



Sunrise Birding LLC  
**SPANISH  
PYRENEES**



June 16 – 24, 2014  
**Trip Report & Species List**



Photos (top to bottom): Stemless Gentian, Ring Ouzel, Bee Orchid, Happy group!



Sunrise Birding LLC

www.sunrisebirding.com

# Spanish Pyrenees BIRDS & NATURE TRIP REPORT

June 16-24, 2014

Leaders: Steve Bird & Gina Nichol

## *Memorable moments and group favorites:*

- Lammergeier Lunch
- Wallcreeper
- Stunning scenery
- Orchids and Flowers
- Alpine Marmot
- Chamois and babies
- The Short-toed Eagle carrying a snake
- Great Views of Hoopoes and Bee-eaters
- A Dipper feeding its chick on the river
- Alpine Accentor
- Mr. Agreeable aka Steve
- Flat Stanley's mojo working!

Day 1 – Just after mid-day we met at Barcelona airport, loaded the vans and headed west out of the city to the Spanish countryside. From the road, we saw our first Magpies, Swifts, Barn Swallows and White Storks. Some power poles held multiple active White Stork nests and the views of them elicited gasps of delight from the crowd. Our first Egyptian Vulture was also seen en route with views much improved later in the trip.

We arrived at our lovely accommodation in the small village of Loporzano and settled in but were soon out for our first birding excursion near the village cemetery. There were Corn Buntings in nearly every direction and a Tawny Pipit perched on the corner of the stone wall. On the opposite corner a Black-eared Wheatear was on show and our first Woodchat Shrike looked handsome perched atop a round bush. Crested Larks and Greenfinch were seen against the



backdrop of Montearagon Castle across the valley. Butterflies were in abundance feeding on the many wildflowers around including Clouded Yellow, Spanish Gatekeeper, Small White, Bath White, and Long-tailed Blue. A Hummingbird Hawk Moth came in close feeding on some Scabious flowers and showing its long proboscis. There were Black Kites, Common Swifts, Linnets, and a Black Wheatear was a bit of a surprise as we expected it to be around the castle.

Lisa spotted a distant bird perched on a power line which turned out to be Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, another surprise! We moved closer and eventually got great views of the bird and below it we found a Sardinian Warbler and another Tawny Pipit. There were Bee-eaters in the area, Rock Sparrow, and a Common Kestrel eating a lizard on the wing. A Blue Rock Thrush quickly disappeared down the hillside and we called it a day. Back to the lodge and before dinner, Lisa and Steve added White Wagtail to our day list. All in all, it was a great start to the tour.

Day 2 – Today we were up and out early and as we drove away from the lodge we had two Red Foxes hunting in the fields just down the road. As we made our way to the cemetery the red ball sun was rising and as we arrived it was already up. Wood Larks were singing and display flighting throughout the morning and we had good views of a Cirl Bunting and another handsome **Woodchat Shrike** in the morning light. Corn Buntings began singing and there was a distant Egyptian Vulture. John spotted a Hoopoe flying away up the valley, so we moved in that direction. A singing Nightingale drew our attention to another Hoopoe perched in a tree that sat for a long time allowing good prolonged views. Two Bee-eaters sat on a bare shrub, and a Greenfinch looked yellow in the morning light. We worked our way back adding Goldfinches, Subalpine Warbler, Serins and a Western Orphean Warbler that showed fairly well. Visions of cereal buntings suggested it was time for breakfast so we headed back to the Casa.



