delta about check in conditions for late arrivals, but the L'Eucaliptus was the only one who answered. In retrospect, it was a good choice, nice and clean campground, reasonable prices (17,50 € per night for 1 person, tent and car) and very close to the next observation sites.

24.04.2019 (Ebro Delta South) / 25.04.2019 (Ebro Delta North)

In the Ebro Delta my focus was definitely on finding Collared Pratincole, Purple Swamphen and the Iberian Yellow Wagtail as lifers and Thin-billed Gull, Audouin's Gull, Gull-billed Tern and Moustached Warbler as long-time-not-seen-birds. So I did not pay special attention to find waders, herons and other terns. However, it is really nice

birding in the Ebro Delta and the region actually deserves more time to spend there than the less than two days I did, let alone to bird all sites thoroughly, which I couldn't. You can see many interesting species with relatively ease, get very close-up views, especially along the rice fields and might have good chances for rarities especially during migration.

From my above mentioned target species I only missed the Moustached Warbler. However, due to strong winds it wasn't a good time during my stay for finding warblers in the reeds and for songbirds in general, respectively. I also didn't find any Crested Coot, which are supposed to be sometimes at El Garxal. Among the hundreds of Coots I saw none of them I could turn into a Crested. However, as a compensation, I discovered two to three individuals of the Lesser Flamingo at La Tancada and L'Encanyissada (Ebro Delta South), which are in Spain now-a-days generally recognized as genuine visitors from Africa.

Almost each of the special birding sites in the Ebro Delta are equipped with observation platforms (s. map in Garcia & Rebane). But those hardly protect against strong winds. Only at Riet Vell is a real hide from a birder's perspective, allowing very nice close-up views on waders and shorebirds, snipes, Purple Swamphens and others from a protected place.

Following bird species of special interest were seen during the two days. For the site names see the itineraries described in Birdinginspain.com and Garcia & Rebane.

Cattle egret	
Little egret	
Great egret	
Purple heron	
Glossy ibis	very common on the rice fields
Greater flamingo	most abundant at La Tancada and L'Encanyissada
Lesser flamingo	one individual at La Tancada, two individuals at L'Encanyissada
Red-crested pochard	many at the mouth of the Ebro into the Mediterranean Sea
Purple swamphen	relatively shy on the rice fields, but abundant at Riet Vell (Ebro Delta South), where you can have nice close-up views from a hide; also fairly abundant on the rice fields around Les Olles in the north
Black-winged stilt	common on rice fields and at the lagoons
Avocet	
Collared Pratincole	15 individuals on a dry and unplanted rice field south of L'Encanyissada and 2 individuals likewise on a dry rice field in the north. Obviously still on migration, since I didn't see any pratincoles on their alleged breeding grounds on the saltflats at La Tancada in the south or at El Garxal in the north.
Kentish plover	abundant at the saltflats at La Tancada
Black-tailed godwit	
Curlew	
Redshank	
Common sandpiper	
Jack snipe	great close-up view from the hide at Riet Vell
Knot	
Little stint	
Temminck's stint	
Dunlin	
Curlew sandpiper	
Ruff	
Audouin's gull	nearly exclusively seen in the south, very abundant on the saltmarshes south of La Tancada and in the evening along the rice fields
Slender-billed gull	nearly exclusively seen in the north at the southern border of el Fangar and on the rice fields around Les Olles; also at El Calaixos at the southern banks of the Ebro
Yellow-legged gull	
Whiskered tern	common along the rice fields

Gull-billed tern	less common, but regular along the rice fields
Caspian tern	4 individuals at L'Encanyissada
Common tern	
Little tern	some individuals south of La Tancada
Scops owl	heard at the campground
Hoopoe	
Lesser short-toed lark	2 individuals on the salt vegetation north of La Tancada and one heard at El Garxal in the north
Iberian Yellow wagtail	one individual at la Tancada and one at Riet Vell
Woodchat shrike	one pair at El Garxal
Savi's warbler	reeds at Les Olles
Great reed warbler	reeds at Les Olles
Fan-tailed warbler	salt vegetation north of La Tancada
Reed bunting ssp. witherbyi	one individual at L'Encanyissada
Spotless starling	very common



Slender-billed Gull



Collared Pratincole



Lesser Flamingo



After finishing the Ebro Delta I headed to the steppes of Aragon. On the way one may stop at the natural park of Els Ports (CAT 8, 3) or the Cardo Massif (4), both mountainous areas, but I ran out of time and it was raining in the mountains that day, anyway.

After a 2,5 hours drive I arrived in my hostel in Sagasto (nice, clean rooms, 30-35 Euro the night), where I stayed the next three nights. Sagasto is located at the river Ebro and strategically a good base, since very close to the next observation sites of Los Monegros and about a 30 minutes drive to El Planeron near Belchite. There is only one pitfall: There is no supermarket in Sagasto, and the only restaurant, which is run by the hostel, offers food only until 8 PM.

