

**Trip Report.**

**Photography from Photo-Logistics hides in the Belchite plains and  
Solsona pre-Pyrenees of Spain and Catalunya.**

July 2019

**Mike May**



*Male Black-bellied Sandgrouse – the hide can be seen reflected in the bottom left of the water drop.....*

## About Photo Logistics.

As seems to be the norm around the Mediterranean, summers are becoming hotter and drier, reaching an uncomfortable peak in July. Dealing with the heat means birds are more dependent than ever on a consistent water supply at a time when broods are fledging, and the standing fresh water evaporates from a substantial part of their territories. Any well-maintained drinking pools therefore act as a magnet for all birds that would be normally widely dispersed and difficult to track down. Photo-logistics ([www.photo-logistics.com](http://www.photo-logistics.com)) maintains drinking pools in a vast network over north eastern Spain, with the greatest concentration being in the arid landscape of the Ebro Basin and the pre-Pyrenees in their home-town of Solsona – each set up with a specific range of species in mind. Photo-logistics is an organization that I have grown to admire and respect. Their well-designed hides offer great opportunities to get up close to a varied spectrum of the rich avifauna (and Mammals) of Spain whilst keeping to an absolute minimum any disturbance to the birds. At the same time, they work with local land-owners to allow birders to experience some spectacular species under unparalleled conditions and in so doing are helping turn the tide on the dominant recreational land use – hunting. The whole network is managed by passionate, knowledgeable and hard-working local guides in such an efficient way that all the client has to do is literally sit back and enjoy. The entire logistics of shepherding birders (not the best organized of species) to and from their rendezvous with their guide, real-time troubleshooting via Whats-App from the hide and organizing accommodation is seamlessly orchestrated by the ever-patient Carles Santana.

In response to my rough sketch of ideas, Carles quickly put together a mouth-watering mixture of sessions to see the birds that make the arid plains of Belchite famous, a day with Lammergeiers and then some drinking pools to get up close to some woodland passerines.

So, if you don't mind the modest discomfort of sitting in a wooden box in 35-40° C heat for hours without moving, the compensation can be enormous. This is a short account of how that unfolded.



## Belchite drinking pools

The star attractions here are the Sandgrouse with a rich supporting cast of Larks, Stone-Curlew and anything else in the area that may be trying to deal with the heat. Pick-up was organized for two 4 ½ hour sessions at two different drinking pools over 2 days on the 70-hectare property of Señor Raphael set up on arid land set aside from his Olive and organic wheat business. The sessions start at sunrise and end around 11.30 so as to capture the best light, peak bird activity and avoid the excessive afternoon heat. The hides are constructed so that the photographer is more or less on eye-level with the birds that come in to drink and so taking the perfect photo of some iconic species is more or less guaranteed. The amount of post-processing and cropping needed is minimal!

### Sandgrouse.

Both Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse were present at both pools throughout the entire morning, with Pin-tailed being more numerous. Birds would arrive in pairs or small groups giving their evocative calls and landing away from the pool before assembling in small groups to drink. The numbers seen indicate that the area supports a healthy population of these birds. The experience was unforgettable – normally views of either species are of a rapidly retreating speck on a blisteringly hot walk. Given that the entire area is composed of a patchwork of olive groves, wheat fields and arid xerophytic scrub, the number of birds present would indicate that the concept of biodiversity-friendly agriculture is alive and kicking. If more and more landowners can see value in having people from all over the world pay for the privilege of sitting on a corner of land they don't cultivate anyway, what a difference that would make to species conservation and general attitudes towards nature. Fragile populations of species such as Little Bustard or Montagu's Harrier would be the beneficiaries.



*Male Black-bellied Sandgrouse presumably wetting his belly feathers to take back to chicks.  
Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f9, 1/1000*



*Female Black-bellied Sandgrouse drinking. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 320, f8, 1/1250*



*Male Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 150, f8, 1/1250*





*Female Pin-tailed Sandgrouse. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 500, f8, 1/1250*