After breakfast we went to bird around **Montearagon Castle**, stopping for nine Bee-eaters and a Northern Wheatear on the way. Below the castle in the rocky slopes we had Black Wheatear, Black-eared Wheatear, Rock Sparrow and a Blue Rock Thrush in difficult light but

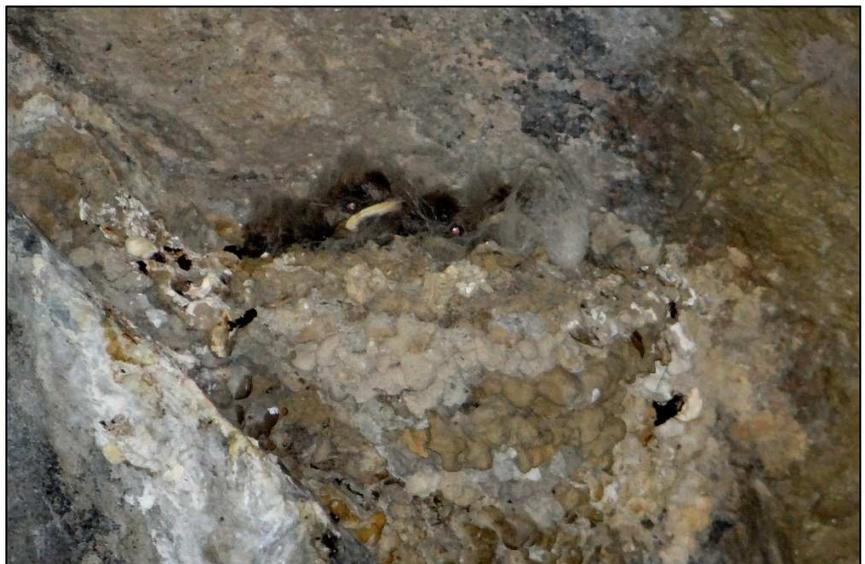


eventually dropped down in front of the cliff showing its lovely blue color. We moved up to the Castle adding a nice male Stonechat on a bush and a Common Kestrel came across the valley and started kiting in front of the castle. Ann pointed out at Common Buzzard in the “cleavage” of two distant hills and Toby spotted a Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush perched on a sign allowing even better views than yesterday. Down the hill there was a female Spectacled Warbler which stayed low but showed well briefly.

We continued on toward the mountains stopping in Jaca for a few supplies. We had great views of Red Kites along the way and went up to Mount Oreol for lunch. In the pines above and around the picnic area were Coal Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, and Chaffinch and John was keen on finding Hellebore and several Greater Butterfly Orchids. A short walk produced nice views of a very showy Wren and a few Crested Tits up in the pines. We carried on to the Hecho Valley and settled into the lodge and spent some time in the garden looking at Griffon Vultures perched on the cliffs up above. The strong wind kept them from flying but eventually some took flight and we started getting to grips with their flight silhouette. In the late afternoon, we took a walk along the road and tried to see Firecrests in the pines and skulky Blackcaps. A Buzzard conceded views floating up the valley but the pines concealed the others. As we walked down the hill toward the waterfall bridge, a Cirl Bunting escaped quickly but a pair of Gray Wagtails was seen going in and out of cliff crevices perhaps tending to a nest. We went back to the hotel for a lovely dinner and reviewed our list of the day.

Day 3 – A few of us met before breakfast and counted 20+ Griffon Vultures circling above the hotel – early birds for sure! We walked down the road toward the tunnel and found a nice Cirl Bunting and a showy, singing Garden Warbler. A Booted Eagle was seen in a stoop above the horizon and an Egyptian Vulture patrolled up the river. The Booted Eagle hung over the ridge top and a Red Kite flew by for comparison. As we approached the tunnel Crag Martins flew out and above the river and upon entering the tunnel we found a **nest with three Crag Martin chicks** up near the ceiling. Meanwhile a Gray Heron flew

down along the river and on the other side of the tunnel a Great Tit was seen and Serins were singing in the tree tops. On the way back a female Red-backed Shrike was seen in a brush pile. Lucia stopped on her way to the hotel to tell us that she had found a dead Stone Marten on the road. When we got to the hotel



and inspected it, we found it to be a nursing female. It was unfortunate that to see a dead one but amazing to know this species is in the area.