26.04.2019 (Monegros, Bujaraloz itinerary)

I started by driving up the hillsides of the Ebro valley and reached before sunrise the Laguna la Playa, a huge salt lake, but almost completely dried out at that time of the year. The combination of saltflats and scrubby salt vegetation were especially good for Lesser short-toed Larks and some other sought-after species (Pied-eared Wheatear, Tawny Pipit), the adjacent cereal fields for Calandra Lark. After birding the first morning hours I returned to the car, took the road back to Sagasto and took the first turn to the left. From here I followed different gravel roads leading in an expanded way around the Laguna la Playa and to another, but smaller salt lake, Laguna Pinto. The area is dominated by agricultural land with stony fields. A gps-based mobile phone (or equivalent) for orientation is recommended. The density of Calandra Larks was remarkable (as common as

skylarks in Germany). From time to time I ran into old, partly ruined farm buildings and walls made of stone, which I checked especially for Rock Sparrow, Kestrels and Little Owls.

Sometime in the afternoon I found my way back to the Bujaraloz-Sastago road. At a junction about half way between Laguna la Playa and Sastago I turned right and followed a minor winding road down the hillsides to Alborge, a little town at the river Ebro, just a few of kilometers upstream from Sastago. The hillsides are dominated by rocky formations and invite for birding, but there are only very few clear opportunities to stop along the narrow winding road.

After reaching the valley floor and having Alborge already in view I stopped before a little bridge crossing a small creek (Barranco de Pozas) which runs into the Ebro. I parked the car and headed leftside of the road to follow a hiking trail which leads downstream the river Ebro to Sastago. The hiking trail follows a huge meander of the Ebro (see front page) and is accompanied by steep, long stretched cliff formations (spectacular scenery) harbouring different cliff nesting bird species.

Following birds of special interest I found that day:

Black kite	along winding road down to Alborge and up to 5 individuals at Ebro at Alborge
Red kite	farmland
Egyptian vulture	one pair at cliffs of Alborge
Griffon vulture	some birds along cliffs at Alborge
Short-toed eagle	along winding road down to Alborge
Marsh harrier	farmland
Peregrine	one individual at cliffs of Alborge
Red-legged partridge	farmland
Kentish plover	on the salflats at Laguna la Playa
Little owl	two individuals in association with an old wall on farmland
European bee-eater	several at river Ebro at Alborge
Hoopoe	at Laguna la Playa
Wryneck	riverine forest along river Ebro at Alborge
Calandra lark	very common on the cereal fields in the expanded surroundings of Laguna La Playa and Pinto
Short-toed lark	fairly rare; best seen on steppe-like stretches of stony fields
Lesser short-toed lark	saltflats of Laguna La Playa; regular in the expanded surroundings of Laguna La Playa and Pinto
Thekla Lark	very common on farmland
Crag martin	common at the cliffs near Alborge
Tawny pipit	one individual on saltflats of Laguna La Playa
Southern grey shrike	one individual along winding road down to Alborge
Nightingale	very common in the riverine forests along river Ebro at Alborge
Wheatear	farmland
Black-eared wheatear	one pair close at the saltflats of Laguna la Playa; occasional in the expanded surroundings; some males still with black, some already with white throat
Black wheatear	two territories along the cliffs near Alborge
Cetti's warbler	occasionally in the riverine forests along river Ebro at Alborge
Sardinian warbler	along winding road down to Alborge
Spectacled warbler	one individual along gravel road between Laguna la Playa and Pinto
Corn bunting	regular on farmland
Rock sparrow	4 individuals in association with ruined farm building between Laguna la Playa and Pinto
Chough	regular, especially in association with ruined farm buildings



Laguna la Playa



Thekla Lark



Down the hillsides to Alborge



Lesser short-toed Lark

27./ 28.04.2019 Belchite Steppes of El Planeron

After a drive of a bit more than 30 min from Sastago I arrived at El Planeron at early dawn, i.e. around one hour before sunrise. El Planeron is a SEO-Birdlife reserve famous for its relatively high density of Dupont's Larks. Along the road between Quinto and Belchite there are two signposted entrances to the reserve. Coming from Quinto I took the second track, since from here the itinerary starts described in birdinginspain.com.

After following the track for about 1 km I stopped and waited the dawn chorus of the Dupont's Lark to begin. I could hear several birds singing, but could't manage to see one. After sunrise I explored the reserve. It is a mosaic of stretches with typical steppe vegetation and scattered fields of less intensively used agricultural fields. The fields were planted with cereal or just consisted of bare soil.

