

## North-east Spain, February 2019

It wasn't easy to know when to go to Spain this year, given an imminent trip to Israel in March and following very successful visits to Extremadura and other areas of southern Spain in 2017 and 2018. There remained very few resident/breeding Spanish species that I hadn't seen, but Neil and I were keen to enjoy a few days (simply a long weekend) trying to see a couple of new species for us and photographing others.

The main targets were Moustached Warbler, Dupont's Lark, Lesser Short-toed Lark and Red-billed Leiothrix, and for photographs, Wallcreeper, Eagle Owl, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and Lammergeier.

We arrived at Barcelona on 8<sup>th</sup> February. It took an hour to sort the hire car out, so we were limited in time by the time we got to the Remolar-Filipines reserve, well-known as a wintering site for one of our targets. As we came in to land, we saw **Gannet** and a small flock of **Greater Flamingo**.

### Friday 8<sup>th</sup> February – Llobregat Delta

Having seen **White Wagtail**, **Feral Pigeon**, **Magpie** and **Yellow-legged Gull** at the airport itself, it was a short drive to the reserve. Once parked up, we headed for the reserve and could very soon hear, then see, a delightful singing **Serin** in the afternoon sun. There was plenty of wildfowl visible from the main hides, with abundant **Gadwall**, **Mallard**, **Northern Shoveler**, **Wigeon**, **Common Teal**, **Common Pochard** and a single drake **Northern Pintail**. The ubiquitous **Sardinian Warblers** made their presence felt, along with **European Robin**, **Greenfinch**, **Goldfinch**, **Long-tailed Tit** and hordes of **Common Chiffchaff** of various hues of green. We heard a **Water Rail**, and of course saw **Moorhen**, **Common Coot**, **Common Snipe**, **Lapwing** and **Meadow Pipit**. There were one or two noisy and territorial **Cetti's Warblers** and at the Pollanques hide we also saw **Little Grebe**, **Black-necked Grebe**, a pair of **Common Kingfisher** and a **Purple Swamphen**, one of a number around the reserve but the only one we actually saw. Occasionally the birds would be disturbed by the odd **Marsh Harrier**, but the other large bird on show was the common **Great Cormorant**. A surprisingly poor show from the heron species, with only a **Grey Heron** to show. An **Iberian Woodpecker** could also be heard, and I saw some distant **Greylag Geese** notwithstanding the constant plane noise! A **Crag Martin** was a bonus.

The target bird was very elusive, but eventually, near one of the screens to the right of the Pollanques hide, we heard an acrocephalus-type call and, by process of elimination, followed by very, very brief and unsatisfactory views, were happy to call it as a **Moustached Warbler**. We would later want to return to the reserve to see if any better views could be achieved.

After a tiring day, we were happy to head for Lleida (Llerida) to sleep off the flight and drive into the plains area the following morning.

### Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> February – El Planerón and Bujaraloz area

We decided to get up early and head for the El Planerón reserve, near Belchite. It was a fair drive from Llerida, especially pre-dawn, but the Spanish road system is straightforward and conducive to long drives. We decided that this reserve presented the best chance of seeing yet another elusive target species. The Gosney guides may look like my mum photocopied them, but the gen can be brilliant and so it proved to be in this case. Even though the GPS location in the guide seemed to leave us a bit short of where we thought we should be, we moved on a little further, found a sign to the reserve then parked near one of the binoculars signs as indicated in the book. As we approached the sign, we saw a smart male **Hen Harrier** ghosting low over the scrub and into the

