

The Spanish Pyrenees, a Winter Weekend.

Contributed by Jos

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A mini-break in the Aragon Pyrenees, a winter fiesta of Lammergeiers and Wallcreepers in the mountains themselves and bustards, sandgrouses and larks in adjacent steppes. With three full days at my disposal, fortunately marked by crisp blue skies throughout, this was a very successful little trip, the basic plan being to spend one day in the foothills in and around Mallos de Riglos, the next at higher altitudes and the last exploring the grasslands of Los Monegros a few kilometres to the south.

No specific target as such, but the mountain trio of Wallcreeper, Lammergeier and Alpine Accentor would always be welcome, as would Pyrenean Chamois, a mammal that would be a new species for me. 27 December. Barcelona-Jaca. Arriving from the Canary Islands at 9.30 pm., we lingered in Barcelona just long enough to arrange a hire car and hit the road. Ahead lay a drive of 340 km, the only highlights a Red Fox prancing about on a roundabout somewhere near Huesca and the ghostly white massive of the snowy Pyrenees rising into the night sky as we approached Jaca. After several circuits of Jaca, we finally found our hotel, twinkling stars overhead, minus 3C. Hotel was locked and shuttered, but the good owner had already given me the door code and our room was open and waiting. 28 December. Riglos and the Hecho Valley. Many years before, on one of my first ever birding trips abroad, I had stumbled across Riglos quite by chance - and what a superb place it is, top-class birding in a landscape that ranks as one of the most stunning in all Europe. And so it was, keen to revisit, we staggered out of our hotel pre-dawn, scraped the ice off our windscreen and began the short drive, first though the broad valley of the Rio Aragon, then southwards along the Rio Asabon, the latter characterised by a tumbling stream, wooded slopes and narrow gorges. As dawn broke, Blackbirds dived across the road, early Red Kites launched themselves into the air, a few Griffon Vultures too. A brief stop at the Embalse de la Pena added Great White Egret, a bunch of Yellow-legged Gulls and quite a few Great Cormorants and Great Crested Grebes, but nothing to keep us there too long. Twenty minutes later, the great vista of Los Mallos de Riglos was before us, stunning red sandstone towers and peaks that soar 300 metres above the quaint village nestling at their base. Already, barely 9.00 a.m., packs of Griffon Vultures were circling the peaks, rising off the tops to drift off across the valley, whilst lower down Rock Doves and a couple of Crag Martins also viewed the pillars as home. For the visiting birder however, it is for a couple of wintering birds that the site is also well-known - frequently occurring very close to a picturesque church that nestles against the rockface, both Wallcreeper and Alpine Accentor are seen here with reasonable frequency, Black Wheatear also occurring quite often. Motor cars are not permitted in the village, so leaving the car, I strolled through the small village and made for the church, the temperature now a reasonable few degrees above zero, the landscape and vultures above meaning I spent equal time with my neck cranked upwards to marvel at the sight. At the church, the enormity of the rock pillars really dawns on you, a vast playground for any Wallcreepers passing, as well as for nutcase rock climbers who were already beginning their dizzying ascents. Clambering up the slope to a convenient boulder, I then began my search, scanning the rocks high and low, pying particular attention to nooks and the many crevasses than cut the pillars. Crag Martins skittered along the vertical faces, Sardinian Warbler popped up from scrubby vegetation adjacent, but no sign of a Wallcreeper ...yet! Griffon Vultures continued to wheel above, then at the stroke of 10.30, a flit of colour on the cliff ... pow, Wallcreeper! Working a fracture in the sandstone, this little beauty was steadily dropping down, getting closer and closer. A few minutes more and it was almost at eye level, range approximately 50 metres. From there, it hopped down onto the ground to explore a little gully damp from water seepage. And then it vanished! I thought it had gone behind a small bush, but it never reappeared. I can only guess it flew off, either round the rock face or possibly down into the village itself, either way I never saw it again! After a suitable period had elapsed, I sauntered back to the church, just a few metres to my rear. Then bingo, three birds flew by, the birds landing on the grassy slope just above! A few minutes more and I was watching them, three most resplendent Alpine Accentors. Stunning birds, quietly feeding in the sunshine and not in the least fussed by me sitting adjacent. What a good morning, I thought as they finally upped and flitted away. A search of the nearby slope failed to locate any Black Wheatears, but I did find another Alpine Accentor hopping about in the village! Now approaching midday, we then took a scenic route back to Jaca, adding few new birds to the day's list, but once again several Red Kites and Griffon Vultures, plus a couple of Cirl Buntings. Back in Jaca, I travelled a few kilometres west to the village of Santa Cilia de Jaca - I thought there was a vulture feeding station here, but if it is here, I couldn't find any sign of it. Given the totally empty skies, devoid of vultures and the like, I don't think any birds were expecting anything here either! Three hours of light left, where to go? A quick look at the map and I stabbed a guess at the Hecho Valley, didn't seem very far and the road seemed to climb into interesting-looking areas. And indeed it did - Common Buzzards and Red Kites in the lower valley, Dippers as we passed through the evocatively-named Boca del Infierno, stacks of Griffon Vultures piling down onto high crags to roost. Beyond the Boca del Infierno, the gorge opened out into a broad valley of Alpine meadow, high snow-capped peaks and patches of forest along the stream. This looked fantastic, the light was beginning to fade, but a flock of about 50 Alpine Choughs made for a good start, Crested Tits churring away in the forests too. Completing the duo, Red-billed Choughs also seen. I resolved to return here the following day, but just prior to departing, I stopped for a quick stomp on the snow, taking advantage of the stop to scan the slopes ...and wow, way up high, a group of seven Pyrenean Chamois trekking across the snow from one little patch of grass to the next! Oo, I was impressed - I had hoped to see this species, but I had no real idea how easy it might be to find! The luck was to continue for a while. As we headed back into the Boca del Infierno, a couple of hundred metres before the road disappears into a small tunnel, a large bird appeared right in front ...flying directly down the road into the twilight, an Eagle Owl!!!! Day one in the Pyrenees over, Wallcreeper, Alpine Accentor, Eagle Owl and Pyrenean Chamois, very nice. 29 December. Astun and the Hecho Valley Had high hopes to get up onto the high slopes today, thoughts of Snow Finches and Lammergeiers most tempting, more Pyrenean Chamois as added toppings. With sufficient snow, the