In El Planeron I observed a similar array of species as in Monegros the day before (all other lark species, wheatears, shrikes). But in addition I found some “big ones” as the sandgrouse (only in flight), stone curlews and even dotterels on migration. Especially, the latter two species were associated with the agricultural fields of bare soil. So it's worthwhile to make several stops to scan the fields for these and other species.

At noon I interrupted birding to get some food in Belchite. I found a supermarket, entered it just 5 min before closure time at 1 PM to buy the most necessary food items. After that I visited the Lomaza reserve which is about 10 km north of Belchite. It is not accessible by car. I walked in for a kilometre or two but didn't find many birds (some larks, Thekla and Lesser short-toed). But this was obviously due to the wrong day time. Since the Lomaza reserve consists more or less exclusively of pure steppe land, a longer hike during the early morning hours might be much more productive.

In the afternoon I returned to El Planeron. After leaving Belchite one passes through several olive groves. I stopped twice to check the groves for Orpheus Warblers as suggested in birdingspain.com. At each stop I had one or two singing individuals, so Olive groves are obviously a good place to look for this species. On my way back to El Planeron I also had Booted Eagle on two occasions between Belchite and the small village of Codo.

El Planeron also has a very small pond with a hide. I spent the last two daylight hours in the hide hoping to see sandgrouse on the ground when they come to drink. But I had no success. I left the reserve at the other entrance, hearing this time the dusk chorus of the Dupont's Lark.

The next morning I visited El Planeron again and arrived at the hide before sunrise hoping to have more luck with the sandgrouse. Also at this corner of El Planeron I could hear the Dupont's Lark. But except of a water rail coming out of the reeds and a bathing Lesser short-toed Lark nothing showed up.

I birded the next morning hours and wanted to leave the reserve when I met two Dutch birders I already met the day before. They already spent some hours at that place and were lucky to observe Dupont's Larks during their song flight. Fortunately, we could observe another Dupont's Lark during its song flight although it was already later in the morning. During the song flight the Dupont's Lark is difficult to tell apart from the other lark species (except from the song, which is, however, difficult to assign to a particular bird when you see and hear several different lark species during song flight at the same time). But at the end of the song flight it falls down to the ground like a stone which is obviously a typical behaviour of the Dupont's Lark as I was told by a Spanish birder some days later. The Dutch and me didn't know of this behaviour before, and it might prove as another way to see this enigmatic species even later on in the morning as to scan for it in early dawn on the ground.

Following birds of special interest I saw in the Belchite steppes:

Black kite	
Griffon vulture	
Short-toed eagle	
Marsh harrier	
Booted eagle	on two occasions along the road between Belchite and Codo
Red-legged partridge	
Water rail	at the pond
Common Moorhen	at the pond
Stone curlew	2 individuals on a field of bare soil
Dotterel	4 individuals in breeding plumage on a field of bare soil
Pin-tailed sandgrouse	seen up to 4 individuals a couple of times in flight; identified by call and colouration of underside
Black-bellied sandgrouse	only heard
Alpine swift	
European bee-eater	
Calandra lark	common
Short-toed lark	seen and heard a few times
Lesser short-toed lark	high density
Dupont's lark	commonly heard at dawn and dusk, seen one individual during song flight
Thekla Lark	common
Southern grey shrike	one territory
Woodchat shrike	one territory
Black-eared wheatear	two territories

Western Orphean warbler	some territories in the olive groves near Belchite
Spectacled warbler	one territory
Chough	in associaton with an old farm house



Spaghetti-Western scenery of El Planeron

28.04.2019 (Monegros, from Candanos to Alcolea)

After leaving the Belchite steppes I headed to the Lleida region where I booked a hostel in Balaguer. On my way to Lleida I crossed the Monegros region in the hope to come along with some additional raptor species I missed so far (especially Lesser Kestrel). First, I took the road from Sagunto to Bujaraloz. I saw several Kestrels but none qualified itself as a Lesser Kestrel. At least, south of Bujaraloz I had another Short-toed Eagle flying overhead. Then, I followed parts of the Candanos-Alcolea-itinerary described in Birdinginspain.com. North of Candanos, just after crossing the railway track I saw three Golden Eagles soaring over the westerly located hills (as described in the itinerary). In addition Alpine Swifts. Then, I crossed stretches of steppelike drylands, which I didn't explore further, because of lack of time and the wrong day time. In Alcolea, I turned into the road to Chalamera. Just after the exit of Alcolea, the right roadside is accompanied by spectacular steep cliffs with many crevices and smaller caves. I stopped and saw among several jackdaws Alpine Swifts and two pairs of kestrels. One individual aroused my interest because I meant to see gray patches on the upper wing. I was just about getting my scope out of the car, when two policemen came by telling me to leave immediately, because stopping there is too dangerous on the narrow road. I had to admit that the policemen were not completely wrong with their judgement (although there were almost no traffic), so I left that place and fortunately found after less than 1 km a trail leading to the small river which runs parallel to the road. There, I could leave my car and hiked back besides the road, i.e. beyond the barriers along the road at the foot of the steeper embankments (thus, not being visible from the road because I didn't want to draw the attention of eventually returning policemen anymore). After my return to the cliffs I found the kestrels again and indeed, one pair turned out to be a pair of Lesser Kestrels. I had excellent scope views of both sexes of both in flight and sitting in front of a smaller cave. It was a steadily alternate come and go of both birds, every time returning to the same cave. After about one hour of observation the pair left into the direction of Alcolea, where I could see in the farther distance an old church with a tower. So, I wasn't sure if the Kestrels really had their breeding site in the cliffs.

