

Iberian Wildlife Tours/Jeff Clarke Ecology

Picos de Europa & Páramos of Northern Castile

24th June – 3rd July 2012

Tour Review



Apollo – Northern Castile July 2012 © Jeff Clarke

Note: All images used in this report were taken during the 2012 tour.

Jeff Clarke & Teresa Farino

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Introduction

This review covers the highlights of a late spring/early summer tour covering two of the most biologically diverse regions of Northern Spain. As usual, it was only possible to sample a tiny fraction of the wildlife potential of the regions, but even so we enjoyed some truly special encounters with the flora and fauna.

On this tour we were at our maximum capacity of 14 clients and so it was always going to be a challenge to ensure that everyone got to see all of the major highlights, though in most cases we managed to achieve it. As expected with such a big group, the individual interests of the clients varied considerably, with birders, botanists, entomologists and herpetologists equally well represented. As this review will illustrate, often with the clients' own photographs, we did pretty well on all these fronts.

By and large we were fortunate with the weather on this tour and thanks to Teresa's intimate knowledge of the weather systems in the Picos de Europa we were able to maximise our opportunities, which is one of the big benefits of working to a flexible itinerary.

Review

Sunday 24th June

Teresa picked up three members of the group from Bilbao airport at about lunchtime, and then whisked them off to a nearby cider house in Loui for a delicious meal washed down with local brews straight from the barrel. Whilst waiting for the remainder of the participants to arrive on a later flight, we explored an adjacent meadow, where we found a good selection of day-flying moths and butterflies, notably Fiery Clearwing, our first Hummingbird Hawkmoths, Latticed and Common Heaths, a host of Marbled Whites, Meadow Browns and Clouded Yellows, and an occasional Wood White and Large Skipper. Most of the meadow plants had already set seed but we did find several patches of Heart-flowered Serapias, one of the most spectacular of the tongue orchids. An added bonus was the small group of Common Wall Lizards that were basking on the pavement nearby.

We then drove back to the airport to collect Jeff and the majority of the tour group in the late afternoon. Teresa's minibus – only just collected – proceeded to develop a problem with the door, so we drove back to





the cider house so that the rest of the group could refresh themselves and explore the same meadow while she nipped back to the airport for a replacement. Butterflies were still dancing all across the meadow, although by this stage in the day the majority were Marbled Whites.

Luckily Teresa was back in short order and it was time to head off for our hotel – ‘El Hoyal’ – in Pesaguero. As we made our way along the coastal highway we were already spotting interesting birds like Red Kite and White Stork.

The entrance to the Picos de Europa for any initiate is both exciting and possibly a little daunting as you make your way through the vertiginous sheer-sided La Hermida Gorge as it winds its way narrowly through walls of limestone. Then, once clear of the gorge at

its southern end, suddenly you are presented with one of the most beautiful mountain ranges in Europe.

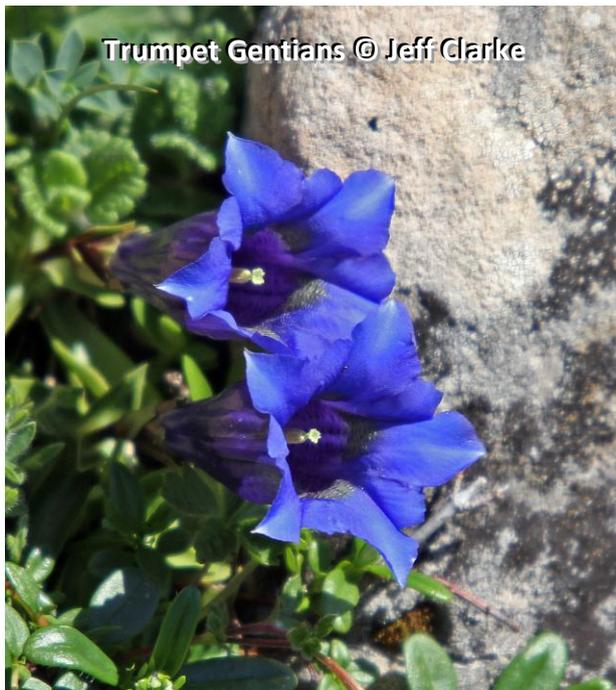
We reached our hotel, unpacked, settled in and then did the next most important thing... get the weather forecast! In this mountainous region the weather systems really dictate the itinerary and any plan is a moveable feast. The good news on this occasion was that tomorrow's weather would be excellent.

The other thing people notice when visiting Spain is how late in the evening people dine. Very often we would be finishing our meal at something approaching 10.00pm and the locals would just be arriving to start theirs.

Monday 25th June

Normally on a tour you might choose to hold back some of the gems to end on a high, but on this tour we decided to go for one of the real highlights straight off the bat. The sun was up and the day was already getting warm as we took on board some fresh supplies for our mountain-top picnic lunch. Watching from the main square in Potes immediately demonstrated the promise of the region for birds of prey as we had excellent views of a Short-toed Eagle circling against the blue sky alongside the ubiquitous Common Buzzards.

Fresh bread collected we set off for Fuente Dé. We had about a 40 minute wait to board the cable car and whiled away the time enjoying the local Red Squirrels and attempting to



spot the Firecrests calling from the conifers around the lower station. As we entered the cable car the anticipation about what might be seen at the top was obvious on the faces of most folks, although a few just seemed to be praying silently they would make it to the top!

We exited the cable car and suddenly we were in a different realm. Considerably higher than Ben Nevis, this is the domain of true mountain wildlife. The first indication came from the chirruping calls of the Alpine Choughs as they wheeled around the upper cable car station. Having duly admired these confiding 'crows', we trooped off across the high

plateau, following a minor trail away from the tourist track. At this altitude it's all about quality, not quantity, and as a rule you have to put some effort into finding your quarry.

The more botanically minded of the party were soon drooling over clusters of Trumpet and Spring Gentians, with less showy gems in the rock gardens including Pink Sandwort, Yellow Wood Violet, the dwarf stock *Matthiola perennis*, endemic to the Cordillera Cantábrica, the rock-jasmine *Androsace villosa*, Cone and Grooved Saxifrages, both of which are also unique to northern Spain, Pyrenean Spurge, Alpine Forget-me-Not, Leafless-stemmed Speedwell, Prostrate and Alpine Toadflaxes and even some late-flowering Spring Squill.

The birders in the group were readily diverted by the Water Pipits and the Northern Wheatears, with the local race of Northern Wheatear looking very different to a British or Greenland bird, so much so that people often mistake them for Black eared Wheatears. The occasional Griffon Vulture would appear along one of the ridge



lines, but the heat of the day meant that most were a very long way off and very high.