ski resorts tend to offer the easiest chances for Snow Finch, severe weather frequently pushing them into the car parks and around the restaurant buildings, etc. So, seeing nice white tops, destination for the morning was Astun, an high altitude resort tucked up against the French border a mere 30 km to the north. Thanks to a new roundabout on a bypass, I left Jaca on the wrong road and ended up trundling up a track which soon degraded into a nothingness ending at a farmstead! Not so bad however, an adjacent meadow was a treat indeed - frosted white in the crisp air of dawn, no less than 160 Red-billed Choughs strutted about, accompanied by about 35 Spotless Starlings and, all on the deck, 20 Red Kites. A quick reorientation and up the main N330 we were headed, Somport and the Valle de Astun directly ahead. Hmm, Astun was not exactly amazing! Snow coverage was simply not enough to force birds in, numerous patches of snow-free slope visible in all direction. A convenient 'path' to some nice looking habitat seemed a nice hike, but 100 metres on this and the result was nearly a little catastrophe - a whoosh of skis zipping past my ears, a squawking skier yelping a warning ...duh, I wondered why the path was so smooth and had little blue poles marking its route! With a mere two Alpine Choughs as reward for my effort, I decided to depart to seek greener pastures. A quick nip into France, then back into Spain to take the small mountain road (via Borau and Jasa) across to the Hecho Valley. Green Woodpecker, Common Crossbills and assorted other passerines on route, but the real rewards were waiting at the top of the Hecho. Impressed by the Boca del Infierno the day before, I now opted to walk the gorge this day, scanning the rock faces and wooded slopes. Crested Tits seen again, plus Marsh Tit and Coal Tit, but right where the tunnel starts, a drop dead gorgeous Wallcreeper was happily poking about, sticking almost exclusively to wet patches directly opposite the road. Nice - day two, Wallcreeper number two. Griffon Vultures overhead again, at least a hundred, but then a familiar shape soaring up the valley ...Lammergeier, a dark juvenile. Only got brief views, but since it seemed to be heading directly into the upper Hecho Valley, I hurried up and jumped into the car that my friend had conveniently parked a kilometre further up. Arriving in the upper Hecho, the views truly are stunning, a 360 degree landscape of snow-capped peaks, particularly magnificent set against the deep blue of the sky. Not abundant birds at this altitude in winter, but the meadows were positively peppered with Red-billed Choughs, a good couple of hundred spread out on the slopes. Even better, scanning the upper slopes, the small herd of Pyrenean Chamois had now metamorphosized into an even bigger herd, a minimum of 15 now grazing on the patches between the snow. Spent most of the afternoon hiking, the ultimate treat coming late on, two adult Lammergeiers cruising directly overhead, one carrying carrion in its talons. And with that, the Pyrenean Chamois still on the meadows, so we returned to Jaca, the evening spent wandering this historic town. 30 December. Castillo de Aragon & Los Monegros. Final day and with it, a change in scene, heading south about 150 km to the grassland of Los Monegros. Stopped on route at a hilltop castle just east of Huesca, a place by the name of Castillo de Aragon. This was not so much for the castle itself, reasonably impressive though it is, but more for the birding possibilities on the slopes around it. A fair wind blowing this morning, so after seeing very little on the stroll up to the ruins, I clambered down via the slopes to the lea of the ruins. And very productive they were - several Dartford Warblers, a couple of Sardinian Warblers, four Thekla Larks, a whole bunch of Rock Sparrows, dozens