Actually, it turned out that at Alcolea was my only observation of the Lesser Kestrel. All other kestrels I had seen the days before or I would see the following days around Lleida had been the Common Kestrel.

After this fabulous tick I drove via Fraga and Lleida to Balaguer where I stayed the following two nights in the Hostal Sant Miquel (30 Euro the night).

Short-toed eagle	south of Bujaraloz
Golden eagle	3 individuals (1 first summer, 2 immat.) north of Candasnos after crossing the railway track soaring over the sierra west of the road
Lesser kestrel	one pair in the cliffs along the Alcolea-Chalamera road
Alpine swift	north of Candasnos after crossing the railway track soaring over the sierra west of the road; in the cliffs along the Alcolea-Chalamera road
Cetti's warbler	at the Alcolea-Chalamera road along the trail leading to the parallel running river



Cliffs along the Alcolea-Chalamera road

29./ 30.04.2019 (Bellmunt and Belianes)

The Bellmunt and Belianes area consists mainly of farmland (mostly with cereal) and scattered rocky outcrops with garrigue vegetation. It is supposed to harbour a relatively high density of the Little Bustard. It was also said that Roller and Greater-spotted Cuckoo occur on a regular basis. I reached this area after a less than 15 min drive from my hostel. I followed the track described in Birdinginspain.com crossing the area from west to east until Bellmunt d'Urgeil.

That day I found none of my main targets in this area. I saw most of the Mediterranean species I found the days before in the Monegros and Belchite steppes, and at least two more lifers. Bonelli's Warblers had been very common in the small patches of pine woods. A bit surprising for me, because I expected this species only to occur in the mountains and not in the steppes. In the Garrigue islands I especially looked for warblers and was rewarded with extensive views on a pair of Western Subalpine Warbler.

Fortunately, the next morning I met a Spanish birder south of Lleida. He confirmed the high density of Little Bustards in the Bellmunt area and wondered that I hadn't seen one. He also described me a place near Montgai where to find Rollers more or less for sure. So I returned to the Bellmunt area in the early afternoon and drove directly to Montgai to find the rollers. In the east of this village is a pig farm and at the outer building several nest boxes have been installed (41°47'33.7"N 0°55'46.9"E). Two pairs of rollers were supposed to breed there.

Tracking the roller wasn't an easy job, though. I arrived at 1 PM, in the heat of noon and couldn't discover any roller activities at the nest boxes. I saw jackdaws, a Common Kestrel and even a pair of Stock Doves exploring the nest boxes, but no roller for the next three hours. I could further hear the silent „treck treck“ of Little Bustards in the adjacent cereal fields, however didn't manage to see them. At least, I learned that there were indeed Bustards also in the Bellmunt area.

But then, in total three rollers appeared hunting in the closer surroundings or sitting on exposed bushes or rocks. No clue where they came from. Within the next two hours I saw only once a roller flying into a nest box but leaving it after some seconds.

Some days later (03.05.19) I returned to Montgai again, but in the later afternoon, to finish my birding trip. It was the same situation, three rollers in the closer vicinity, but none at the nest boxes. So it seemed to me that they didn't really use the nest boxes for breeding, but at least rollers appear to be regular at that place.

Birds of special interest in the Bellmunt area:

Griffon vulture	
Hobby	
Little bustard	only heard in cereal fields close to Montgai
Stock dove	a pair at a farm building west of Montgai
Alpine swift	
Common roller	3 individuals close to a farm building west of Montgai
Hoopoe	
Calandra lark	
Thekla Lark	
Wood lark	
Woodchat shrike	
Wheatear	
Grasshopper warbler	
Western Orphean warbler	2-3 singing individuals in association with pine woods
Sardinian warbler	
Western Subalpine warbler	one pair at a patch of Garrigue
Western Bonelli's warbler	common in patches of pine woods
Corn bunting	widespread and common
Spotless starling	



Farmland with rocky outcrops in the Bellmunt and Belianes area

29./ 30.04./ 03.05.2019 (Drylands south of Lleida near Alfés)

I visited the drylands near Alfés three times: In the afternoon after my first visit to the Bellmunt area, the next morning and at my last birding day after coming back from Cap de Creus (see below). Each time I followed the Alfés itinerary described in Birdinginspain.com. The itinerary finished at the road from Aspa to Castellldans. The drylands before Castellldans are called Mas de Melons. One can follow signposted tracks leading to hiking areas.