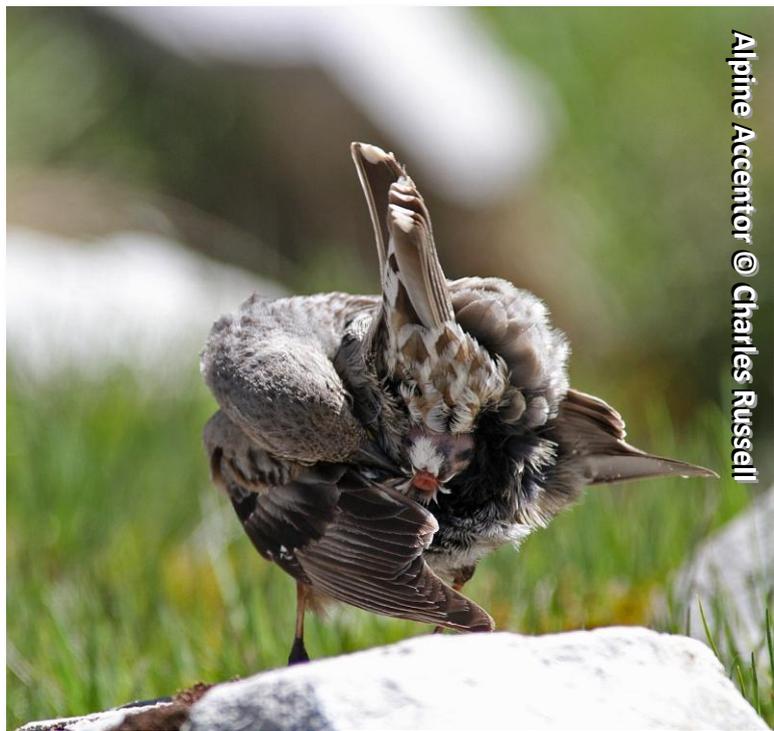
After a time we reached one of the small pools on the plateau. A Broad bodied Chaser dragonfly was scooting above the surface, and looking into the water we found one of our hoped-for targets in the shape of Alpine Newts. Other than a couple of distant and fast moving 'ringlet' butterflies the Lepidoptera were pretty thin on the ground, but we did find a Crowned Moth, a true high-altitude geometer.

A flurry of white wings alerted Jeff's attention to the proximity of a genuine Alpine bird. Very soon everyone was enjoying excellent views of a male Snow Finch, and this proved to be just the first of a great many seen during the day. Then, for a bit of fun during our morning snack, we tempted in a few Alpine Choughs with some crushed hazelnuts and raisins. If we flicked the nuts into the air, the birds wheeled up to catch them like dogs catching a ball.

It was time to try for our big target for the locality. A few folk seemed a bit sceptical about our chances as it was very hot and we were now heading for the doldrums of the day. We selected our lunch spot and set up camp. After a few minutes the distinctive high pitched whistle of a Wallcreeper could be heard faintly above our heads. After a time we picked out one flying across a nearby vertical cliff face, and then Jeff found a couple of birds closer to hand, low down but a little away from our lunch spot.

Very soon the entire party was being entertained by the most incredible and prolonged views of at least three Wallcreepers, a matter of metres from the group, even flying low over our heads at some points. This is a real dream bird and one you can never tire of seeing, but you have to work for it, which makes seeing it all the better!

At this point the party split, some choosing to descend to lower levels to look at a different flora and, hopefully, some butterflies, and the others electing to stay at elevation a little longer. The latter group was rewarded with a rather distant view of a snow-bathing Southern Chamois (Isard) and rather better views of Alpine Accentor.



Meantime, the low-elevation group explored some of the superb meadows near Pido. Sheets of Yellow Rattle, Pyrenean Eryngo, Bloody Crane's-bill, Pyrenean Germander, Round-headed Rampion, Pyramidal Orchid, Sawfly Ophrys and English Iris were the botanical highlights here, but there was not much to be seen butterfly-wise, with a late Orange Tip and a Large Wall the best of the bunch.

A superb day had simply flown by.

Tuesday 26th June

We began the day with a pre-breakfast moth trap opening on Teresa's terrace. The Picos de Europa is justly famous for its wealth of butterflies but it is equally excellent for the diversity of moth species to be found there. The sky had been clear and it had been relatively cool overnight so the catch was a little down on the norm for the time of year. Even so we had a myriad species to enjoy and photograph. Many of the smallest moths are incredibly beautiful but of course it is the larger species that initially catch the eye. In today's catch we had Southern Pine and Elephant Hawkmoths, Orache Moth and the dead-leaf-mimicking Lappet, as well as The Passenger, Three-humped Prominent and two Lesser Puss Moths.



Morning Moth Trap Session © Jeff Clarke



Lappet Moth © Jeff Clarke

After breakfast the engine management warning light was causing concern on Teresa's mini-bus so we arranged to have it checked out in Potes. Meanwhile Jeff led the party along the old 'road' high above the Hermida gorge. This track, as usual, contributed an interesting variety of sightings. Birds-wise, raptors traditionally feature here and on this occasion we were soon watching a pair of Egyptian Vultures

drifting around the crags across the gorge. Firecrests called regularly from the track-side bushes but most folks struggled to catch a glimpse. Luckily the Bonelli's Warblers were a little more co-operative. A Red-backed Shrike showed briefly to a few members of the group and a reeling Grasshopper Warbler remained, as usual, resolutely in deep cover.



False Ilex Hairstreak © Jeff Clarke

This track can be very productive for reptiles, but today, despite our best efforts, only Common Wall Lizards put in an appearance. Conversely the butterflies were very active and several species were on show, notably Lulworth Skipper, False Ilex Hairstreak, Holly Blue, Marbled White and Cleopatra. Most, however, were hard to photograph as the day was heating up quickly and they were very

active. We also saw several fritillaries, but they were generally reduced to a black and orange blur as they rocketed by.

By the time Teresa had returned it was obviously going to be a scorching day and we needed to find somewhere to have lunch which provided cover. We changed our plan to a less arduous route and headed for the delightful village of Tudes. Lunch under the canopy of Walnut Trees in the square gave us much needed shade, while above us the occasional Spotted Flycatcher or Black Redstart would sally out from the tree canopy to snatch an insect, but the fast rising temperature had sent most birds deep into foliage for a siesta.

After lunch we attempted to locate the local Middle-spotted Woodpeckers but they too were keeping to deep cover, so we headed for one of the local water troughs. After several minutes we had located a few giant Midwife Toad tadpoles and at least one Palmate Newt, but we were after a more

spectacular prize. A glimpse here and there gave us hope and then 'softly, softly, catchy-monkey'... the reward was to hand as Jeff extricated a brilliantly marked male Marbled Newt from the depths of the trough.



Marbled Newt © Rob Smith

We then set off on a walk of several kilometres which was thankfully mostly downhill and in the shade. This particular route can be very productive for birds and butterflies but on this day the exceptionally high temperatures limited our opportunities. As we proceeded we would find something of note here and there, a Cirl Bunting showed for a few of the group, while Spanish Purple Hairstreak and Common Swallowtail butterflies both posed for photographs, the latter laying eggs. Just off to one side of the track Teresa discovered



Common Swallowtail egg laying © Jeff Clarke

a pair of Wasp Beetles copulating, which were later confirmed as *Clytus rhamni*, and a short while later a Roe Deer leapt from cover. Amazingly at least half the group had passed within feet of the animal before it bolted from its resting place.

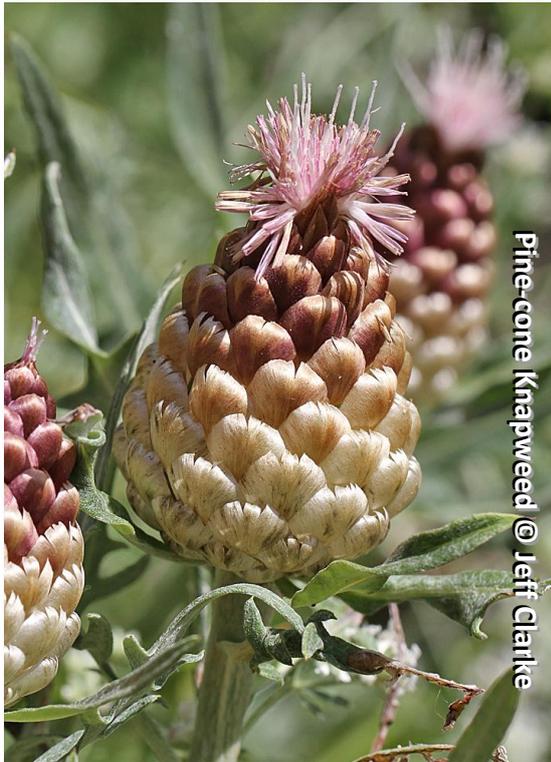
We continued our descent until we reached an ancient stone wall, where we spent some time trying to locate basking reptiles, successfully adding Iberian Wall Lizard and Large Psammodromus to our trip list. Just short of the bottom section of the walk we added Brimstone, Mallow Skipper and Blue-spot Hairstreak to the group's butterfly total, as well as an attractive geometrid moth called the Narrow Rose-banded Wave and a couple of eye-catching burnet moths: Southerly and White-collared (or Broom) Burnets. A Goldenring dragonfly was also seen here briefly.