The skies were gray up the valley and the wind was blowing hard so we decided to head down to the lowlands. On the way down we had another Gray Heron, Red and Black Kites and a Common Buzzard perched on a power pole. We birded near the Aragon River and found House Martins near the bridge, White Wagtail, Garden Warbler, a troupe of quickly moving Long-tailed Tits, and male and female Blackcap. The Nightingales were being skulky but we eventually got glimpses, then good views of them. As we approached the river a Golden Oriole was seen flying down toward the bridge and while we were scoping a White Wagtail on a log another Golden Oriole was seen chasing a Common Cuckoo across the river. A Yellow Wagtail was seen and we tracked down a Chiffchaff and a Common Treecreeper. On the way back for lunch, we had Green Tiger Beetle, Pyramidal Orchid, Broom Rape, and Red-veined Darter.



After our picnic lunch by the river, we headed back toward town with a photo stop for the village of **Berdun**. A coffee stop was much appreciated in town and then we went to Foz de Binies to walk through the scenic gorge. Griffon Vultures were soaring and perched and we had great views of several though we couldn't coax them to come down to investigate us. Red-billed Choughs and Ravens were flying high with the Vultures and Crag Martins were common. A Common Kestrel flew in and perched for a while and then was seen off by a Crag Martin. A couple of Gray Wagtails moved up the river ahead of us and then we arrived at the end of the gorge and spent a little time in a lovely flower and butterfly filled meadow. Butterfly highlights included Scarce Swallowtail, Spanish Chalk Hill Blue, Spanish Gatekeeper, Spanish Purple Hairstreak (Aragon River), Cleopatras,

Large Skippers, Chestnut Heath, Holly Blue, Dark Green Fritillary, and False Ilex Hairstreak. Lisa spotted a Red-backed Shrike in the shrubs at the other end and we had good scope views of it.

We returned to the lodge with a little time to enjoy the view and scan for Lammergeiers and then review our list and enjoy a delicious dinner.

Day 4 – The skies were sparkingly clear this morning and there was a definite chill in the air as we embarked on our pre-breakfast walk. We went to a small side road that offered excellent views of a singing Nightingale, Great Tit, Stonechat, Garden Warbler and a close Bonelli's Warbler.

Since the sky was clear we decided to head up to the Roncal Valley for the day. A pit stop along the way had Steve and Lisa looking at a Dipper in a river behind the service station and the rest of the group had Black Redstart and White Wagtail. We ascended into the mountains where our first

stop along the road offered fabulous panoramic views and several Griffon Vultures drifting over the hills.

Further up we had good views of Northern Wheatear, Linnet and our first **Yellow-billed Choughs**. We spent some time at Pierre St. Martin at 1802 meters and found some Crossbills feeding on pine cones, and two Ring Ouzels. A Red-billed and then a Yellow-billed Chough disappeared down a large hole so we investigated and found a large



black cavern in the ground. On one wall was a young Red-billed Chough not yet fledged.

Near our lunch stop we had good views of Citril Finch and as we finished lunch an Alpine Accentor came up onto a rock not 30 feet away and posed for us. The bird disappeared before all got on to it so we spent the next half hour or so searching the hillside and eventually found the bird again perched up for good scope views. Also around were several Water Pipits displaying and calling, Northern Wheatear, Raven, both Red-billed and Yellow-billed Chough.

On the way back down, John spotted an Alpine Marmot near the road and as we got closer there was a Ring Ouzel under a road sign that showed incredibly well. We continued down stopping for a coffee just before descending the mountains. We crossed over to the Anso Valley stopping for a Robin and some quickly departing Jays and then spent the rest of the afternoon near Zuriza.