The drylands south of Lleida turned out to be much more productive than the Bellmunt area. On the last day I even found the roller between Aspa and Castellldans as described in the itinerary. The core region is a former aerodrome which is now under protection as a SEO reserve. There, I saw Little Bustards, Pin-tailed Sandgrouses, Greater Spotted Cuckoo and others. In recent years the aerodrome has been recolonized by the Dupont's Lark again and has been recorded by the already above mentioned Spanish birder those days in the western parts of the reserve.

Spotting the Little Bustards was still a challenge. During my first visit in the afternoon I could only hear the silent „treck treck“ coming out of the fairly low vegetation, but which is apparently still high enough to conceal the birds. I was successful in the first day light hour of the next morning. After walking along the trails on the aerodrome for about an hour up to four bustards (2 males, 2 females) flew up and flew longer circles so that they could be observed even through the spotting scope. It was the same when I returned to this place some days later.

Following birds of special interest I saw near Alfés:

Short-toed eagle	one individual in the Mas de Melons area
Marsh harrier	one male flying over the steppelike fields of the aerodrome
Montagu's harrier	one male flying over the steppelike fields of the aerodrome
Red-legged partridge	in association with the riverine woods along the Canal d'Urgeil
Little bustard	2 males and 2 females in flight (longer circles) over the aerodrome; one male flushed along a trail south of the autobahn A2
Stone curlew	2 individuals on the aerodrome; 2 individuals on farmland south of the autobahn A2
Pin-tailed sandgrouse	up to 15 individuals seen several times in flight over the steppelike fields of the aerodrome
Great spotted cuckoo	one adult individual in association with the pinewoods at the southern edge of the aerodrome; one adult and one juvenile along the Aspa-Castellldans road crossing the drylands of Mas de Melons
Scops owl	1 individual calling in the pinewoods close to Canal d'Urgeil
Red-necked nightjar	2 individuals calling in the pinewoods close to Canal d'Urgeil
European bee-eater	on the steppelike fields of the aerodrome; common along the Aspa-Castellldans road crossing the Mas de Melons area
Common roller	one individual along the Aspa-Castellldans road crossing the Mas de Melons area, on a telegraph wire
Hoopoe	in association with the pinewoods close to Canal d'Urgeil
Wryneck	in association with the riverine woods along the Canal d'Urgeil
Iberian Green woodpecker	in association with the riverine woods along the Canal d'Urgeil, only heard
Calandra lark	common on the steppelike fields of the aerodrome
Short-toed lark	one individual on the steppelike fields of the aerodrome
Dupont's lark	in the western parts of the aerodrome, not accessible by car
Thekla Lark	common on the steppelike fields of the aerodrome
Red-rumped swallow	one individual over the farmland south of the autobahn A2; one individual in the Mas de Melons area
Southern grey shrike	one territory in association with the pinewoods at the southern edge of the aerodrome
Woodchat shrike	one territory in association with the pinewoods at the southern edge of the aerodrome; one territory in the Mas de Melons area
Nightingale	in association with the riverine woods along the Canal d'Urgeil
Black-eared wheatear	one individual along the Aspa-Castellldans; one pair in the Mas de Melons area
Cetti's warbler	in association with the riverine woods along the Canal d'Urgeil
Melodious warbler	in association with the riverine woods along the Canal d'Urgeil
Sardinian warbler	in association with the riverine woods along the Canal d'Urgeil

Western Bonelli's warbler	few individuals in the pinewoods just north of the autobahn A2
Cirl bunting	in association with the riverine woods along the Canal d'Urgeil
Golden oriole	in association with the riverine woods along the Canal d'Urgeil



Dryland on the former aerodrome near Alfés



Farmland south of the autobahn A2



Mas de Melons

01.05.2019 (Revilla and Anisclo gorge)

After ticking the roller at Montgai in the afternoon the day before I headed to Ainsa in the Pyrenees, the eastern gateway to Ordesa National Park. I stayed in the Hostal Apolo for the next two nights (30 Euro per night, in a small but clean room). My main motivation to go to the Pyrenees had been to see Lammergeiers and the mountains north of Ainsa should prove to be an ideal place to do so. First, it is supposed to have the highest density of this species in its European range. Second, with Revilla exists an outstanding viewpoint allowing excellent views over the Escuin gorge and neighbouring mountain walls.

From Ainsa to Revilla it is about 30 km. However, it takes some time to get there. After leaving the main road the last 12 km follow a steep and winding road. At the end of the road is a parking place. From there one has to follow a sign posted hiking trail for about 20 to 30 min to reach the viewpoint.