Iberian Wall lizard © Jeff Clarke

As elsewhere in the lower parts of the Picos, many of the meadows had already been cropped for hay, but we did note one or two plants of interest as we descended, including the furry-leaved stonecrop *Sedum hirsutum*, with lovely white, star-like blooms, the umbellifer *Thapsia villosa*, with

yellow globes of flowers, Round-headed Thyme, Etruscan Honeysuckle, trailing Dark Swallow-wort and the curious Cone Knapweed.



By the time we reached the bottom most people were wilting. Teresa and Jeff retrieved the minibuses with the aid of a pre-arranged taxi and cold drinks from the cool box were pressed against cheeks and necks (and other parts) that had been caught by the sun.

After a refreshingly cool shower we reconvened on Teresa's terrace, as we did on most nights in the Picos, for a review of the day's sightings and a provisional outline of the plan for the following day.

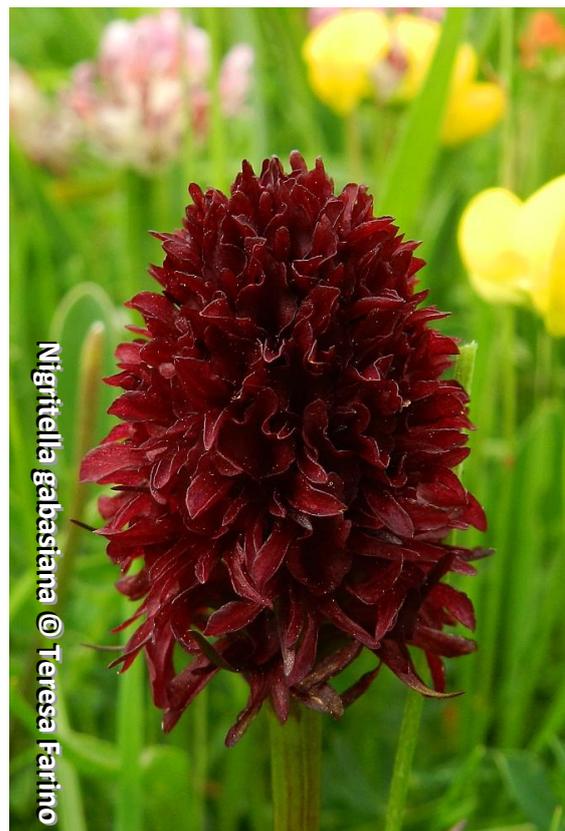
Wednesday 27th June

The idea for today was to stay high and try to avoid the excesses of heat that had affected so many people the previous day. Our first port of call was a damp meadow en route to the

Puerto de San Glorio, at around 1,550 metres. This meadow is particularly good for orchids and butterflies and we became totally engrossed in recording and photographing both.

Thankfully the altitude meant that several species of orchid were still in flower, with the vanilla orchid *Nigritella gabasiana* probably the most sought after. Close by were many examples of Early Marsh Orchid, and although most were 'going over', some of the specimens were still in good condition. A more careful examination also revealed the diminutive and very beautiful Burnt-tip Orchid to be well distributed on the drier slopes. Other notable plants here included Globeflower, Horned Pansy, Irish Spurge, Large-flowered Butterwort, Whorled Lousewort and its close relative *Pedicularis mixta*.

Bird wise it was fairly quiet at this spot, although a Common Whitethroat was singing from the nearby bushes and a few people did



manage to get brief views. The reptile hunters were scouring the upper reaches of the meadow where it melded into heathland, keeping a close eye out for Seoane's Viper. Unfortunately they failed on that score, but John Hanratty had a most unusual find in the shape of a little black lizard. Many reptiles have black, or melanistic, forms, often associated with high altitude or cold regions. After a struggle to extricate it from the thatch of grass, this little lizard posed beautifully in John's hand long enough



melanistic Viviparous Lizard © Rob Smith

for a few photographs and for most people to see it. Teresa quickly solved the mystery of its identity by noting the tiny pin-like scales on the back and the strongly keeled tail scales. It was a Viviparous Lizard, a species often referred to as Common Lizard in the UK: a brilliant find!



Glanville Fritillary on Early Marsh Orchid © Teresa Farino

As usual the meadow contained a number of species of butterflies and day flying moths. The most noticeable and distinctive moth was the Chimney Sweeper, with its dusty black wings tipped with white. Most of the restless blue butterflies appeared to be Common Blues, at least those that settled long enough to get a view of the underwing. Alongside them was another lycaenid, the rather smart looking

Purple-edged Copper. Jeff then managed to secure and identify one of the passing ringlets as De Prunner's Ringlet, and showed some of the group its distinguishing features.



The fritillary butterflies are always sought after and a number were dancing around the field, although – as usual – many kept just too far away for certain classification, with the exception of the Queen of Spain Fritillaries, with their lovely 'mother-of-pearl' patches under the wings. Thankfully several of the other species paused atop flower-heads for more prolonged periods and this enabled Provençal, Small-pearl Bordered and Glanville Fritillaries to be positively identified. The latter perched attractively on the top of an Early Marsh Orchid, much to the photographers' delight.

There was so much to see in this little meadow that the only thing to get some folks out was the lure of elevenses. We drove the short distance to Puerto de San Glorio and kept a watchful eye for Citril Finches as we snacked. Several of the keen herpetologists disappeared up a nearby slope in pursuit of vipers and Jeff took a short walk down the track. He soon picked up a Citril Finch in flight which landed conveniently on the Armco at the side of the road. He gesticulated and thought he'd got the group onto the bird only to discover that they had actually been watching a Linnet at much closer quarters. After elevenses, the group split with the birders joining Jeff in an attempt to catch up with the Citril Finch and the rest headed off in pursuit of botanical and reptilian treasures lower down the valley.

The birders gave San Glorio a chance to reveal its avian treasures, but things were pretty quiet in the heat of the day, so after an extended period of time keeping quiet, a change of

plan was required. A bout of high volume pishing from Jeff did draw out a few birds from the pine woodland, mostly Coal tits and Chaffinches. We had pretty much given up the ghost when a Citril Finch did a brief fly-by, so we redoubled our efforts, but with limited success. Most of the group did latch on to the birds as they passed quickly by on a couple of occasions, but they were little more than silhouettes.