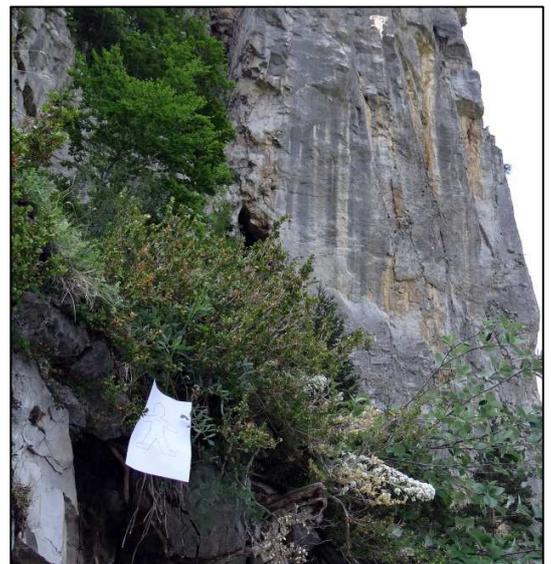
We scanned the river below for Dipper and the skies for raptors and soon found a group of at least six Pyrenean Chamois in the high meadows and three Gray Wagtails and an elusive Dipper in the river. There were **Burnt Tip Orchids** nearby and several Butterflies including Piedmont Ringlet, Silver-studded Blue, Small Tortoiseshell and others. It was a stellar day with many new species and incredible landscapes.

Day 5 – Today was dubbed “The Day of Reckoning” as we planned to hike up to Gabardito to try and find one of our targets, the Wallcreeper. Before breakfast, we walked a short trail below Gabardito that offered Coal Tits, Crested Tit, a singing Chiffchaff and a small family group of Firecrests.

After breakfast, we drove up and parked at the Refugio and as we were getting geared up a Mistle Thrush flew in and landed in the open field allowing good views. We hiked up and crossed paths with a mixed flock which held Long-tailed Tits, Coal Tit, Marsh Tit and a Jay. Our next stop

overlooking an open field and scanned the distant cliffs and found three Lammergeiers first flying together and then coming in to perch on a cliff face. A Black Woodpecker was calling and then flew over the trees down the valley and away.

As we approached the Wallcreeper site, two birds were out on the cliff face flitting and then flying off quickly. Soon after they were back going into a slit on the cliff face where they likely had a nest of hungry chicks. We positioned ourselves below the cliff face and had several views of the birds coming in and out and then interacting with each other on the cliff face. For an hour or so we watched for them and at one point both male and female flew directly over us and perched on a close cliff face. It was about as good as it gets for sightings of these mythical birds and all by lunch time! Our friend **Flat Stanley** had his photo taken with the cliff face in the background in celebration.



A group six Alpine Swifts flew in toward the cliff face chattering loudly and after a few flybys they were off again. The activity died down a bit so we hiked up the mountain to investigate further. Several Griffon Vultures flew low over us as if to check if we were a potential meal and more Alpine Swifts flew by calling loudly. A Short-toed Eagle flew over with the back end of a snake hanging out of its mouth. Lisa spotted two Pyrenean Chamois frolicking on the ridge top and we followed them as they ran down the hillside and stopped at a rock face. It looked like male and female and we noticed another male below. We weren't sure what the interaction was but a little later the female was seen walking up the hill alone. We continued up and enjoyed amazing scenery and then headed back down the mountain and went to Bordo Basaltico to celebrate our victory with the Wallcreeper and Lammergeier. Late in the afternoon we went up to Selva de Oza and found Gray and White Wagtail working along the river above the bridge. We had hoped for Dipper but some swimmers were in the water right at our Dipper site. We walked over the bridge and had great views of a pair of Black Redstarts and further down we could see



Steve doing his Dipper impression and found an adult **Dipper** feeding a well grown chick. We enjoyed fabulous views of the birds and eventually the adult hid the chick on the side of the river and went further down to preen on a rock. A paraglider coming in for a landing

offered mild entertainment and on the way back we had great views of a Jay near a small bridge and returned to the hotel with fond memories of an exceptional day.