I arrived at the viewpoint at about 10 AM and stayed there for at least 4 hours. Lammergeiers of different age stages (immatures and adults) showed up fairly soon. However, most of time I had only distant views but which I could compensate by using my spotting scope. During the 4 hours about on 5 occasions Lammergeiers also flew at lower heights and approached the viewpoint in a distance of less than 150 m. On one occasion an adult bird flew for about 10 min longer circles on eye level approaching the viewpoint in a distance of less than 30 m, filling out the view in the binoculars and allowing to see both the upper and underside of the bird.

I was very happy with my observations. However, I cannot judge if this was an average Lammergeier day, if this was a good Lammergeier day or if on a regular day one should have binocular filling views for most of the time and not only on one occasion.

Besides Lammergeiers I also saw two other vulture species as well as 5 species of birds of prey.

In the later afternoon I visited the Anisclo gorge. First, I followed a scenic road which runs through the gorge along the Rio Vello for about 12 km. It is a narrow one way road with only a few possibilities to stop. Driving up the gorge becomes narrower and narrower. On the last two kilometres the steep mountain walls come very close to the road inviting to screen the area for wallcreepers. For me without success. The only interesting bird I saw in the gorge had been a dipper.

At the very end of the road is a parking place, which is a starting point for hikes on signposted trails further along the gorge and the Rio Vello or in the surrounding mountains. I stayed there for only about 45 min, enjoying the landscape, but without seeing any interesting birdlife. The area surely deserves more exploration, but I was running out of day light and a thunderstorm with rain was approaching.

To return to Ainsa I followed the minor road bringing me first to Escalona. After about 3 km, close to the village Buerba I stopped again, since an overflying red-tailed bird attracted my attention. The landscape consisted of sheep pastures with rocky outcrops and thorny bushes. The bird turned out to be a female Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush. After some minutes the male showed up to mark its territory. I had very good close-up views on the male. I stayed there for the last day light hour and besides the Rock thrushes I also found Subalpine, Dartford and Orphean warbler.

See the following list of birds of special interest:

Honey buzzard	several dozens individuals migrating over the mountain tops at Revilla
Red kite	one individual seen from the viewpoint at Revilla
Egyptian vulture	4 individuals seen from the viewpoint at Revilla
Lammergeier	8-10 individuals (immatures and adults), more or less continuously seen from the viewpoint at Revilla
Griffon vulture	several birds; one pair with breeding site and chicks in the wall just opposite of of the viewpoint
Short-toed eagle	two individuals seen from the viewpoint at Revilla
Goshawk	one individual seen from the viewpoint at Revilla
Peregrine	one individual seen from the viewpoint at Revilla
Red-legged partridge	at Buerba
Alpine swift	few individuals seen from the viewpoint at Revilla
Iberian Green woodpecker	heard along the hike to the viewpoint and at the viewpoint calling from the gorge
Crag martin	few individuals breeding at walls one passes by when hiking to the viewpoint at Revilla
Dipper	Anisclo gorge
Rufous-tailed Rock thrush	one pair at Buerba
Western Orphean warbler	heard singing at Buerba
Western Subalpine warbler	one pair at Buerba
Dartford warbler	one individual at Buerba
Western Bonelli's warbler	one singing individual in the pine woods just at the viewpoint of Revilla
Firecrest	in the pine woods just at the viewpoint of Revilla
Crested tit	few individuals in the pine woods just at the viewpoint of Revilla



View into the Escuain gorge from the viewpoint Revilla

02.05.2019 (Cap de Creus)

I left Ainsa in the morning and headed to Cap de Creus, which was supposed to be my last birding destination on the trip. To get there took a 4 hour drive.

So far, I was still missing the Melodious Warber. Therefore, before I reached the autobahn I stopped somewhere at the Embalse del Crado where the habitat with its riverine forests seemed to be appropriate for this species. Fortunately, after about half an hour of search I was successful by finding one singing individual.

In the afternoon I arrived in the National Park Cap de Creus. My main motivation to get there was to do sea watching in order to tick the Balearic Shearwater. Therefore, I drove first directly to the lighthouse at the Cap de Creus. From there I hiked down the rocks to approach the easternmost point of the headland. I found a place which was protected against the winds and was soon rewarded by watching Balearic Shearwaters. It must have been 100+ individuals flying back and forth along the coast. On occasions groups of shearwaters approached the coastline in a distance of less than 50 m.