### **Larks.**

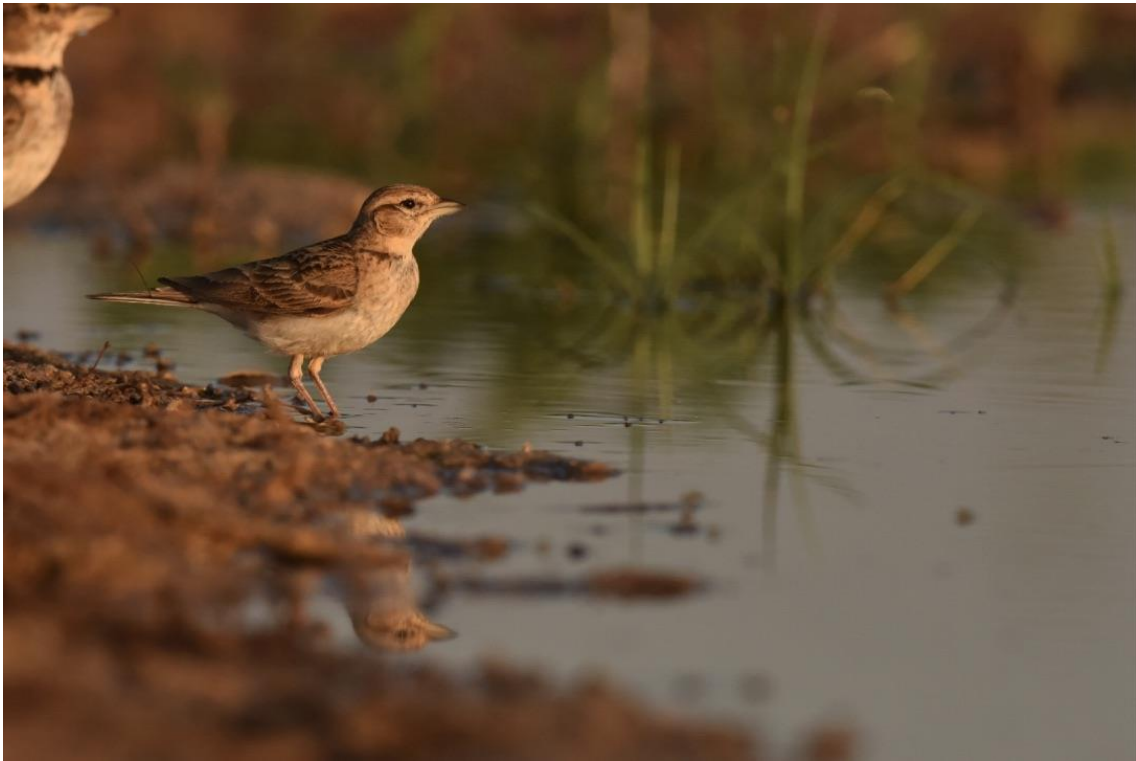
Belchite is famous for its population of Dupont's Lark – sadly none came, although Raphael says they do occasionally, and the pools are very close to their breeding territories. Calandra, Crested, Short-toed and Lesser Sort-toed were all abundant, many of them recently fledged. Given the numbers seen, the population of Lesser Short-toed here appears to be healthy which is encouraging given its patchy distribution in Spain. I had only once ever seen it well in Doñana.



*Fledgling Lesser-short-toed Lark. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 640, f8, 1/1000*



*Adult Lesser-short-toed Lark. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f8, 1/1000*



*Adult Short-toed Lark. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 1000, f8, 1/1000  
(Calandra Lark behind showing size difference)*



*Fledgling Short-toed Lark. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 640, f8, 1/1000*





*Moulting Adult Calandra Lark. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 500, f8, 1/1250*



*Adult Calandra Lark. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 500, f8, 1/640*



### **Other birds.**

Northern Wheatear, Rock Sparrow, Corn Bunting, Red-legged Partridge, Linnet, Greenfinch all photographed. A Green Sandpiper on migration stayed all morning. Some surprises were Red-billed Chough and Stock Dove.



*Stock Dove. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f8, 1/1000*



*Green Sandpiper. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f8, 1/1000*

## Stone Curlew

An unforgettable encounter in early morning light with one of the most charismatic of European birds. 5 birds in total.



*Stone Curlew. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 640, f8, 1/1000*



*Stone Curlew. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 640, f8, 1/1000*



## **Booted Eagle.**

A real treat was a Booted Eagle that dropped in right in front of the hide during the heat of the mid-morning. I saw it close its wings and stoop from height down to a wooden perch by the pool. Surprisingly, the Sandgrouse drinking there were completely unperturbed by its arrival and presence. The first picture is uncropped!