and dozens of Serins. Next came what I had been looking for ...after flashes of black and white vanishing over the crest of some rocks, a couple of moments later I had my eyes on the birds responsible - Black Wheatears, a rather smart pair hopping about, a Black Redstart their companion. Crag Martins also present, skimming the slopes, plus Red Kites overhead, a Fan-tailed Warbler a little lower down and, in the village a couple of kilometres back towards the main road, loads of Spotless Starlings and a pair of White Storks on a nest atop the church. Time to move on, the grasslands awaiting. At Los Monegros, the first area I explored, south of Ontinena, was pretty naff, quite a few wind-buffeted larks, but little else. Arriving in the Bujaraloz area however, the grasslands awaiting were simply phenomenal - almost immediately I began bumping into larks, thousands of larks! Travelling down the A2105 and random side tracks, it was just one massive flock after another of Skylarks and Calandra Larks, each flock numbering many hundreds of birds. Impressive indeed! Also a few smaller gatherings of Lesser Short-toed Larks and, Spain being Spain, quite a few Crested Larks too. My target bird for the day was Great Bustard, a small population of which is resident in this area, but the wind was certainly not doing me any favours - any self-respecting bustard would be hunched down in vegetation or some other sheltered spot. For a good few hours, I zigzagged through the area, ploughing through endless flocks of larks, enjoying too a selection of raptors that winter on the plains - amongst the Common Buzzards and Red Kites, others included at least four Merlins, two Golden Eagles, a male Hen Harrier and a couple of Marsh Harriers. Also saw a couple of Hoopoes, White Wagtails and Meadow Pipits, a couple of Black Redstarts, Stonechats, several Red-billed Choughs and a number of flocks of Linnets and Corn Buntings. Tumbleweed type bushes went rolling by, a mean wind ripped into the car, the search for bustards was drawing a total blank. Eventually, as the afternoon began to wear on, I decided to call it quits and so begin a slow drive back to Bujaraloz, scanning all the way. And that's where my luck kicked in - about five kilometres short of town, a group of large blobs in a distant field. A quick stop and look with the binoculars and there they were, seven Great Bustards plodding along, stateliness personified. Manoeuvred the car onto an adjacent side track and watched them strut their stuff, gaggles of mixed Spotless and European Starlings their courtiers. And then without warning, up the bustards went, lumbering into the sky and flying a few hundred metres to drop into a shallow gully just beyond. Out of sight and presumably out of the wind. Taking another track, I managed to get a view over this area too. And then I nearly fell over with surprise - it was jam-packed with Great Bustards!!! Oh wow, now I understood why I had failed to find any for the whole afternoon, they were all here basking in the sun in the relative shelter of a low hillside! Took out my telescope and enjoyed the spectacle, a count revealing a grand total of 76 Great Bustards in a long line. And not only that too, scrubbing about on the short grass, a pod of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse! Plus too yet more Spotless Starlings, a fly-by Hen Harrier and a few distant Griffon Vultures. What a nice way to end the day, and indeed my mini-trip to the Aragon Pyrenees. With that, I turned tail and drove the 330 km to Barcelona, arriving just after dark and checking into a small hotel adjacent to the airport. 31 December. Departure. No time to pop into the wetlands flanking Barcelona's airport unfortunately, so onto the plane we went, a 10.00 a.m. departure. Next stop, the cold overcast environs of Vilnius, home.