Besides Balearic Shearwaters I could find some Scopoli's Shearwaters, Gannets, Sandwich Terns and one Shag. See the following list:

Scopoli's shearwater	about 10 individuals
Balearic shearwater	>100 individuals
Gannet	3 individuals
Shag	one individual
Sandwich tern	few individuals

Originally, I had planned to stay at a campground and to visit other places in the National Park the next day. Targets would have been warblers and swifts and maybe Bonelli's Eagle. However, it was forecasted continuous rain with stormy wind for the next whole day. So, I left Cap de Creus after less than half a day and drove back to the Lleida area. After a three hours drive I arrived there at midnight, was at least rewarded by hearing Red-necked Nightjars and Scops Owl and birded the next day again the Alfés itinerary (with good views on Little Bustards and Pin-tailed Sandgrouses) and finished the trip with the Rollers at Montgai (see above).



Cap de Creus (on occasion shearwaters passed by between the cap and the small islet in the background)

		24./ 25.04.19	26.04.2019	27./ 28.04.19	28.04.2019	29./ 30.04.19	29./ 30.04./ 03.05.2019	01.05.2019	02.05.2019
		Ebro Delta	Monegros, Bujaraloz	El Planeron	Sastago- Bujaralos; Candasnos to Alcolea	Bellmunt and Belianes	Drylands south of Lleida near Alfés	Revilla and Anisclo gorge	Cap de Creus
Little grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	x							
Red-necked grebe	Podiceps grisegena								
Great crested grebe	Podiceps cristatus	x							
Black-necked grebe	Podiceps nigricollis								
Scopoli's shearwater	Calonectris diomedea diomedea								x
Balearic shearwater	Puffinus mauretanicus								x
Gannet	Morus bassanus								x
Common cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	x							
Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis								x
Cattle egret	Bubulcus ibis	x							
Little egret	Egretta garzetta	x							
Great egret	Casmerodius alba	x							
Purple heron	Ardea purpurea	x							
Grey heron	Ardea cinerea	x							
White stork	Ciconia ciconia	x		x					
Glossy ibis	Plegadis falcinellus	x							
Greater flamingo	Phoenicopterus ruber	x							
Lesser flamingo	Phoeniconaias minor	x							
Mute swan	Cygnus olor								
Common shelduck	Tadorna tadorna	x							
Gadwall	Anas strepera	x							
Teal	Anas crecca								
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	x							
Pintail	Anas acuta								

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		Ebro Delta	Monegros, Bujaraloz	El Planeron	Sastago- Bujaralos; Candasnos to Alcolea	Bellmunt and Belianes	Drylands south of Lleida near Alfés	Revilla and Anisclo gorge	Cap de Creus
Red-crested pochard	Netta rufina	x							
Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula								
Red-breasted merganser	Mergus serrator								
Goosander	Mergus merganser								
Osprey	Pandion haliaetus								
Honey buzzard	Pernis apivorus							x	
Black kite	Milvus migrans		x	x					
Red kite	Milvus milvus		x					x	
Egyptian vulture	Neophron percnopterus		x					x	
Lammergeier	Gypaetus barbatus							x	
Griffon vulture	Gyps fulvus		x	x		x		x	
Short-toed eagle	Circus gallicus		x	x	x		x	x	
Marsh harrier	Circus aeruginosus	x	x	x		x	x		
Montagu's harrier	Circus pygargus						x		
Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis							x	
Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus								
Common buzzard	Buteo buteo					x			
Golden eagle	Aquila chrysaetos				x				
Booted eagle	Aquila pennatus			x					
Lesser kestrel	Falco naumanni				x				
Common kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	x	x			x			
Hobby	Falco subbuteo					x			
Peregrine	Falco peregrinus		x					x	
Red-legged partridge	Alectoris rufa		x	x			x	x	

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		Ebro Delta	Monegros, Bujaraloz	El Planeron	Sastago- Bujaralos; Candasnos to Alcolea	Bellmunt and Belianes	Drylands south of Lleida near Alfés	Revilla and Anisclo gorge	Cap de Creus
Common quail	Coturnix coturnix		x			x			
Water rail	Rallus aquaticus	x		x					
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	x		x					
Purple swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio	x							
Common coot	Fulica atra	x							
Little bustard	Tetrax tetrax					x	x		
Black-winged stilt	Himantopus himantopus	x							
Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta	x							
Stone curlew	Burhinus oedicephalus			x			x		
Collared Pratincole	Glareola pratincola	x							
Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus								
Little ringed plover	Charadrius dubius	x							
Kentish plover	Charadrius alexandrinus	x	x						
Dotterel	Charadrius morinellus			x					
Black-tailed godwit	Limosa limosa	x							
Curlew	Numenius arquata	x							
Spotted redshank	Tringa erythropus								
Redshank	Tringa totanus	x							
Common sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	x							
Jack snipe	Lymnocyrtus minima	x							
Knot	Calidris canutus	x							
Little stint	Calidris minuta	x							
Temminck's stint	Calidris temminckii	x							
Dunlin	Calidris alpina	x							