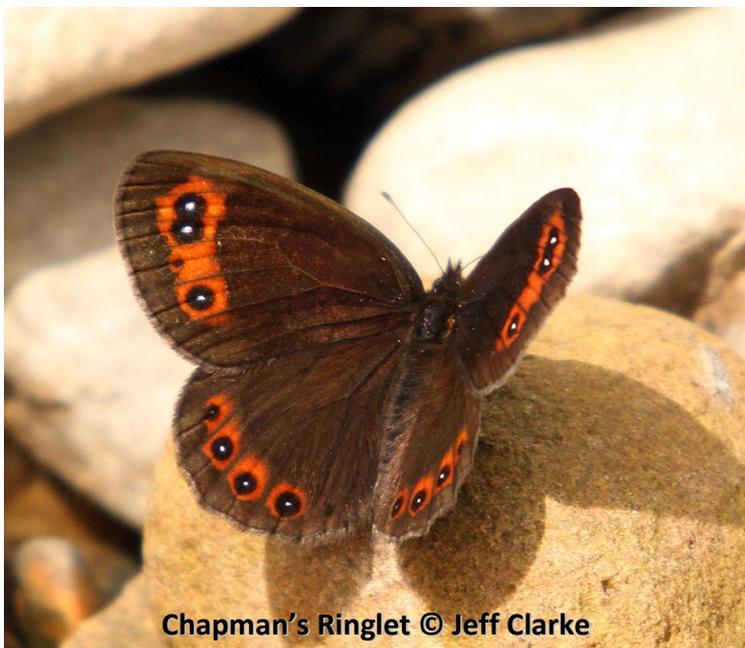
A two-way-radio message from Teresa encouraged a re-gathering of the group, as they had found one of their major targets. We came back together in another damp meadow to the west of the pass. Along the banks of the stream here stealthy figures were peering intently towards a pile of boulders. The object of their attention was a stocky green lizard



Schreiber's Green Lizard © Jeff Clarke

with a blue head and a brown tail: a male Schreiber's Green Lizard, a species endemic to north-western Spain. It calmly stayed put while a careful adjustment of position enabled a few photographs to be secured by most of the camera-toting brigade in the group.

This meadow was also full of invertebrates, including more of those 'pesky' ringlet butterflies! Really the only way to identify most of them is to get a really good look at the arrangement of ocellis ('eyes') and orange patches on the wings, which is easier said than



Chapman's Ringlet © Jeff Clarke

done when they are so restless. However, at least one consented to be photographed and this proved to be quite special: Chapman's Ringlet, a species endemic to the Cantabrican Mountains. Other butterflies recorded here included Lesser Marbled, Dark Green and Marsh Fritillaries, Turquoise Blue and Purple-edged Copper, while the marshy margins of the stream turned up Beautiful Demoiselle and Large Red Damsel.



Owl-fly *Libelloides coccajus* © Teresa Farino

Other winged invertebrates, like a cross between a dragonfly and a butterfly, were also zooming around above the meadow. These were Owl-flies. There are several species to be found locally and they can be hard to separate, but the one photographed in this meadow proved to be *Libelloides coccajus*. They perform similar insect-catching sorties to dragonflies, but up close the distinctive antennae help to distinguish them.

Botanically speaking, the highlight of this meadow was undoubtedly the

Great Yellow Gentians, although they were not quite in flower yet, but we also encountered Water Avens, the bluish Pyrenean form of Spiked Rampion and Chives.

As we travelled on further west we had one of the big surprises of the tour. Just on the boundary of the Picos de Europa, Rob Smith spotted a movement on the rocks above a narrow pass. There, in full view, was a herd of Spanish Ibex. This wild ungulate became extinct in the region

After such a busy morning we were all glad to relax at the picnic site just south of the Puerto de Pandetrave for lunch. Even then, the potential of the site had some members of the group scouring the surrounding scrub for reptiles, and with good reason, as Jeff turned up a rather large Smooth Snake under a slab of rock, although as it promptly made a rapid escape into the undergrowth, not everyone saw it, unfortunately.

After lunch we spent an hour exploring the meadows around the Arroyo de Mostajal, where Sue and Teresa located more Schreiber's Green Lizards, and we also spotted yet another species of Owl Fly, this time *Libelloides hispanicus*. We then



Owl-fly *Libelloides hispanicus* © Teresa Farino

made a slow return towards Pesaguero stopping at likely looking places along the way in a bid to spot a Wildcat. At one of our stops we had excellent views of Rock Bunting, but the best mammal we managed was a Red Fox, doing its best to imitate a cat.

Thursday 28th June

Once again we started the day with a pre-breakfast run through the catch from last night's moth trapping session. As usual there were some splendid moths to enjoy but there was



one in particular that really caught the eye, the large and strikingly marked Privet Hawk-moth. Other species of note included Dusky Marbled Brown, Lobster Moth and several species of emerald: Blotched, Small and Jersey. Often when sorting through the moths of a morning we hear a Black Woodpecker calling from a patch of nearby pines; we live in hope of actually spotting it from the terrace one day...

After breakfast we headed towards Beges, stopping en route at one of the spectacular viewpoints overlooking the La Hermida Gorge. Rather menacing cloud was spilling over the tops of the peaks to the north, though this had the bonus of bringing some of the birds of prey down to lower levels. From here we had excellent views of Honey Buzzards, Common



Fairy Foxglove & Carder Bee © Jeff Clarke

Buzzards and the ever-present Griffon Vultures. Among the vultures we could see swifts scything through the sky, and careful examination showed that a number of these birds were Alpine Swifts, distinguished by their greater bulk and white bellies.

This is often an interesting spot botanically, notable for its limestone fissure flora. The Fairy Foxgloves were in full flower and other plants of interest included the northern Spanish endemic Blue-leaved Petrocoptis, the mauve-flowered wall-lettuce *Lactuca tenerrima*, and the lovely yellow Pyrenean Hawk's-beard.

With a few anxious glances at the tumbling cloud we proceeded up the mountain towards Beges. As we approached the village it became pretty obvious that before very long we were going to be engulfed by the descending cloud. We mulled over the possibilities as we parked at the edge of the village watching an actual catfight. One of the protagonists did look very much like a Wild Cat. Was it one? Very doubtful but perhaps its mother had had a dalliance with tall dark stranger one night!

Teresa is very good at reading the weather in these mountains and we made a smart decision to head back down towards the gorge, stopping in another layby en route to photograph the Fairy Foxgloves. Other plants seen at this locality included both Woodcock and Bee



Spanish Purple Hairstreak © Jeff Clarke

Ophrys, the lemon-yellow snapdragon *Antirrhinum braun-blanquetii*, Sticky Flax, Harebell, Spreading Bellflower and Malling Toadflax.

A few butterflies were active, despite the low cloud, and a Spanish Purple Hairstreak sat just below eye level on a bracken frond with its wings fully open, the deep purple iridescence glowing on its upper wings. A short while later, a False Heath Fritillary posed nicely on top of some Narrow-leaved Valerian growing out of the cliff wall. Stone turning can be productive at this spot but on this occasion we found little other than a smart Slow-worm.

We then drove to a spot bathed in sunshine above Turieno. Even from where we had parked the minibuses we could see that there were plenty of butterflies on the wing close by, and we couldn't wait to take a closer look. For a brief moment a clearwing moth was among them but it promptly disappeared and remained a mystery. Checking out a scrubby corner Steve Dobson found a sunbathing lizard, we eventually got good enough views to confirm it was another male Schreiber's Lizard, but in the meantime, John Hanratty, turning rocks as was his wont, startled a fabulous female Ocellated Lizard. It dashed into the bushes, but a few folks managed to get reasonable photos as it eyed us warily from its position of safety.



We set off slowly up the track, which was full of flowering brambles and other good nectar-rich plants, looking for butterflies. It was noticeable how many Long-tailed Blue butterflies were on the wing, while a large orange, round winged fritillary showed well enough to confirm its identity as Marbled Fritillary. We eventually found a good selection of fritillaries along this track including Queen of Spain, Glanville and another new one for the tour in the

shape of Knapweed Fritillary. As ever Marbled Whites were in abundance and the Iberian form of the Speckled Wood ssp. *aegeria*, with its orange spots, not cream as in the UK ssp. *tircis*, was also on show. Other species along this butterfly-rich trail included Cleopatra, Wood White, False Ilex Hairstreak, Lang's Short-tailed Blue, Mallow and Lulworth Skippers and Pearly Heath.

