We travelled to Stanstead and took a flight to Zaragoza which is an easy airport to use. A short flight was followed by a simple car pick up – we chose an auto SUV with plenty of room and good ground clearance which was really useful (Hyundai Tucson). The drive to our first few days accommodation was only an hour and we enjoyed birds on the way like Golden Eagle and several Crag Martins around the valley cliffs.

We soon found our hotel Allucant on the shores of Lake Gallocanta and had a quick look from the visitor centre hide before dusk. The number of wildfowl on the vast lake soon became apparent and we also started to see Cranes flying in to roost in good numbers. It was a small example of the huge spectacle that we would enjoy over the next few days! 110,000 Common Cranes were on site as a staging post during migration.

Back at base we got unpacked and decided on a shower before an evening meal. Let’s just say the next few hours are a bit of a blur, but involved a very wet bathroom floor, an ambulance for 3 hours, 8 staples in a head wound and a very late first meal! Thanks to Javi our amiable host and the E111 card I survived the experience!

Day one

The following morning Simon was up and out whilst I nursed a big headache. He enjoyed some good local birds including Hen Harriers leaving the roost, Rock Sparrows and Calandra Larks. I settled for window watching the local Black Redstarts and Serins whilst attending to one hell of a large bandage!

After a delightful breakfast we were on our way to explore the Lake Gallocanta and surrounding area – simply stunning and full of birds. Corn Bunting, Crested Lark, Calandra Lark were common and we watched Rock Sparrow on the dilapidated buildings plus Marsh Harrier and thousands of Cranes ketteling as the heat rose.

We enjoyed the raised hides giving stunning views over the roosting cranes and marvelled in a young Golden Eagle buzzing the Cranes in a half-hearted attempt. Flamingos shimmered in the distance and Griffons circled overhead as we set about picking waders and anything else unusual from the mass of birds. Waders included Avocet, Ruff, Black Tailed Godwit and Green Sandpiper.

Driving around the site was easy and we stopped at many locations, one of which revealed 9 Great Bustards which showed very well on the shore before flying past us to roost in the
large open fields. Little Owl, Iberian Grey Shrike and Spanish Sparrow were all in this area as was an entertaining family party of Wild Boar!

Only one place to end the day and that was back at Gallocanta watching thousands of Cranes come in to roost but also over 20 Hen Harrier returning to the reed beds – incredible sight watching them lazily drift in and out in front of us. We decided to return again at first light to watch them leave………..

The hides on stilts were invaluable at Gallocanta.
Cranes and Great Bustards in late afternoon sun – magical.
A family party of Wild Boar. Other mammals seen included Roe Deer, Fox, Rabbit, Hare, Rat.
Day two

Next morning, we were out early to watch the Harrier spectacle unfold. To watch so many Hen Harriers get up and set off to feed was great, along with Marsh Harrier and Merlin. Water Rail were very obvious and the noise of warblers and wildfowl with so many Cranes was a great start.

As we moved off back for breakfast we came across a number of family Crane parties in the small farm paddocks allowing close approach (see pics). Also here good numbers of Spanish Sparrow and Corn Bunting.

We spent the next few hours around Gallocanta again, not adding anything new but just marvelling in the sheer number of birds! Eventually we stopped for lunch and a coffee (how great is their coffee!) and then tried a few tracks for Duponts Lark. Nothing doing in several suitable areas but we noted them for an early start in the morning.
Eventually we decided we had given Duponts enough time and decided to explore a small reservoir and some cereal fields in the vain hope Little Bustard were back (they weren’t). I often find Spanish reservoirs somewhat disappointing, and this was no exception with just the usual common species there.

Later in the afternoon we found a suitable looking dry valley and explored it picking up several Rock Bunting and Woodlark which were singing from high up and the tops of stunted bushes. Plenty of Crested Lark here and calling Choughs too.

We ended the day back at Gallocanta taking in the Crane spectacle for what we thought may be the last time and the Great Bustards.
Day three

Don’t you just love getting up at daft o’clock to search for one of Europe’s most annoying birds?

We knew Duponts inhabit this area but it doesn’t necessarily mean we will see them! We spent several hours from before light straining ears for them in some fabulous habitat. Woodlark and Crested Lark were obvious as was our first Dartford Warbler. But no Duponts………

We did have Hoopoe here sunning itself in the early morning (weirdly our only one all week!). A Red Kite circled catching the early morning glow. It was time to return to the hotel and get ready to move on but on arrival Javi told us “today was the day”! At 11.00 o’clock sharp the Cranes would start to leave and head off over the mountains into France. How did he know?! Years of experience it seems and the right conditions. He invited us up an old ladder on to the roof of the building for the best view………having secured a motorbike helmet (just in case) we started to scan.......
Our only Hoopoe sunning itself at dawn.
The noise was building – clearly something was happening. We started to pick up on a movement of Black Kites as they began to move past us in large numbers, then our first House Martins with a few White Storks. But soon it was the Crane show as they circled just above our heads in their tens of thousands! What a spectacle to witness – just sensational! It was as if he sounded a klaxon and invited them all to set off – line after line of bugling Grus Grus..........we stood and stared trying to take it all in. They were climbing and spiralling just over us, gaining height to tackle the mountains. We stood and watched for over an hour as masses of birds left for the next part of their journey. It was an “Attenborough” type experience in wonderful HD.