distance. At the sign, instantly, on opening the car windows (in just-above-zero Celsius conditions) but near daybreak, we heard the beautiful sound of **Dupont's Lark** song. It was fairly persistent, and, as we later discovered, quite widespread. However, this individual sounded very close to the road, so we stealthily got out of the car and proceeded to walk down the track following the sound. Occasionally it sounded very close to the track, occasionally a bit further away; but frustratingly, despite it seeming to be less than 10 metres away and easily recorded well on my iPhone, the bird remained elusive to the eye, even while we searched with our bins all the tuft-tops as the Gosney guide encouraged. However, we were treated to the numerous calls of **Common Crane**, **Red-billed Chough** and distant **Raven**. So we got back in the car and drove down the track we walked down, windows open. At a junction in the track another Dupont's song whistled forth. Again, no obvious sign, so we drove on a bit till the right habitat seemed to run out so turned back. We stopped again, near that junction, and I scanned the tufts again and this time, lo and behold the unmistakable profile of the Dupont's Lark was fully visible. I managed some surprisingly blurry photos before it dropped off the tuft never to be seen again. We drove back to the sign, parked up and walked the track we had already headed down once. Having seen the target species, my eyes were now a little wider to the other birds on view. For the first three hours of the day, the sky was alive with territorial / frisky birds and there was a constant noise of bird song and calling. Among the commonest were **Lesser Short-toed Larks**, a species I can't believe I hadn't seen before, **Calandra Lark** with their aggressive and impressive singing, hissing and chasing, and **Thekla's Lark** in abundance. **Corn Bunting** were also everywhere. Every so often a Dupont's Lark would pipe up. As the morning warmed, I could hear mesmerising gull-raven calls of **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** along with occasional bubblings of **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** but despite hearing them, it wasn't till quite a lot later that we actually saw any. A derelict, distant building held a smart male **Blue Rock Thrush**, and the other thrush/chat was the abundant and ubiquitous **Stonechat**. A **Hoopoe** also flew off in typical fashion. Among the smaller birds, we saw **Zitting Cisticola** briefly, and very flighty **Dartford Warbler**. Before any sandgrouse had given themselves up, **Red-legged Partridge** were the main "game birds" to show. We also began to see more birds of prey, including **Peregrine Falcon**, **Common Kestrel** and **Marsh Harrier**. Magpies were everywhere.

It was really noticeable that the Dupont's Larks went largely quiet within an hour and a half of sunrise, while the other larks continued up to midday-ish. As the birds got quieter, so we began to wander, but the pull of the El Planerón reserve was pretty irresistible most of the time. At one point, as we drove along the entrance track to the reserve, Neil noticed what could have been sandgrouse by the side of the road, really quite close by. Indeed they were, and he managed to get a few great photos before either the noise of his shutter or my movement in the car spooked them and they flew off. It turned out that both species were in the group. It is fair to say I was disappointed not to be able to get the photo I wanted and was a tad despondent for a while. What a big baby.

We hung around El Planerón till it became clear that we had had the best of it for the sunlit part of the day at any rate. So we headed off to the Bujaraloz area in search of so-far unseen steppe species. Along the road we spied a magnificent 2cy **Golden Eagle** perched on a pylon, and we stealthily got out of the car to take a few photos. It seemed unperturbed but then something did cause it to take off. At first it looked like it would head away, but such is the self-confidence of the bird, it instead headed back towards us giving unspeakably good views as it flew no more than 25m over our heads. Despite it not being a lifer, nor even one of the more exotic local species, it was pretty definitely our bird of the trip.

After that, and a little way along the road, we went to the saltpans area and although all looked quiet, we decided to head off the road a little and this proved a good decision as we managed to see **Little Owl** really close up and four **Little Bustard** took off from an adjacent field. No sign of its larger

cousin, which are supposed to be relatively easy at this location. A ringtail Hen Harrier also gave good views as the light started to fade. We headed back to Lleida rating the day 10/10.

### **Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> February – Mas de Melons, Alquézar, Vadiello**

We had decided that this would be a day for the sub-Pyrenean species, but there was time to visit the Mas de Melons reserve near Castellldans/Aspa which had so beguiled me in the previous August. Of course, many of the species I saw then wouldn't be there in February: Golden Orioles, Black-eared Wheatears, various hirundines and Bee-eaters would be absent, but the resident species could be showier. First thing, it didn't really seem so, though we stopped beside a pool with reedbeds that were alive with singing birds: a cold spring day. We ended up at the large farm building which, as far as a car like ours was concerned, was our terminus. Immediately we arrived, good numbers of **House Sparrow**, **Red-billed Chough** and **Stock Dove** were in evidence. We headed to the low ridges beyond the car park and up onto the plateau. As we walked up the track towards it, we could hear an unfamiliar song, or subsong, that had elements of blackbird in it, but which I suspected would be one of our targets for this site. We listened to the Collins app and I had guessed right. When we got onto the plateau, it seemed surprisingly quiet, though it was pretty cold up there, barely above freezing. However, when we gave up and decided to head back to the car, things began to liven up: **Iberian Grey Shrike** became active, and a distant flock of 25 **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** flew in and out of view as they circled in the valley beyond the ridge. This heralded a more or less constant sound of the sandgrouse calling, and while some wheeled above us, many others must have been making these calls from the ground. As we headed back down to the car, Neil caught sight of a dark bird and it wasn't long before we were watching at least two male and two female **Black Wheatear** chasing each other around. We chased around trying to get better photos before eventually giving up as they were clearly so obsessed with chasing each other around the territory.