We were in pursuit of one particular butterfly, however, so we headed for a specific meadow known to Teresa as a good locality for the species. After a period of prolonged but fruitless searching Teresa left to prepare the lunch, meanwhile Jeff took the opportunity to give the meadow one last going over. By now the lure of Teresa's homemade hummus had drawn everyone away, so there was nothing for it but to take it back to the lunch spot where Jeff was able to show everyone a pristine specimen of Large Blue.

After lunch we headed off towards Brez. We were now in the quiet period of the day bird-wise but we were determined to try and find some of the specialities of the region before transferring to our next base in northern Castile. As we worked our way down the trail towards the Pyrenean Oak woodland we could see the hay being harvested in the fields below us. The farmers, with rakes in hand, were steadily creating piles of this valuable crop, ready for baling. It was great to show people just why this area is still so special. No pesticides, natural manures, small machinery and sheer hard labour mean that the Picos de Europa remains a biological jewel.

A little way along the track we also witnessed something quite remarkable. A female Blackcap had captured a Great Green Bush-cricket and flown down to the path in front of us. There was little difference in size between the two protagonists, but with deft flicks and twists of her neck the Blackcap slowly but surely dismembered the giant orthopteran. We were all clustered just a few metres from the bird as she carried on her task, seemingly oblivious to our presence. It must have been similar to a human eating three Christmas dinners!



Other than this episode, however, birds were hard to come by, so after a time Jeff resorted to a bout of long and loud 'pishing'. It worked, as it should, like a charm and dragged lots of birds into view, including a couple of resplendent male Pied Flycatchers, squawking Jays and

a selection of Blue, Great and Coal Tits, but sadly no interesting woodpeckers. A melancholic 'weeping' call signalled the arrival of a couple of Bonelli's Warblers. Some quiet pishing pulled them closer and several members of the group managed excellent views of this little *Phylloscopus* warbler. Not to be outdone, the botanists also turned up some real gems here, including Bloody Crane's-bill, Pyrenean Germander, Large-flowered Self-heal and Fly Orchid, a Slender Broomrape, as well as four species of oak in the space of just a few square metres: Cork, Western Holm, Lusitanian and the aforementioned Pyrenean.



On our return along the track we were passed by a large butterfly which promptly settled on the path. It was one of the more distinctive 'brown' butterflies a Great Banded Grayling, an expected but nonetheless appreciated addition to our growing butterfly list, along with another new species for the day in the shape of Dark Green Fritillary.

As we returned in the direction of our base but decided to take an alternative route in the shade of the hill along the 'old' road to Frama. The track was pretty narrow and at times needed the assistance of Rob Smith to guide the vehicles 'Army Style' through the narrowest of sections. However, the big pay-off came a few minutes later when we were treated to an eye-ball to eye-ball encounter with a Short-toed Eagle. It was so surprised about what we were doing that it came back again just for another close look. I'm sure that this will be one of the most indelible wildlife encounters of the tour for almost everyone; it was simply brilliant!

That evening we had a splendid and 'noisy' meal and thanked our hosts at El Hoyal. After the meal a few of us still had the energy to go out and do a bit of 'batting'. We certainly recorded Common Pipistrelle and Daubenton's Bat, and we also picked up a horseshoe bat on our detectors, which was probably Lesser Horseshoe. It was on this walk that we discovered that Steve Dobson's night vision and hearing are off the scale compared to mere mortals. He could hear the bats before we picked them up on the detectors, as well as observe them without any difficulty flying along in what, for most of us, was inky blackness.

Friday 29th June



Transfer day. We set off around 10.00am, by which time Steve Dobson had finally managed to get a glimpse of the Black Woodpecker that had taunted us all week. We were transporting that much kit that this was a three vehicle operation so we co-opted Rob Smith to drive Teresa's 4x4. The route to our new base would take us through some fantastic habitats and we would in fact spend far more of the day looking for wildlife than travelling.

Our first stop was by a small damp meadow just beyond the mountain pass of Piedrasluengas (1,345m). We dispersed in various directions trying to find as much as we could. The herpetologists were intent on finding snakes but had to be content with a few Iberian and Common Wall Lizards, but did spot a Red Deer as it crashed out of the meadow, alarmed by our presence.

The botanists located Spiked Star of Bethlehem and the woolly-leaved *Hieracium lainzii* up on the rocky slopes, the lovely bronze-coloured goatsbeard *Tragopogon crocifolius* in the verge, and sheets of Musk Mallow and Musk Thistle in the meadow proper. Quite a number of butterflies were enjoying the sunshine here, including Piedmont Ringlet and Peacock, and some of us were also lucky enough to catch a brief glimpse of a Narrow-bordered Bee



Hawkmoth, although the related Hummingbird Hawkmoths were much more abundant, and Jean Bulmer got some of her fabulous photographs of them feeding on the Viper's-bugloss here.

As we cleared the pass the valley opened out somewhat and White Storks were immediately noticeable, after which we spotted a pair of Egyptian Vultures circling low close to the roadside. A little further on we paused by some roadside poplars on a hunch of Teresa's and duly located a fabulous Hornet Clearwing, recently emerged from its pupa and resting on the trunk in the hopes of finding a mate. One of the most startling mimics in the European fauna, this



Hornet Clearwing moth © Teresa Farino

female was so convincingly hornet-like that most people could scarcely believe it was actually a moth. By the number of shutters whirring on cameras it was a popular find.

Just a short distance further down the road we stopped briefly in the village of Vañes to admire the locally breeding White Storks. Well-grown young were standing patiently atop their huge stick nests waiting for the adults to return with a beak-full of regurgitated grasshoppers, or perhaps – if they were lucky – an unwary frog, lizard or vole.... Also flying the general vicinity was the Black Kite, a species well adapted to this farmland region.



Iberian Marbled White © Charles Russell

Just above Cervera we stopped at a mirador, and almost immediately you could tell that we had entered a new climatic region as the butterflies were somewhat different. Most noticeable was the fact that most of the Marbled Whites were in fact Iberian Marbled Whites and we also found its close relative Esper's Marbled White, as well as Heath Fritillary and the day-flying Feathered Footman moth. We took advantage of the shade here to have our usual scrumptious lunch.

We were now headed for a rendezvous with a mystery 'green' lizard at the Embalse de Ruesga. We disembarked the minibuses and slowly fanned out across the sloping ground, which was scattered with low spiny bushes. It didn't take long before we found the first one and over the period of an hour or so we found several more, but what were they? Photographs were taken and close scrutiny of the salient features noted and the conclusion was Western Green Lizard, close to the southern limit of their range.

That wasn't the end of the reptile hunt however and we kept scouring likely spots whilst keeping an eye on the many butterflies that were fluttering about. John and Jeff had the same idea of working the shoreline, which was alive with Iberian Water Frogs. Lift enough stones and you will eventually find what you are looking for and sure enough below one of the waterside boulders was a young Viperine Snake, which – on this occasion – we were able to get almost the whole group down to see.