Day 6 – Once again we were up early this morning birding along the road up to the farm at Reclusa. We caught Nina up on the Bonelli's Warbler, had a quickly departing Subalpine Warbler, and saw Garden Warbler. A family Group of Magpies were investigating a manure pile at the farm and a nearby Raven made them look small.



After breakfast, we drove up to the Hecho Valley where we found Yellowhammers, Peregrine Falcon, Common Kestrel, Egyptian Vultures, and two Chamois high up the hillside. A little further down we found a family group of Chamois with three babies. Scanning the river, Gina found a Common Sandpiper working among the rocks along the shore. An Alpine Marmot streaked across the road and then back was seen on a rock and then further out in the open grass. Steve found some **Pyrenean Brook Newts** for us including the largest we'd ever seen. Further down the valley we stopped for our picnic lunch by the river. After lunch we walked into a Pine forest on the other side of the road which offered Bullfinches, Coal Tits, Mistle Thrush, and a Red Squirrel.

We had our afternoon coffee break at the riverside Bar and then walked at trail in the woods which held many Robins and a family group of Firecrests. A large black bird streaked across the sky and disappeared into the tree tops which could have only been a Black Woodpecker but the bird could not be relocated. The forest was quiet except for a Common Toad (Pyrenean subspecies) and nice views of a Peacock Butterfly. Since the birding was quiet we decided to enjoy through the gorge above Bocas del Infierno. It offered a couple of Gray Wagtails, some new flowers, and outstandingly beautiful scenery.

Day 7 – This morning before breakfast we headed back to Reclusa Road to try and clean up a few species. On the way, a Great Spotted Woodpecker flew into a tree by the road and we stopped and watched it from the van. We drove up Reclusa Road and as we got out of the van, a Rock Bunting appeared. We spent the next several minutes watching a pair of these difficult birds bringing in nesting material to some small shrubs on the bank. The male kept watch perched above while the female flitted around and eventually entered the bank to work on the nest. A Bonelli's Warbler sang and appeared in the trees right above. We walked down a little and found a Subalpine Warbler that showed well on the top of a tree. A Chiffchaff was singing and we tracked it down on a tree top watching it from eye level from the hillside above. A Buzzard soared above as we drove away to breakfast.

Since we had done so well in the Hecho Valley, we decided to try a new place north of Jaca near the famous Camino de Santiago. Just past Villanovilla we continued on a dirt road into the uninhabited Garcipollera valley and stopped near a small stream. As we got out of the van, Steve heard a Green Woodpecker calling. In minutes we were scoping the bird and



checked its face pattern to verify that it was indeed the Iberian subspecies of Green Woodpecker, a potential split. We explored the **abandoned ruins of Acín and the temple** there which dates back to the eleventh century then continued up toward the old monastery. A river crossing made the trip exciting and we made a stop for a Purple Emperor butterfly. We

arrived at the next river crossing and started walking across the river when Steve spotted four **Lammergeiers** soaring over the ridge up the valley. We watched them circle and fly over toward the Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria de Iguácel and realized that the area around the monastery was wonderful so Steve drove



the van up and we walked a short way to our picnic spot. As we investigated the area Lammergeiers kept appearing and continued as we ate lunch offering great views. Two flew together and John got photos. It was an amazing show.

Heading back over the river, we looked back above the monastery and spotted a kettle of Lammergeiers and counted 8 in total – a record number to see together! (Flat Stanley's mojo strikes again?) Always on the lookout for new and exciting finds, Steve found a couple of Bee Orchids on the ground nearby and these were well photographed.