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		Ebro Delta	Monegros, Bujaraloz	El Planeron	Sastago- Bujaralos; Candasnos to Alcolea	Bellmunt and Belianes	Drylands south of Lleida near Alfés	Revilla and Anisclo gorge	Cap de Creus
Curlew sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	x							
Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	x							
Audouin's gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>	x							
Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	x							
Slender-billed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>	x							
Yellow-legged gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	x							
Whiskered tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>	x							
Gull-billed tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	x							
Caspian tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	x							
Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	x							
Sandwich tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>								x
Little tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>	x							
Pin-tailed sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>			x			x		
Black-bellied sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>			x					
Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>					x			
Wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	x							
Turtle dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	x	x			x			
Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	x							
Great spotted cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>						x		
Common cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		x			x			
Scops owl	<i>Otus scops</i>	x					x		
Little owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		x						
Red-necked nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus ruficollis</i>						x		
Alpine swift	<i>Apus melba</i>			x	x	x		x	

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Common swift	Apus apus	x							
European bee-eater	Merops apiaster		x	x			x		
Common roller	Coracias garrulus					x	x		
Hoopoe	Upupa epops	x	x			x	x		
Wryneck	Jynx torquilla		x				x		
Great spotted woodpecker	Dendrocopus major								
Black woodpecker	Dryocopus martius								
Iberian Green woodpecker	Picus sharpei						x	x	
Calandra lark	Melanocorypha calandra		x	x		x	x		
Short-toed lark	Calandrella brachydactyla		x	x			x		
Lesser short-toed lark	Calandrella rufescens	x	x	x					
Dupont's lark	Chersophilus duponti			x			x		
Thekla Lark	Galerida theklae		x	x		x	x		
Wood lark	Lullula arborea					x			
Sand martin	Riparia riparia						x		
Crag martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris		x					x	
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	x							
Red-rumped swallow	Cecropis daurica						x		
House martin	Delichon urbicum						x	x	
Iberian Yellow wagtail	Motacilla flava iberiae	x							
White wagtail	Motacilla alba		x						
Tawny pipit	Anthus campestris		x						
Southern grey shrike	Lanius meridionalis			x			x		
Woodchat shrike	Lanius senator	x		x		x	x		

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		Ebro Delta	Monegros, Bujaraloz	El Planeron	Sastago- Bujaralos; Candasnos to Alcolea	Bellmunt and Belianes	Drylands south of Lleida near Alfés	Revilla and Anisclo gorge	Cap de Creus
Dipper	Cinclus cinclus							x	
Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes							x	
Dunnock	Prunella modularis							x	
Robin	Erithacus rubecula					x		x	
Nightingale	Luscinia megarhynchos	x	x			x	x		
Black redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros			x					
Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus	x		x					
Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra	x	x						
Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		x						
Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe		x	x		x			
Black-eared wheatear	Oenanthe hispanica		x	x			x		
Black wheatear	Oenanthe leucura		x						
Rufous-tailed Rock thrush	Monticola saxatilis							x	
Blackbird	Turdus merula					x			
Song thrush	Turdus philomelos								
Cetti's warbler	Cettia cetti		x		x		x		
Savi's warbler	Locustella luscinioides	x							
Grasshopper warbler	Locustella naevia					x			
Reed warbler	Acrocephalus scirpaceus	x							
Great reed warbler	Acrocephalus arundinaceus	x							
Melodious warbler	Hippolais polyglotta						x		
Western Orphean warbler	Sylvia hortensis			x		x		x	
Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla		x						
Whitethroat	Sylvia communis					x			

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Lesser whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>								
Sardinian warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		x			x	x		
Western Subalpine warbler	<i>Sylvia inornatus</i>					x		x	
Spectacled warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>		x	x					
Dartford warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>							x	
Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	x		x					
Western Bonelli's warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>					x	x	x	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>					x			
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>							x	
Fan-tailed warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	x							
Pied flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>						x		
Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>						x		
Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>							x	
Crested tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>							x	
Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>			x					
Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>							x	
Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>							x	
Taiga treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		x						
Corn bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		x			x			
Cirl bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>						x		
Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> ssp. <i>witherbyi</i>	x							
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			x		x			
Serín	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	x							
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	x							

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		Ebro Delta	Monegros, Bujaraloz	El Planeron	Sastago- Bujaralos; Candasnos to Alcolea	Bellmunt and Belianes	Drylands south of Lleida near Alfés	Revilla and Anisclo gorge	Cap de Creus
Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		x						
Linnet	Acanthis cannabina	x							
Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula							x	
Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes								
House sparrow	Passer domesticus	x							
Tree sparrow	Passer montanus	x							
Rock sparrow	Petronia petronia		x						
Spotless starling	Sturnus unicolor	x				x			
Golden oriole	Oriolus oriolus						x		
Jay	Garrulus glandarius					x			
Magpie	Pica pica	x							
Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax		x	x					
Jackdaw	Corvus monedula		x						
Raven	Corvus corax		x						