Eventually we bid our farewell to Javi and had to tear ourselves away as we needed to move on towards Belchite. It wasn’t a big journey but it still involved a pee break! The best thing about these in Spain is that they are often fab bits of habitat that we didn’t expect to find! But find it we did...........having dealt with the necessary in a roadside wood we started to listen. Ears always need to be tuned in during these situations and we soon found several singing Firecrests amongst us, then Short Toed Treecreepers and a Tit flock, which included Coal Tits. We felt the habitat was bang on for Crested Tit too and soon enough we had several showing very well. We had an hour here but had to leave this little nugget of woodland and crack on.
No, not taking a pee, but enjoying Firecrest and Crested Tit.......
We arrived in the old town of Belchite to find luxurious accommodation (sadly for one night only!). We decided to explore the plains to get an idea of suitable Duponts Lark habitat ready for a pre dawn start. As we approached we checked a few wetland habitats that held numerous Wagtails and gave superb views of a juvenile Golden Eagle. We drove the roads around Belchite plains straining our ears and eyes for any Duponts encouragement, but as usual they played hard to get. However, after some searching we did score 3 Black Bellied Sandgrouse and a nice large flock of 20 Pin Tailed Sandgrouse that allowed prolonged views. We also found a hide with a small pool in front that was clearly used to watch Sandgrouse from. We had 10 White Storks chilling on one of the pools, two more Golden Eagles, several Marsh Harrier and two Hen Harriers. Our only Tawny Owl was here at dusk and a Merlin darted over the lark fields. Speaking of Larks the area was superb for them – large numbers of Calandra, Lesser Short Toed, Wood, Sky, Thekla and Crested. We also heard several Duponts but needed a view!

We called at the war ruins of Belchite on the way back to the digs recording several Black Redstarts, Sardinian Warblers and numerous hirundines. We ended with a great meal in the local restaurant of tapas and local beer. Early to bed as we needed to be back on site before dawn.........

**Day Four**

It felt like the dead of night but we needed to be in the right area well before the sun rose so off we went. Having parked up and started to listen as we couldn’t see, it was obvious
that we were surrounded by Stone Curlews and Larks of all sorts. Duponts called all around us and as we strained our eyes in the half light we expected to see the little sods sat up staring at us. But previous Duponts experiences suggested this was never going to be the case and so it proved. With sun up they simply shut up! We walked the area and drove the lanes with distant glimpses our only reward. How do they do that!? It felt like they were taking the right royal p*s$s!

We couldn’t afford to spend too much time as our last destination beckoned – the fabulous town of Alquezar. And the distinct possibility that one of my most longed for target birds would give itself up..........

We were soon admiring the stunning city walls whilst waiting for the accommodation to be ready (awake!). The town itself was gorgeous with a historical feel as we started to explore. Our info suggested that occasionally Wallcreepers appeared in town on the buildings, could we be that lucky? We found the huge cliffs under the castle walls and started to scan. One thing very obvious was the huge number of wintering Blackcaps here feeding in the ivy covered rock faces – hundreds of them. We started on the north side of the castle walls but as it started to drizzle we moved around to the south side which actually felt a less daunting search as we were closer to the rock face. I started setting up the scope and wrapped up against the only rain we saw all week..........then Simon said “I’ve got one!”

One what?! Only a bloody Wallcreeper! Where? The rock face was huge and I suddenly felt under pressure to pick up this stunning bird. But no such worries – there it was! In front of us making its way up the wall checking crevices for food. I swung the scope around and picked it up straight away and began to film this stunning bird. Neither of us spoke as we concentrated on watching the Wallcreeper go about its business. Eventually it flicked around the corner and was gone but we had watched it for ages! Topping this was going to be tough!

It was time to retreat to the wood cabin that was to be home until our time was over and sort another evening meal which we did back in the city walls. A few glasses of fine wine were used in celebration.
Alquezar – cliffs on the left were covered in Blackcaps. Also, Hawfinch here.
Day Five

There is a saying in birding – “pressures off”! and so it was in Wallcreeper terms anyway. We were so chuffed having had such good views that we could concentrate on the hills around the site and a vulture feeding station. We drove up a few bumpy tracks the sort you only do in a hire car and eventually found the site next to an ancient church really high up. The area had lots of old carcasses and bones with a hide in front – you could imagine the site very popular with fresh meat. But we had plenty to look at with Ravens and Griffon common, a pair of Egyptian Vultures, a few Red Kites, 2 Peregrine and Sparrowhawk amongst the plentiful supply of raptors. The church gave stunning views over the town below and it was great just to take in the scenery. Sardinian Warblers chuntered in the cover and we picked up more Chiffchaff and Blackcaps.