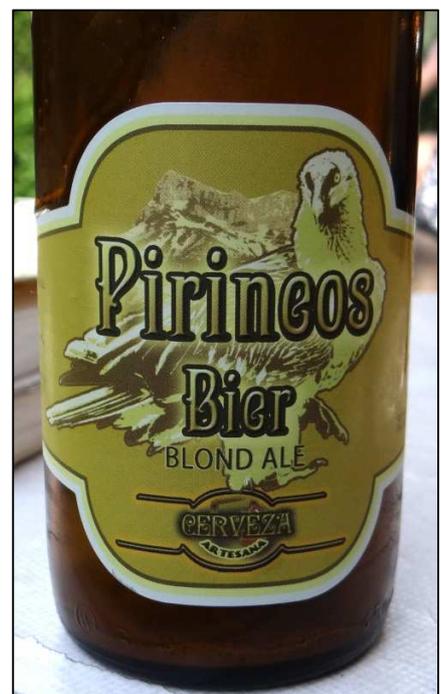
We headed out and continued up the valley toward France stopping at the border and walking through to enjoy the scenery.

Some **Serins** were around and a Black Redstart was flying between the buildings at the top. We explored the seasonal ski/ghost town of Candanchu and the deserted Atun Ski area, enjoyed a quick coffee and headed back down the valley. A stop in Jaca had Steve T posing at a mail box and then we continued back to the Hecho Valley. On the way up we stopped for two Turtle Doves showing well perched on a power line. Some of us opted to visit Siresa village and then we met in the evening for another great dinner and a tour of the **Pirineos Brewery**.



Day 8 – By morning, the overnight storms had cleared the air and it was shaping up to be another gorgeous day. A few of us met before breakfast to bird around the hotel and catch up on a few common species. First up was a Firecrest that showed well in the pines above the car park. Also seen were family groups of Crested Tits and Blue Tits and a handsome looking Great Tit on our way back up the driveway.

After breakfast we packed up, said good bye to our hosts and departed our wonderful mountain hotel. We worked our way down to the lowlands noting that the river had turned red with sediment from the heavy rains. We continued on noting an aquamarine lake that emptied into a river (the same unusual color). Passing the towers of Riglos we stopped at the Embalse de Sotonara to explore the area around the lake for the day. At our first



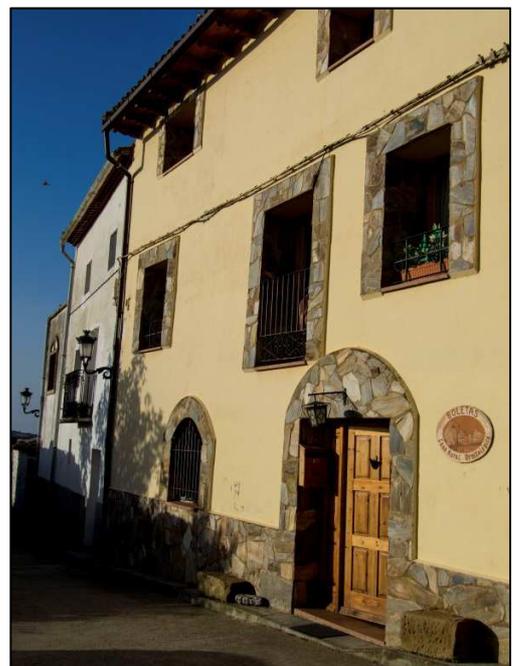
stop, we found several Purple Herons, Great Crested Grebes, Eurasian Coot, Red-crested Pochard with ducklings, Great and Little Egret, and a dodgy Mallard. Three Cattle Egrets perched on the top of some evergreens looked fine in their breeding plumage. There were several Yellow-legged Gulls in the background and a couple of Little Terns. Our lunch stop featured nesting Rock Sparrows, a low flying Marsh Harrier and a flock of sheep being followed by a dozen or so Cattle Egrets. We moved on checking some other stops around the lakeshore and found Collared Doves, Black-winged Stilt and two quickly departing Little Ringed Plovers. The next stop near some ball pines offered a female Spotted Flycatcher, Turtle Doves, Moorhen, a singing Great Reed Warbler, Melodious Warbler, and the effervescent Zitting Cisticola. Butterflies included Tree Grayling and Banded Grayling and a Lesser Emperor dragonfly was seen well.

