

## Ordesa National Park - Richard Lobley

Like most birders I always have a target bird at the top of my wish list. Until this summer my target was Wallcreeper. The only problem was to see one would probably mean going on an organised bird tour and I didn't want to pay for a full tour as most tours would include birds that I have seen before. For various reasons I decided to go this year and had initially intended going on my own. Surprisingly my wife, Janet, said she would go too.



Wallcreeper

photo: Paul Latchbury

After a bit of research and various e-mails to Boletas via their British contact, Andrew Howes it was apparent I could either go with directions provided by them, pay for a solo guide or join one of their planned tours for a day in the Spanish Pyrennes. I opted for the latter, which turned out to be an excellent choice.

The itinerary of the Boletas Tour entitled the Pyrennes & Ebro Delta meant I could meet up with them for a full day on Tuesday 10 June 2014. Andrew had contact details of the hotel they were using so I booked the same one for the Sunday. The fee I paid Boletas included the hotel accommodation on the Monday & Tuesday.

The journey from Barcelona & back was in some ways a second highlight although it did have some nightmare moments but that is another story. The accommodation was at the Hotel Palazzo in the small village of Nerin at the head of a 15 kilometre drive up a narrow gorge. One side of the road was overhanging rock & the other was a sheer drop into the river below (although protected by a crash barrier).

The hotel was the only one for miles and was surprisingly good, for both accommodation and birds. We had Crag Martin nesting in the eaves and Black Redstart and White Wagtail in the grounds. From the balcony I saw two Hobby's and what I thought was an Egyptian Vulture in a milli-second view. I subsequently bagged that as the third vulture species of the trip.

We had arrived very late on the Sunday night so we had a very relaxed Monday. This was basically a modest 20 km potter around the area. Whilst we were having lunch we had a very close Lammergier but overall this species was outnumbered about ten to one by Griffon Vultures. Although not seen, I also heard a Nightjar churring mid afternoon near to a stream on the way up to another small village.

On the Monday evening, from the hotel car park, whilst I was waiting for Josele to arrive, I a Short-toed Eagle went by. Josele was quite late as they had problems at the airport. One guide had his case and birding equipment stolen. He explained what we were going to do on the Tuesday plus he had a Plan B which involved me driving to Hecho on Tuesday night if I missed the Wallcreeper. Luckily, the Plan B wasn't required.

The tour as far as I was concerned started straight after breakfast on the Tuesday. We drove about a half a kilometre to the start of a gravel road onto the mountain and transferred to a plush coach. Apparently this mountain is privately owned and the owner controls vehicular access which means you probably cannot get on it other than on an organised tour. We were driving on the mountain I had looked up at the previous afternoon.

We drove for probably 30 minutes on a very tortuous track. Where we disembarked it was a pretty flat topped mountain but all the surrounding mountains were in view and basically level or below us which immediately cheered me up. Josele said we were about 6000 ft up. The view was very impressive. We then had a twenty minute uphill walk to the first viewing area. The weather was pretty cool and as rain was predicted I had packed waterproofs and ditched my camera. I had taken my scope and tripod which I had thought necessary. Unfortunately it wasn't and it weighed me down as we ultimately walked about five miles on the top.

With a guided tour the guides generally play tapes of bird calls to attract the targets but I was still very surprised when they started using them at the top of the mountain. It took a few minutes to bring in a couple of Alpine Accentors (first tick). At this point it started raining and Josele told me that the chances of Wallcreeper was at best 60% so I didn't feel confident.

After the Accentor we set up scopes to look onto the next mountaintop area about a mile and a half away. Josele had said I might pick up a flying Snowfinch at long distance. This apparently was our only chance!

A call went up suggesting someone had seen a Wallcreeper from the mirador. After searching the cliff face for several minutes, we failed to relocate the bird. The crag was several hundred yards away so it was not a great surprise. The group then started spreading out and I started getting a little desperate. Ultimately the Wallcreeper was found again in the same general area but by watchers looking from a much closer, and more precarious site. It was found once more by photographer Paul Lathbury.

Everybody ultimately got good binocular views. I was surprised at how small the bird was - when it flew it was quite easy to see (I think it is called the butterfly bird) but if you lost it in flight picking it up on ground was tricky given its mainly grey colouration. The consensus was that it was a female.

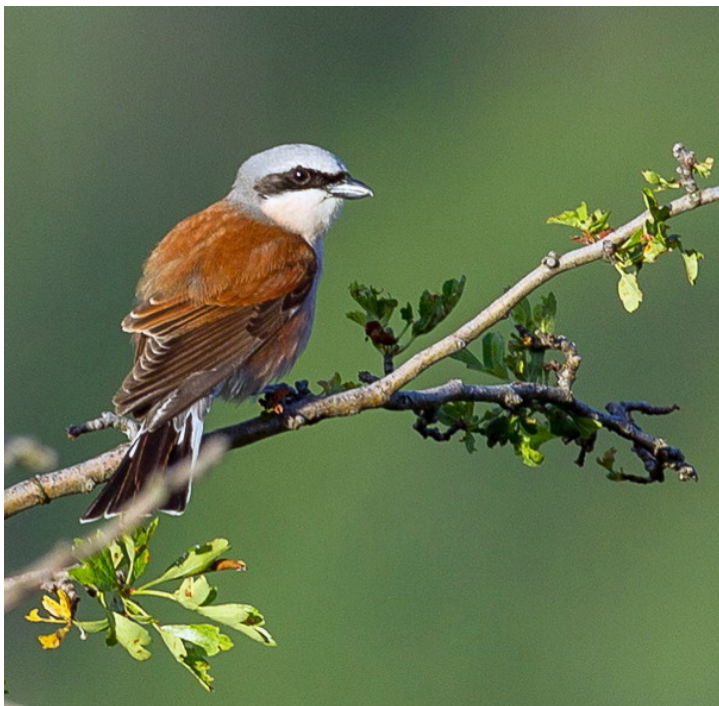
After that we walked round the mountain for about half a mile or so. Josele had said we wouldn't walk over snow as it was too dangerous so we were quite lucky when I picked up a Snowfinch in flight and got the guides onto it. It looked like a large Snow Bunting in flight. However it took another ten minutes or so to relocate it. In the end we had four or five together. I scoped one at about 20 yards, so taking the scope wasn't totally wasted. At this point it was lunchtime, I had three new ticks and was extremely pleased.

After that we walked back to the dirt road and started hiking along to an area Josele said was our only chance of getting Citril Finch. On this two mile hike (each way) I had cripplingly close views of a Honey Buzzard which apparently doesn't breed here so it must have been a late migrant.

Half of the group bailed out of the walk before we got to the wooded area so I felt a bit sorry for them as my agenda had hijacked part of their day. I had an untickable view of the first Citril Finch but Josele stuck with it & eventually lured one in for a private viewing as everybody else had started the long walk back. Excellent! All four targets crossed off.

The following pre morning walk was extremely good. Starting at 6:30 it was very cold. Less than a kilometre from the hotel there was a Wryneck in a nearby paddock, followed by two Rock Thrushes, an Orphean Warbler and a pair of Red Back Shrikes.

I felt privileged to have joined the trip and got all four primary targets plus some very good views of other southern species. If anyone wants detailed information let me know. The photos used were all from Paul so a special thanks to him for sharing them with me.



Red-backed Shrike and Honey Buzzard

photos: Paul Lathbury