Butterfly-wise we were encountering a few new species, most obvious being the many Silver-studded Blues. Most of these were males, gathered in damp patches close to the

water's edge sucking up much-needed moisture and mineral salts. Flitting around the grassland were Essex Skipper, Black-veined White, Turquoise Blue, Spotted, Small Pearl-bordered and Knapweed Fritillaries and Chestnut Heath. Notable day'-flying moths here included Clouded Buff and *Zygaena nevadensis*, recently christened Discrete Burnet by Patrice Leraut. One or two dragonflies also put in an appearance: Black-tailed Skimmer, Broad-bodied Chaser, and Common and Azure Bluets.



It was now seriously hot and people were beginning to wilt. It was time to head for our new base at the El Convento de Santa María de Mave. That evening we set the moth trap in the grounds and were delighted to have a Nightjar flying around us for a short time.

Saturday 30th May

Having set the moth trap the previous evening in the hotel grounds we were keen to examine the night's catch, although the cold start and heavy dew wasn't promising. Indeed the returns from the trap were slim pickings compared to the Picos de Europa, with just Ruby Tiger, Rose-banded Wave and L-Album Wainscot really catching the eye, plus 'lesser mortals' such as Dark Sword-grass, Four-dotted Footman and The Vestal.



After breakfast we headed out to in the direction of the nearest of the *páramos*, known locally as 'Las Tuerces'. We started by exploring a farmland area along a road close to the Río Pisuerga. We could hear Bee-eaters immediately but it would be a while before we caught up with them properly. One of the first birds decisively on our list was a Montague's Harrier. These lightweight agile harriers do well in this low

intensity arable landscape of northern Castile, and we would see them several times more, as well as adding plenty of other raptor species as the day progressed.

Butterflies were already busy and we got good pictures of some very fresh Spanish Gatekeepers. Working our way along the road we added a few more species to our list, including the dainty Red-underwing Skipper. We kept getting glimpses of one of the larger blue butterflies but they were pretty restless and it took Teresa's experienced eye to finally sort out the identification as Amanda's Blue. Thankfully one of the males finally settled down and consented to be photographed. Here too we found the lovely little Slender Scotch Burnet moth.



Spanish Gatekeeper © Charles Russell



Blue Catananche © Teresa Farino

As ever the birders were alive to other possibilities and close scrutiny of bush tops revealed several sentinel-like Southern Grey Shrikes. The skirl of Corn Buntings was ever present and we had excellent views of one with Bee-eaters floating around behind it. The occasional Quail could be heard calling "wet-my-lips", but as usual kept to cover. The botanists in the group were enjoying some of the wayside flowers such as Silvery-leaved Pink Convolvulus, Blue Catananche, the curry-scented *Helichrysum stoechas*, Pyramidal Orchids galore and some very extravagant Lizard Orchids.

Further up the trail we stopped again when we heard some very vociferous Rock Sparrows, and finally managed to track them down on a rubbly bank. At this point we were also treated to a male Montagu's Harrier mobbing a Booted Eagle, and also spotted a Red-backed Shrike. In the ditch were the large yellow pea-flowers of Dragon's-teeth, as well as the pink spikes of Sainfoin.

We took lunch under the shade of the poplars at one of our favourite stops alongside the Río Pisuerga. While Teresa set up lunch we pursued dragonflies, butterflies and birds, and some folks attempted to find a snake or two in a likely riverside spot.

There were plenty of birds about, with Sand Martins swirling over the fast running river, a Great Reed Warbler singing strongly and showing briefly for a some and the more familiar

'standard' Reed Warbler present in the marginal vegetation. Nightingales were singing and an Iberian Chiffchaff was also belting out song from the nearby poplars.

After lunch we managed to get some photographs of the various invertebrates that were flying around. Hummingbird Hawkmoths were a popular option and there was a bit of competition to see who could secure the best in-flight shot. A small area of bramble was particularly attractive to one of the fritillaries, in this case a Lesser Marbled Fritillary, which duly



Photographing Lizard Orchids © Jeff Clarke



Lesser Marbled Fritillary © Jeff Clarke

became digitally archived on most people's cameras. As ever the small 'bluet' damselflies proved a challenge but the 'Viking helmet horns' on the 1st abdominal segment of some of those under scrutiny proved that we had Mercury Bluet amongst them, including a copulating pair.

We then decided to head for the limestone pavement area on the summit of Las Tuerces which is commonly referred to as Sculpture City. By the time we arrived the weather had cooled and it was pretty breezy; after so many hot days some

people were taken by surprise and had to find additional layers to keep warm. Among the plants new to us here were the succulent, lurid-pink-flowered *Pistorinia hispanica*, Wall Germander, prostrate *Centaurea lagascana*, delicate spikes of St Bernard's Lily, Wild Gladiolus and Blue Aphyllanthes.



As usual the snake hunters scattered across the landscape. This is not because they are anti-social but because most reptiles are very sensitive to vibration and movement and a big horde of tramping feet is guaranteed to send them for cover. The tactic proved a winner, as Sue and John's herp-heightened instincts led them to a likely-looking boulder. There, basking next to it, was a vaguely familiar looking snake. On examination it proved to be a Southern False Smooth snake, our third snake species of the tour.



As we arrived our vehicles had disturbed a flock of small larks. A group of birders led by Jeff set off to solve the mystery. After a few minutes we located the flock and by careful positioning everyone was now able to get excellent views of these Woodlarks. This same group then set off in search of other goodies and presently had close views of passing Griffon Vultures and a very close fly-by of a hunting Montague's Harrier. A radio message alerted us to the snake but we got a little diverted by some flowering Fragrant Orchids and a flock of Crossbills, so unfortunately some of us didn't get there in time to see it.

A very nice bonus awaited all of us in the shape of two Apollo butterflies, spotted by sharp-eyed Steve: a recently mated pair no less. The cooling breeze had clearly grounded them and despite our proximity they remained *in situ*. Almost everyone took the time to photograph these seriously impressive and very large, altitude loving, butterflies.



Purpuricenus budensis © Teresa Farino

By now some folks were getting distinctly cold and we headed back towards the vehicles. As we neared the mini-buses Jeff picked up a chunky longhorn beetle with brilliant crimson wing-cases, which Teresa swiftly identified as *Purpuricenus budensis*, as she'd had the good fortune to find one of these charismatic creatures here the previous year.



male Apollo butterfly © Teresa Farino

Sunday 1st July

In a slight change of plan for today, partly influenced by the weather, we decided to head further south, towards the Canal de Castilla. We arrived at an old Water Mill near Ventosa de Pisuerga and began working our way along the verdant banks. There was plenty of bird activity, with Melodious Warblers, in particular, blasting out their fantastically varied song from many points along the path. Cetti's Warblers would join in periodically and we also had plenty of views of Iberian Chiffchaff. Further along the track we gathered to watch a series of birds of prey appear across the adjacent fields, starting with Marsh Harrier. In the distance pair of Honey buzzards began to spiral aloft and joining them for a time was a Goshawk. Whilst we were enjoying this raptor fest, a bird appeared at the top of a bare tree on the other side of the canal: there, contorting its neck characteristically, was a Wryneck.

The bird excitement didn't stop there. On the return trip we all looked up as the Swallows started yipping in alarm. The cause was immediately obvious: a scimitar-winged falcon that was fizzing low overhead. It was an incredible view of an adult Hobby, our only sighting of this hirundine-catching specialist during the tour.

A good variety of butterflies were also on show here. Teresa potted a Dark Green Fritillary, so anyone who had missed out earlier now got a chance to enjoy this large, attractive, butterfly, and there were plenty of Great Banded Graylings soaking up the morning sun, sometimes even with open wings, which is a rare occurrence with this cryptic butterfly. Owing to the abundance of flowering *Phlomis fruticosa* here we'd been hoping for Sage Skipper, but perhaps we were too early in the season, as we only came across Lulworths.