We got out to the main road and flushed a Hoopoe which flew to the shade of a nearby tree and showed well with its crest expanded. Along the road, there were numerous Goldfinches and Crested Larks.

At the next stop, John spotted a Gull-billed Tern patrolling the lake shore and it flew right in front of us offering great views. Gina noted a small fish swimming on its side close to shore and upon further investigation found there to be a Viperine Snake carrying the fish toward shore. It disappeared under a bush and then a rock to devour its quarry.

As we rounded the lake, Nina spotted a Red-legged Partridge in a wheat field and we noticed a few chicks with it. We continued on toward Huesca noting threatening skies and got a quick cup of coffee before heading to Loporzano to check into **our casa for the night**. Josele was there to greet us and hear some of our stories and we later shared our trip highlights and reviewed our daily list.

In the evening we went to a site overlooking a canyon to check for Eurasian Eagle Owl. We arrived just before dusk and it was a still night, perfect for owl prowling. We got out of the van quietly and checked the rocks up the hill and the slopes and rock faces across the valley. All at once Steve whispered "Flying!" as he had seen an owl move down along the cliff face. We focused on the area and could hear the owl barking. In a few minutes it moved into view with a second owl which looked to be a juvenile. The birds flapped around and called for several minutes as we struggled to get decent views in the waning light. Though most views were wing flaps and shapes, we had found the birds and could tick them for the trip.



Day 9 – There were several storms overnight and we woke up to cloudy skies. Our early start took us to the steppes south of Huesca on our way to Barcelona. We traversed agricultural lands and passed through towns noting numerous White Stork nests on the tallest buildings and old power poles. Our first Roller was seen perched on a roadside tree and we bettered our views several times throughout the morning. The skies remained overcast creating unusually cool conditions for the area and this turned out to be great for birdwatching.



We turned off the main road to and found a **Little Owl** on some stones next to a rabbit colony. The owl flew off but our session here was most productive with three Great spotted Cuckoos and two Stone Curlews in a plowed field next to a wheat field. A Southern Gray Shrike was seen well (one of 5 for the day) and as we continued along we had a family group of Spectacled Warblers. We had Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse flying by and a male Montagu's Harrier coursing over the fields. We found several Little Owls on the various ruined buildings and scoped some of them. There were many Rollers around and Hoopoes and Bee-eaters were seen. Steve found Greater Short-toed Larks and scanned the low grasses for them. Lesser Short-toed Larks were in the area and we got varying views as they skulked along the ground. We moved up to an escarpment where Steve spotted a Common Cuckoo perched in some open branches of a small tree and as we watched it a Southern Gray Shrike knocked it off its perch.

Looking across the sloping landscape below, Lisa spotted a group of **Little Bustards** in the wheat fields. We scoped them and over the next half hour of so counted 26 of these wonderful birds in three different groups roaming the grasses. It was an amazing find since we had been told there were only 3 pairs in the area and they were impossible to find!

Nearby was a bare tree with a Great Spotted Cuckoo, two Bee-eaters and a Southern Gray Shrike. To the left of the Little



Bustards we found three more Stone Curlews in a field as it started to rain. It was getting near lunch time so we loaded up and started back toward the main road. Not far along, Steve stopped for a pair of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse in the middle of a field. The views weren't bad from the bus and we tried to get them in the scope but once they noticed us they turned stealth. We continued on noting our 12<sup>th</sup> Little Owl of the day. And what a day it had been – so many birds and so many surprises! It was a great end of the trip.

From here we traveled to Barcelona through a deluge of rain but our local guide extraordinaire, Steve (aka Mr. Agreeable) got us back safe and sound. We said our good byes at the airport and went away with wonderful memories of an excellent trip in the Spanish Pyrenees.



Enjoying dinner at our wonderful lodge in the Pyrenees!



Trip Report by Gina Nichol. Photos by Gina Nichol, Steve Bird, & John Towers