*Booted Eagle. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f9, 1/1000*



*Booted Eagle. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f9, 1/1000*



## **Torres de Segre.**

Close to Lleida is a wonderful patchwork of rocky hills and wetlands. The star attraction of the hills is Black Wheatears and the area holds about 2-3 pairs. I was taken to a hide to see them after the short 160km drive down from Belchite by Pau who was very knowledgeable about the birds of the area and optimistic about the opportunities for expanding the network of hides there. The Wheatear experience was stunning. On arrival at the site we saw two birds parachuting up and down the rock face on the thermals as they do. The hide itself is tiny with barely enough room to sit with the tripod. My only regret was that I really had the wrong lens. 200mm would have been enough, and a fantastic opportunity to capture an image of 5 fledglings with both parents was missed. The images shown are uncropped and right at the very limit of minimal focal distance.



*Male Black Wheatear. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f9, 1/1000*



*Female Black Wheatear. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f9, 1/1000*



*Fledgling Black Wheatear. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f9, 1/1000*

## Lammergeier Hide, Solsona

The Lammergeier population of the Pyrenees is strong, and a clear draw for birders coming from all over the world. I know of areas where they can almost be guaranteed at any time of the year but had always wanted to have “the perfect shot” of this incredible bird. I had tried at a hide in Bonansa with my family for two days in January in freezing weather, and not a single bird showed. The other hide of Photo-Logistics is near to Solsona, and I had the whole of the third day of my trip booked in there. The local guide, Joan Padró is highly knowledgeable of the area which is mostly comprised of undisturbed mid-altitude mixed forest, where there are also hides to see Black Woodpecker and Citril Finch. The hide itself is well equipped with a chemical toilet and space for three photographers and set on top of a small hill surrounded by scattered *Buxus* and *Juniperus* inhabited by a number of pairs of Red-backed Shrikes. Joan scattered a mixture of dead rabbits and sheep/goat legs in the short turf and explained that normally first to arrive were the Griffons followed a couple of hours later by Lammergeiers (if at all) of which there was a pair with a nest just to the North. Usually, the Lammergeiers had the habit of circling the area a few times, making their presence known to the photographer by their shadows and then circling lower with hopefully iconic photo-opportunities with the mountains behind as out-of focus backdrop. A small drinking pool (a Vulture-proof ceramic basin) had been sunk in the ground in front of the hide with perches set up nearby. Events happened largely as he had described – in fact the Griffons hardly waited for him to leave before landing en-masse in a frenzy. Once they had fed and squabbled, many of them dozed in the heat with their heads drooping and eyes closed. One young male took offence to his reflection in the glass of the hide and body-slammed it which was slightly unnerving. Others took to roosting on the roof of the hide. They were joined by a pair of Egyptian Vultures, and many of them came very close to drink briefly in the wash basin. Once they had flown off, a male Red-backed Shrike came to bathe in what was left of the water after the mob of Vultures had trashed it..... And then, 2 shadows circling the area meant the Lammergeiers had arrived, I presume the local pair. Again, a shorter lens (for the Shrike also), particularly for the flight shots (and a faster camera body – the D810 can only do 6fps) would have been valuable. The only very slight negative is that the Lammergeiers did not spend much time in the air probably due to the strong wind that required them to make “short runway” landings - but hardly a detractor from a fabulous show. The other birds of interest were a Tawny Pipit and Western Orphean Warbler.





*Having carefully selected a bone....*



*...the bird positions it for swallowing by pushing it in with its tongue and beak tip.....*



*.....and then swallows it by angling its neck so that the bone goes down*



*Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 500mm f/4G ED. ISO 640, f8, 1/1600*



*In flight there is no bird like them. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 500mm f/4G ED. ISO 640, f8, 1/1600 (uncropped pictures.....)*







*Male Red-backed Shrike scanning the sky before darting for cover as the Lammergeiers descended. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 800mm f/4G ED. ISO 640, f8, 1/1250*



*Tawny Pipit, an unexpected bonus. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 640, f8, 1/1600*



*Egyptian Vulture. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 1250, f8, 1/1250*



*Ronnie Wood*

## Finale.

Two shots from the drinking pools near Solsona set up for woodland passerines, a wonderful opportunity to try for the perfect image of some commoner species:



*Male Serin. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 2000, f8, 1/500*



*Western Bonelli's Warbler. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f8, 1/1250*





*Nuthatch. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 400, f8, 1/1250*



*Male Subalpine Warbler drying after a bath. Nikon D810 with AF-S VR Nikkor 600mm f/4G ED. ISO 1250, f8, 1/250*