This was supposed to be a brief stop but there was so much to see we stayed far longer than planned. Western Demoiselles danced along the marginal vegetation, and at one point we were looking down into a water trap where we could see the sad corpses of several dead mice, when below them we spotted large crayfish, obviously not short of food, with Iberian Water Frogs in the same pool.

After elevenses it really was time to move on, so we headed further along the canal to a small reserve with lagoons and reedbeds: the Laguna de la Toja. We immediately observed at least five different Marsh Harriers, both males and females, coursing over the reedbeds. The open water had plenty of birds on view,



but other than a mass of Mallards and a few Coot, we only managed to find Great Crested and Little Grebes, with nothing else of note. The reedbeds, however, were alive with warblers and it was good that most people managed to connect with the Great Reed Warblers, if a little distantly.

The fields next to the wetland held a number of Crested Larks and Linnets, but the heat haze was now intense so picking out any 'non-calling' small passerines at any distance became nigh on impossible. One bird that couldn't be missed, however, due to its incessant and insistent song, was the Zitting Cisticola, also known as the Fan-tailed Warbler. Even so it took some spotting as it yo-yoed through the air in display. As it turned out, its nest was very close to the main hide overlooking the lagoon.

All around us there were masses of butterflies, but nearly all of them turned out to be Iberian Marbled Whites and Clouded Yellows. We also spotted a Blue Emperor Dragonfly and a male Azure Bluet, but the fence around the lagoon prevented us from exploring any further, so it was time to move on.

We lunched at the lock system near Ribas de Campos where, thankfully, there was some shade on offer from the old waterworks buildings. There were plenty of birds around, with the most popular probably being the Rock Sparrows that were nesting in holes in the walls of the lock



system itself. Several folks took the opportunity to get good photographs of these birds, while a few people caught a glimpse of a Kingfisher. A Grey Wagtail was also in the vicinity.

After lunch Teresa and Jeff re-parked the mini-buses further down the track and people slowly worked their way along the waterways. A Common Sandpiper sat on a pile of debris on one small lagoon and the blast of Cetti's Warbler song emanated from waterside shrubbery. A distant Booted Eagle was spotted hunting over the adjacent fields, with a Black Kite in the sky at the same time for comparison.

The final lagoon was slightly larger with reeds and rushes surrounding it. A couple of Little Grebes graced the water and by positioning ourselves in the gaps in the surrounding tree cover we gained superb close sightings of Great Reed Warblers hunting for insects. This was one of the few places where there was an abundance of dragonfly activity and Broad Scarlet darter and a Blue Emperor were both readily seen by all. It was also a great auditory experience; at times the croaking from the Iberian Water Frogs was astonishingly loud, comfortably drowning out both Cetti's and Great Reed Warblers.

By now the heat of the day had reached its zenith and following cold drinks it was decided to head for higher ground and cooler conditions, so we returned to the limestone plateau closest to Mave. We hoped to time our arrival with the incoming Griffon Vultures that roost in the nearby gorge – the Cañón de la Horadada – but we could only find a single bird, hunched in its rocky lair. Masses of Jackdaws swirled around the cliffs, their excitable calls echoing of the canyon walls, while a few skylarks were dotted around on the plateau, but it was otherwise quiet on the bird front.

The herpetologists searched in vain for Lataste's Viper, only catching glimpses of scuttling wall lizards but there was still plenty to see. The botanists found Meadow Clary, Round-headed Leek and more *Pistorinia hispanica* in the dry limestone pastures, but the thin soils had long since dried out in the heat of summer, and this habitat is undoubtedly better appreciated in the spring.

Butterflies on the wing included an abundance of Esper's and Iberian Marbled Whites, plus Adonis Blue, Spanish Gatekeeper and Chestnut Heath, but the real eye-catchers were a couple of day flying moths, both belonging to the family Zygaenidae: the Burnets. The first was *Zygaena sarpedon*: the Royal, or Occidental, Burnet, which has stripes, rather than spots, plus a striking red band on its abdomen, and we also found *Zygaena rhadamanthus*, bizarrely christened 'Algarve Burnet' by Patrice Leraut, which is a particularly striking crimson and grey creature, quite unlike any of the UK moths of this genus.



Zygaena rhadamanthus © Teresa Farino

We retired to the hotel, where our evening meal was followed the world cup final, which was of course won by Spain, much to Teresa's delight.

Monday 2nd July

Our last full day in the Páramos of northern Castile started at the first light of dawn for those wanting to search for Iberian Wolf (Jeff & John). We set off in the direction of Las Tuerces, aiming slowly, slowly for the nearest plateau, scanning as we went. One of the first things we disturbed was a Quail, which had been gritting at the side of the road. It shot off across a wheat field like the proverbial bullet.

We gave it a good go but the Iberian canid avoided our detection. It was, though, magical to be up on the plateau at that hour of the day, enjoying the memorable sight of a Skylark



backlit by the rays of the rising sun as it sat just metres away on karst limestone hump. We also had fabulous views of a female Montague's Harrier hunting below us. On our return the sun was up on some riverside poplars, from which the fluting sounds of Golden Oriole could be heard. We managed a flight-only view of a female over the canopy, but back near to the hotel, Eve was enjoying the same species at considerably closer quarters.

Straight after breakfast we headed for a small gorge on the road going down to Hoyos del Tozo, on the southern edge of the Páramo de la Lora. As we entered the gorge road, the forward van driven by Teresa stopped a little way ahead. By good fortune the group in Jeff's vehicle was then treated to a superb view of a male Rock Thrush, which flew right in front of our stationary vehicle and promptly sat barely a bonnet's length away from our windscreen on a roadside sign.

We were hoping to catch the local Griffon Vultures at their roost before they launched off for a day's carrion scouring. As we drove through, a few birds were still on their rocky pinnacles so we dropped the group nearby to give everyone the chance to see the vultures close at hand. Teresa and Jeff then drove on to a suitable turning point. As the group reached the vultures most were still in place but very soon afterwards they began to peel off into the blue sky. Thankfully at least one person in the group managed a few shots of the birds.

We then had a rummage around the top end of the gorge looking mainly for new birds. We saw several Subalpine Warblers, including a family party, and also had Northern Wheatear, and Blue Rock Thrush.

Griffon Vultures © Steve Dobson



Flowers there included Common Asphodel and the botanists were kept busy with a good variety of other plants, including Blue Aphyllanthes, Round-headed Leek, Bearberry, Felty Germander, Cornish Heath, the lovely yellow spikes of Phlomis lychnitis, Spiked Star-of-Bethlehem and much more besides. A few butterflies were already on the wing among the blossoms and included good numbers of Pearly Heath, Knapweed Fritillary, Long-tailed Blue and a Grayling.

John Hanratty meanwhile was off on a nearby heath in search of snakes. Sadly he didn't see any but Teresa's group went to collect him and found a few more butterflies there, including Silver-studded Blue, Great Banded Grayling and Small Skipper. Jeff's group then headed down the road in the opposite direction with the intention of joining the others at a rendezvous point. As they progressed down the road they chanced upon a Black-eared



Amanda's Blue © Teresa Farino

Wheatear. After a bit of a hiatus while the two teams relocated each other, our two-way radios proving invaluable to the process, we headed for Sargentas de la Lora. We drove through a landscape perfect for shooting a 'Spaghetti Western', passing some 'nodding donkeys' along the way before arriving at an ancient dolmen, or Neolithic burial chamber. As we approached the site we had very close views of a Short-toed Eagle perched in a tree, its disproportionately huge head being something of a give-away as to its identity.