We got back into the car and headed to Alquézar, a remote town and a massive tourist trap. It's unimaginable how busy it must be in the summer, since even in mid-February the car park was close to full and the town teemed with tourists. We followed the directions to the Colegiata area and soon found the cliffs where our target ought to be. Hordes of Griffon Vultures circled about in and above the gorges and **Black Redstart** were singing and commonplace. Our first **Blue Tit** of the trip appeared in the trees around the viewpoint, along with lots and lots of **Blackcap**. We scanned the cliff face but nothing seemed to be moving or giving any telltale signs of being there, until a slightly curious and distant black dot caught my eye. Without much hope I focused with the bins and saw that it was a **Wallcreeper**.

We watched it for a while, but for the most part it remained fairly and surprisingly still. There were no climbers to disturb it off the cliff and, we hoped, into the village. As the day wore on, however, a party of climbers did appear, but when they finally did disturb the bird, it disappeared from view. We never got the views that some have had of this species but at least we had seen it.

Keen to try and get better views of the species, we drove off to the Embalse de Vadiello. At the end of a mountain road beyond Loporzano, we reached a dam where the Wallcreepers were often seen. No such luck, and we didn't quite know what to do, as it was a fair drive from Alquézar so we weren't sure we would have any luck there and were concerned we would just waste valuable birdwatching time with more driving. So we waited, and while we did, the weather deteriorated. Never terrible, nonetheless it wasn't ideal. That said, I caught sight of the distinctive outline of a **Lammergeier** among the **Griffon Vulture** and about an hour later another one showed. They remained distant, and somewhat grey, but a welcome distraction. We tried a couple of paths in the area by the dam and this proved fruitful when a grey bird flew up from a small patch of weeds. It turned out to be an **Alpine Accentor**. Not a total surprise, but it did seem a little low. As the evening

drew nearer, we didn't want to be coming down the mountainside in the dark so decided to head back to Lleida. On the way, upland pastures proved good for various "little brown jobs", though a **Booted Eagle** showed itself in the area too. About a 6/10 day, which seems churlish given we had seen Wallcreeper, Lammergeier and Alpine Accentor pretty well!

### **Monday 11<sup>th</sup> February – Lleida plains and Los Monegros**

We had arranged a day's birding with guide Stephen Abbott, a Derbyshire man who had the good sense to live in Spain. Our original aim was to see steppe species well with him, and we were not disappointed, even though we had, with one exception, seen every steppe species already on the trip! We met near Alfès in the dark, but as day was breaking were in the vicinity of some hesitant **Dupont's Larks**, eventually seen one reasonably well and close from the car.

As we headed away from the larks, we searched the surrounding plains and fields for other species. I spied a few light brown humps in a field of winter wheat and they turned out to be 36 **Little Bustard**. A real delight to see this species on the deck – even though they had clearly clocked us, they remained where they were, a stark contrast from the flock of 50 at Eyguières airfield in southern France the previous year, which had flown off even though we couldn't have been closer than 400 metres!

Having so grossly missed a photo opp in El Planerón, I was very glad that after a further bit of driving around the fields we located a flock of 68 **Pin-tailed Sandgrouse** in a ploughed field. Like the bustards, they noticed us as we pulled up, but gratifyingly decided against disappearing and continued to feed and preen. They are a top species and one I would never tire of seeing.

After some time with them, we headed away from the Alfès area towards Utxesa. The cliffs around the general area there seem like ideal spots for **Eurasian Eagle Owl** and we were pleased to find a female, sitting on the nest in the shade of an overhang, while some way further along the road we spied the male. Great, but respectfully distant, views which we would never have achieved without Stephen's knowledge.

Another location we wouldn't have found without Stephen, but which when you look at it, is ideal for **Wallcreeper** held a number of other great birds. We walked a long way along the tall and remarkable cliff sides before finally locating the bird. At first it was half way up the cliffs and then came down pretty low, allowing for decent though sunless photos. We spent a fair amount of time with that bird, while **Crag Martin**, **Kestrel** and **Cirl Buntings** also made their presence felt in the area.