We moved off into the mountains and chose a few viewpoints including the fabulous Canones de Guara. We watched the Griffon colony here and the constant attack from Ravens trying to take the eggs. It felt like a real struggle unfolding before us – remarkable that they get any eggs hatched with these intelligent Corvids working in tandem.

We moved off to a local reservoir – Adelo - as the hills around it and the dam wall itself have hosted Wallcreeper. Sadly, not today but we picked up a showy Firecrest and other more
common species. The water was rather disappointing as Spanish reservoirs often are, but we added Cormorant to the trip list! We worked our way back to base covering some open areas and one produced singing Woodlark on another wee stop.

We decided to work the cliffs at Alquezar again to round the day off and had a couple of Hawfinch before Simon again picked up a Wallcreeper! What is it with some birds that become magnets to some birders! We watched this stunning bird for a while this time as it foraged in front of us allowing me time to video it through the scope. All of a sudden, we realised we were both watching different birds! Two? They followed each other around for a while showing stunning plumage before we lost one around the giant cliff. It was a wonderful half an hour in their company – I certainly hadn’t expected that!

As we took our eyes off the Wallcreepers suddenly an adult Lammergeier appeared right in front of us! Another special moment with one of my favourite birds and one I hoped to see on this trip. It circled for a while close into the cliff face and I also managed to digi video this! Eventually it sailed away over the hills, so we called it a day watching another pair of Egyptian Vultures as we wandered back.

Canones de Guara watchpoint.
Griffons under constant attack from Ravens working in pairs.
One of the birds of the trip – adult Lammergeier in view for 5 minutes checking us out.

Day Six

Our last full day and we decided to head to Riglos. Simon had visited before, but I had not. We heard Wallcreeper had been showing there all week, and it was a great opportunity to visit a historical place not far away. We got there early before the locals had risen and walked to the small church to explore the cliffs behind it.
The only issue was that it was blowing a gale! It made even standing a challenge! Any self-respecting Wallcreeper would be sat snug out of the way laughing at two Englishmen who needed to retreat. So we did.......the local hostel was a great place to have breakfast including the fabulous Spanish coffee that we both enjoyed.

We explored again as the wind eased and spent a while watching the gardens and especially Black Redstart and Hawfinches. They were both common garden birds here and so easy to see – not like at home! White Wagtails were all over the narrow lanes and quiet corners held lots of migrants taking insects from the Ivy and shrubbery. Crested Lark were abundant and we were still picking out Sardinian Warblers.

Ravens and Vultures were a constant over head as were a few Red Kites but we decided to call it a day and explore a few more valleys on the way back.

On the drive back we picked up White Storks, Black Kites and Marsh Harrier but didn’t add anything new before returning to base in Alquezar itself. We decided to try the cliffs again for Alpine Accentor as they had avoided us so far. Eventually we picked up a small group around the castle walls that eventually flew around a while picking up others before roosting. Mission accomplished! We had a lovely local meal before packing ready to leave tomorrow.
Black Redstarts were all over Riglos – very confiding birds.
Hawfinch were garden birds here – nothing like back home!

Day Seven

The wonderful buildings in Alquezar – imagine seeing Wallcreeper on these. It does happen!

We had the morning on site before an afternoon drive to the airport.
We enjoyed another Spanish coffee with breakfast whilst watching birds circle above us – White Storks, Egyptian Vulture, many Griffons, Marsh Harrier (oddly!), Sparrowhawk, Red Kite, Black Kite, Common Buzzard and finally our only Goshawk of the trip. Raven and numerous Chough called and circled above whilst Crag Martins went busily about their day. We even had time to add Grey Wagtail to the trip list which gave us 106 for the week – far higher than expected. I will finish with the star bird on the cliffs below the castle.
INFORMATION ON THE TRIP

The itinerary -

Sat 26 Feb 2021 - 12.45 flight Stanstead to Zaragoza, Night Hotel Allucant at Gallocanta (unplanned hospital visit!!)

Sun 27 Feb - birding Gallocanta, night Hotel Allucant

Mon 28 Feb - birding Gallocanta, night Hotel Allucant

Tues 1 March - drive to Belchite, bird plains. Night Rincon Del Cuervo hotel

Wed 2 March - bird plains then drive to Alquezar, night log cabin Alquezar

Thur 3 March - birding Alquezar area, night log cabin Alquezar

Friday 4 March - birding Alquezar area, night log cabin Alquezar

Sat 5 March - birding locally then Zaragoza for 16.25 flight to Stanstead

Costs -

Flights £213 each
Car hire £205
Hotel Allucant £101 – 3 nights in a twin room
Rincon Del Cierzo £50 each – 1 night in own room
Alquezar camping log cabin – 3 nights, 2 rooms - £145 each

It proved to be an inspired choice by Simon in terms of location. The birds were better than we thought and the scenery stunning. All target species seen well. The accommodation and food as good as ever in Spain.

I want to thank him for all the effort made in planning – he enjoys it (weird!) - his company and finally his Wallcreeper magnet!

Dan Martin.