This site had a different feel to it from most of the other places we had visited, being very steppe-like in character. Over lunch we had plenty of interesting butterflies to enjoy including the attractive Amanda's Blue and the by now familiar Spanish Gatekeeper. There was a damp flush in a small depression close by and here we had Western Demoiselle damselflies. The same spot also held 'Spanish' Yellow Wagtails, while a warbler singing in the depths of cover by the flush turned out to be a rather 'out of context' Garden Warbler.

Floristically the stop was very productive and included the likes of *Senecio doria*, Carthusian Pink and Chives, but the real highlight of the lunch stop was without doubt a fantastic period of about 10 minutes when a succession of vultures – both Egyptian and Griffon – circled low over our feasting group. These were to be our closest encounters of the week with these huge birds.

As we made to leave the site, heading for the next destination, we intercepted a Hoopoe which settled on a small concrete platform and proceeded to give incredibly close views, at least to the group in Jeff's vehicle. This bird seemed blithely unaware of our proximity and perfectly demonstrated the value of using a vehicle as a hide. After a time we lost the bird in cover and took this as our cue to head for our next port of call: Pesquera de Ebro.



Medieval Bridge at Pesquera de Ebro © Eve Templeton

This village is located at the foot of a dramatic canyon carved out of the limestone by the infant Río Ebro, which can be exceptionally good for raptors, although unfortunately not while we were there. We found a pull-in that would give us access to the top of the plateau close to the canyon, but the locality proved to be a bit disappointing in terms of its birds and

butterflies, though perhaps not surprisingly, as we were in the doldrums of the day and it was very hot. We did however find a good variety of interesting plants, including three different junipers (Common, Prickly and Spanish), Love-in-a-Mist, Blue Pimpernel (*Anagallis foemina*), Broad-leaved Everlasting-pea, yellow-flowered *Argyrobium zanonii*, Ground-pine, the dwarf sage *Salvia lavandulifolia*, *Scorzonera graminifolia*, Blue Catananche and Sawfly Ophrys.

Once we had exhausted the possibilities here, we drove down into Pesquera, and headed for the picnic area below the village, on the banks of the Ebro. We were all more than ready for a cold drink as we were hot and it was getting very humid. This location did produce a few items of interest with more Spanish Gatekeeper, Wood White, False Ilex Hairstreak and Western Demoiselle, but the only new invertebrate here was Bryony Ladybird, picked up on our walk to the village. Bird-wise it was very quiet, apart from some young Great Spotted Woodpeckers feeding low down on a poplar trunk, and Red backed Shrike during the walk.

We recovered the minibuses and collected the group from the picturesque Medieval bridge over the Ebro at the lower end of the village. We then decided to head for the canyon viewpoint, where the obligatory group photo was taken, although John Hanratty somehow managed to dodge the camera (is Interpol looking for him?)...

Full Group Photo (well almost) © Jeff Clarke



We then had a leisurely drive back towards the hotel, diverted by a couple of temporary stops to enjoy Southern Grey Shrikes and a pair of Short-toed Eagles. Although it had felt like a bit of a poor day bird-wise, when we did the summary that evening we had actually seen nine species of raptor and a host of new birds for the trip.

Tuesday 3rd July



Aspen Lappet © Teresa Farino

A final moth trapping session in the grounds of the hotel was once again stymied by the clear, cold conditions overnight. There were still a few notable species in the selection, however, including Brussels Lace, Peppered Moth, Poplar Hawkmoth and Ground Lackey, but the big surprise was an Aspen Lappet, which we were only able to confirm after the tour.

After breakfast we packed up the vehicles and headed for the coast, arriving at our lunchtime destination of

the Dunas de Lienres around mid-day. The dune system itself has been declared a Natural Park, despite it being a popular destination for coastal recreation, and as anticipated on such a lovely day, the car park was packed. If you travel just a few metres into the dunes, however, it immediately becomes a much quieter place.

Within 100 metres we had encountered several Western Three-toed Skinks slinking through the sparse dune vegetation, and we subsequently spread out in search of the Western Green Lizards that are known to frequent this habitat. After a time Steve Dobson managed to locate a male and anyone who wished to see it did manage to get good views, but only by getting on your knees and peering with binoculars deep into the cover where it had taken refuge.

Butterfly-wise it was relatively quiet, with initially just a few Common Blues pirouetting around across the dune slacks. However the star attraction on the Lepidoptera front were the large and beautifully marked Spurge Hawkmoth caterpillars, varying in background colour from vibrant yellow to a rich orange red.

Coastal dune systems always have their own rich floral community



Spurge Hawkmoth caterpillar © Joyce & Tony Harbottle

and Teresa took a group to explore the dunes for some choice plants whilst Jeff and a few non-botanically minded folks set up lunch under some shady pines. Teresa's group duly located characteristic psammophiles of the Atlantic coast, including Sea Spurge, Sea Bindweed and Sea-holly,



female Copper Demoiselle © Joyce & Tony Harbottle

as well as Coastal Crucianella: a tough, sprawling member of the bedstraw family (Rubiaceae) with whorls of honey-scented yellow flowers, which was unfamiliar to most members of the party. Abundant clumps of Sea Daffodil leaves made us wish that it were late July, when this exquisite species comes into bloom. Other less obligate dune plants included Jersey Pink, the everlasting flower *Helichrysum stoechas* and some rather desiccated specimens of Heart-flowered Serapias, Bee Orchid and Greater Butterfly Orchid.

After lunch we drove to another part of the coastal system to have a very quick look for a particular member of the Damselfly family: the delightful Copper Demoiselle. In a small creek we enjoyed watching both males and females, dancing around the overhanging vegetation, the males clearly sparring for the best position to intercept receptive females. All too soon, unfortunately, our time was up and we headed back to the airport where we said our goodbyes.

Overall we had been lucky with the weather on most days of the tour and we had all found and enjoyed a tremendous variety of wildlife. For the birdwatchers there were many highlights, with at least 116 species recorded, but the Wallcreepers are always going to be top of the list. We also managed to locate an impressive variety of reptiles and amphibians – 18 species in total – with John H's Southern Smooth Snake, arguably, topping the chart for best find, although Steve Dobson's green lizards were also much appreciated. On the whole, the spring and summer of 2012 were very poor for Lepidoptera over much of Western Europe and our butterfly total was somewhat under-par compared with trips to the same area in other years. Perhaps the morning in the damp meadow near San Glorio stands out on the butterfly front, but for many the Apollos at Las Tuerces were the find of the tour. Botanically speaking, it was of course getting quite late in the season, even so we found some truly wonderful plants in flower, notably at the top of the cable car.

Mammals are always difficult to find with groups as they are so sensitive to human presence and our moderate species total was to be expected, although the Spanish Ibex stand out because they were definitely not on our anticipated trip list!

Final Frames © Teresa Farino



The contribution of so many fabulous pictures to the report by the members of the party, are a testament to their enthusiasm and commitment in helping to make the tour so successful. Special thanks to Rob Smith for driving Teresa's 4 x 4 between venues and again to Rob, together with Steve Dobson, for their assistance with kit lugging during the hotel transfers, all of which helped enormously.

We obviously hope you enjoyed the tour. Northern Spain, especially the Picos de Europa, which is a very special place and a real biodiversity hotspot. We hope you will encourage others to visit the area as the 'eco-tourist euro' is essential to maintain the biodiversity of this region. We hope to see you all again very soon.

Warmest regards

Jeff Clarke & Teresa Farino; 2012

For information about future tours please visit our websites:

Jeff Clarke: <http://www.jeffclarkeecology.co.uk/>

Teresa Farino: <http://www.iberianwildlife.com/>