Next we headed into the Bujaraloz area for a bit of lunch and in search of the only steppe species to elude us thus far. The wind was quite strong, and so it looked like our birds, though large, would be difficult to see as they hunkered down in dips and behind ridges in the extensive fields. Eventually though, we spied four birds feeding about 200m from the road from the track we were on, and we were fortunate that a track that ran perpendicular to ours took us a bit closer and with the sun behind us so we could get a good look. There they were, four **Great Bustards** which became wary of us as we drove along and took off the moment the car stopped. We managed to get good views and photos so weren't too disappointed.

Stephen took us back to Alfès after what had been an excellent day's birding: very well worth the investment! We hung around the area a bit longer, long enough to see a flock of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse fly over and I managed to see a bird scurrying across the track but couldn't confirm if it was a Dupont's.

## Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> February – Collserola and Llobregat Delta

Our last morning saw us schlep through Barcelona rush hour traffic to the Collserola Park. In my mind's eye, it was a tiny park in the centre of the city, but it turned out to be an enormous expanse of hilly woodland. If it hadn't been for excellent gen, we would never have located where we needed to be to see our "Cat C" target for the first part of the morning. We parked above the Panta de Vallvidrera and walked down towards the small lake where a few **Grey Heron**, **Cormorant** and a **Grey Wagtail** were seen. As we walked the surrounding paths, it was great to hear and/or see **Nuthatch**, **Firecrest**, **Short-toed Treecreeper** and **Crested Tit** to add to our trip list.

It took a while before our target revealed itself, but some aggressive calling from a nearby bush eventually drew our attention. Frankly, it could have been anything, but having compared sounds on xeno canto, our suspicions were confirmed when at least two beautiful **Red-billed Leiothrix** were seen chasing each other aggressively. I guessed they were asserting dominance over a territory, and it wasn't long before both disappeared, unphotographed, never to be seen again. We looked around for a little longer, but there was no further sign so we headed back to Remolar-Filipines with a little less time than we had hoped for.

Once there, we were on a mission to give our most elusive species of the trip one last shot. We walked straight to the Campo/Pollanques area and searched from the hides and the screens without luck. We returned to the spot where we had heard our suspected bird on the Friday and this time were very surprised to hear what was a nailed-on **Reed Warbler** in full song. It seemed incredible, and incredibly early, but the deliberate, rhythmical notes were distinctively that species' signature tune. This depressed Neil and me, because we now worried that the bird we had heard calling on the Friday might indeed have been Reed Warbler, whose call was very similar. But, after staring at the reeds for a couple of hours much to the bemusement of locals, I managed, finally, to get a sight of our **Moustached Warbler**, its distinctive bold white eyestripe and other Sedge-like features showing well, but ultra briefly. Over the next hour it came tantalisingly close, calling sometimes aggressively, and I managed to catch sight of it drinking from the low pool below, but it was never truly out in the open and photographable. It flitted about a bit, had a split-second coming-together with a **Cetti's Warbler** for good measure before it was time for us to leave the reserve and head to the airport. I was thrilled but Neil hadn't really got any kind of look at it so was definitely frustrated.

Still, as we reflected on the journey back, the trip had been a great success, with 107 species seen mostly very well.

Species list:

1. Cormorant
2. Greylag Goose
3. Mallard
4. Gadwall
5. Pintail
6. Shoveler
7. Wigeon
8. Teal
9. Pochard
10. Red-legged Partridge
11. Black-necked Grebe
12. Little Grebe
13. Gannet

14. Great White Egret
15. White Stork
16. Greater Flamingo
17. Griffon Vulture
18. Golden Eagle
19. Booted Eagle
20. Marsh Harrier
21. Hen Harrier
22. Common Buzzard
23. Common Kestrel
24. Peregrine Falcon
25. Water Rail
26. Moorhen
27. Coot
28. Purple Swamphen
29. Common Crane
30. Little Bustard
31. Lapwing
32. Snipe
33. Black-headed Gull
34. Yellow-legged Gull
35. Black-bellied Sandgrouse
36. Pin-tailed Sandgrouse
37. Rock Dove
38. Feral Pigeon
39. Woodpigeon
40. Collared Dove
41. Little Owl
42. Kingfisher
43. Hoopoe
44. Ring-necked Parakeet
45. Iberian Woodpecker
46. Crested Lark
47. Thekla's Lark
48. Lesser Short-toed Lark
49. Calandra Lark
50. Dupont's Lark
51. Crag Martin
52. Meadow Pipit
53. White Wagtail
54. Grey Wagtail
55. Robin
56. Stonechat
57. Song Thrush
58. Blue Rock Thrush
59. Zitting Cisticola
60. Sardinian Warbler
61. Dartford Warbler
62. Moustached Warbler
63. Cetti's Warbler
64. Chiffchaff

65. Great Tit
66. Long-tailed Tit
67. Iberian Grey Shrike
68. Magpie
69. Red-billed Chough
70. Carrion Crow
71. Raven
72. Starling
73. Spotless Starling
74. House Sparrow
75. Rock Sparrow
76. Chaffinch
77. Linnet
78. Goldfinch
79. Greenfinch
80. Serin
81. Common Waxbill
82. Reed Bunting
83. Corn Bunting
84. Red Kite
85. Stock Dove
86. Black Wheatear
87. Wallcreeper
88. Lammergeier
89. Alpine Accentor
90. Merlin
91. Great Bustard
92. Eagle Owl
93. Long-eared Owl
94. Mute Swan
95. Dunnock
96. Little Bustard
97. Wren
98. Cattle Egret
99. Lesser Black-backed Gull
100. Goldcrest
101. Firecrest
102. Crested Tit
103. Short-toed Treecreeper
104. Jay
105. Nuthatch
106. Sparrowhawk
107. Cirl Bunting
108. Water Pipit



*Black-necked (Eared) Grebe, Remolar-Filipines*



*Cetti's Warbler (Cal Tet)*





*Common Waxbill (Cal Tet)*



*Little Grebe (Remolar-Filipines)*



*Yellow-legged Gull (Remolar-Filipines)*



*Calandra Lark (El Planerón)*





*Dupont's Lark (El Planerón)*



*Golden Eagle (Bujaraloz area)*



*Golden Eagle (Bujaraloz area)*



*Griffon Vulture (El Planerón)*

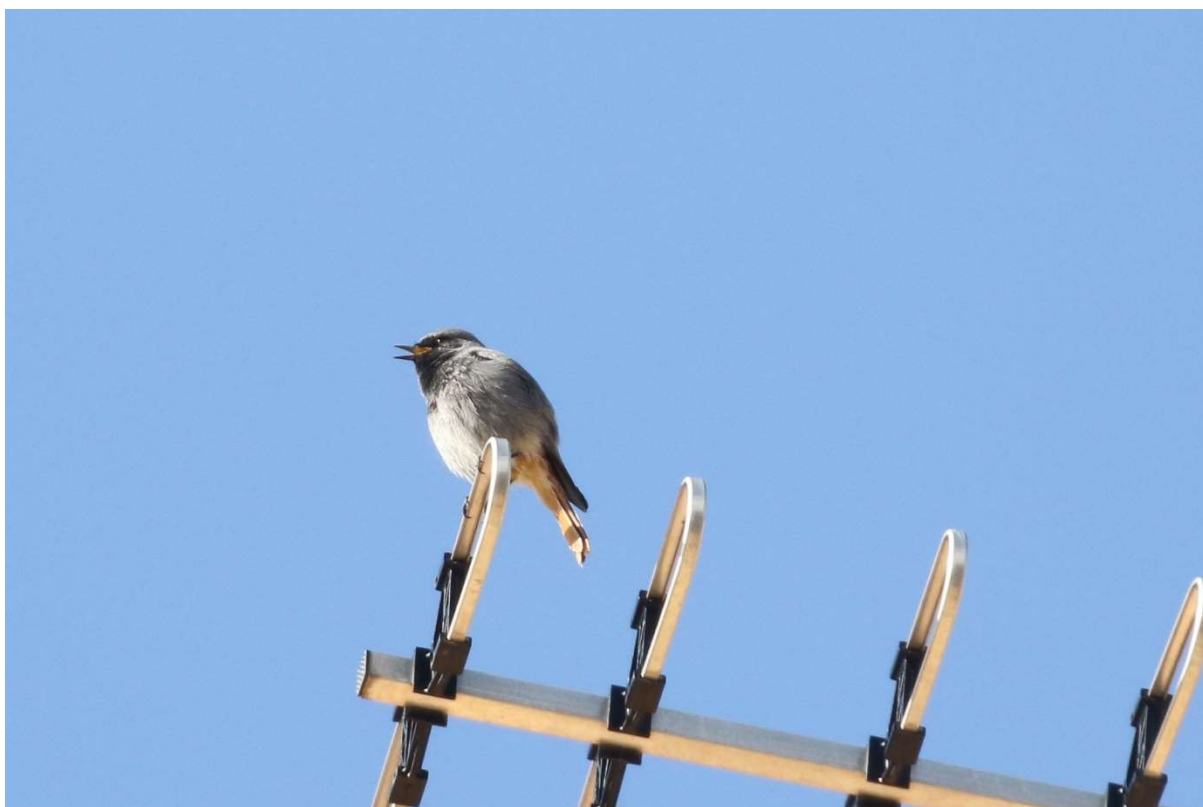


*Lesser Short-toed Lark (El Planerón)*

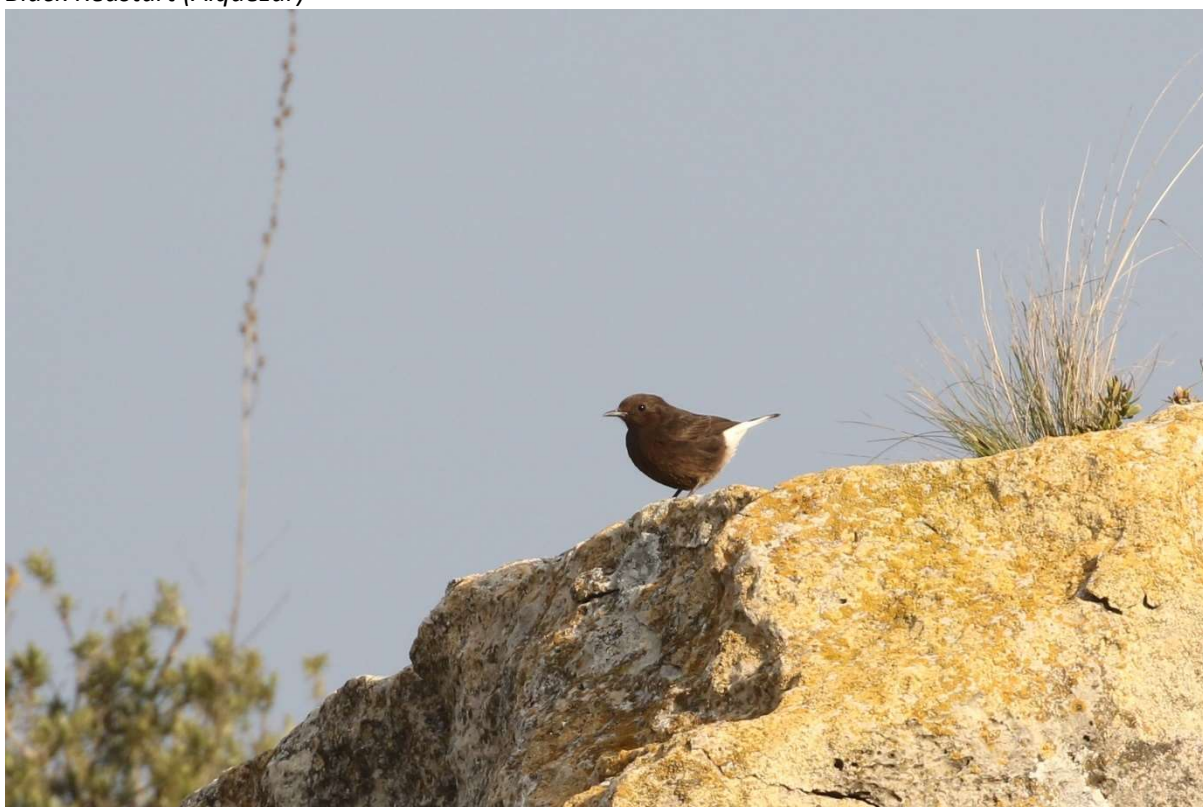


*Alpine Accentor (Vadiello)*





*Black Redstart (Alqu zar)*



*Black Wheatear (Mas de Melons)*



*Lammergeier (Vadiello)*



*Wallcreeper (Alquézar)*



*Calandra Lark (Alfès aerodrome area)*



*Eagle Owl (Utxesa area)*





*Great Bustard (Bujaraloz area)*



*Great Bustard (Bujaraloz)*



*Little Bustard (Alfès aerodrome area)*



*Little Bustard (Alfès aerodrome area)*





*Pin-tailed Sandgrouse (Alfès aerodrome area)*



*Pin-tailed Sandgrouse (Alfès aerodrome area)*



*Wallcreeper (Alcolea de Cinca area)*