

Birding in NE Spain, May 14-29, 2014

I visited Barcelona with my wife Pia for a visit to our daughter Dr. Aili Pyhälä who is employed at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. I took two days off to visit the Lleida (Lérida) region with an excellent professional guide Steve West ([steve\(a\)birdinginspain.com](mailto:steve(a)birdinginspain.com), móv. +34-606 855 571) who had been recommended to me. Of my wish-list of about 20 species, he was able to show me all but one, Great Bustard, which had its *lek* already in April this year.

I took the AVANT train from Barcelona Sants station on 14 May at about 6 a.m. and arrived one hour



Golden Eagle juv

later in Lleida where Steve picked me up from the station. We drove straight east for two hours to the Department of Aragón to Planerón, an area near Belchite village established by SOE for the protection of steppe birds. Steve said that our main target Dupont's Lark, a lifer for me, was coming to the end of the singing season but there still were some hopes of hearing and maybe even seeing its courtship flight. We managed to see three individuals flying high and then "parachuting" down while singing. One of these birds was visible a few seconds also on ground, but not enough to focus my camera. A few individuals were flying near ground short distances, but difficult to identify.

Lesser Short-toed Lark (r) was numerous, this subspecies *apetzii* being new for me. I had seen and photographed a local subspecies in Fuerteventura, Canary Islands. Crested Lark and Thekla Lark were common. It was good to learn to distinguish these two species from each other with Steve's excellent



upper left
Common Nightingale
upper right
European Bee-eater

lower left
Great Reed Warbler
lower right
Firecrown



guidance. It was fascinating to visit a site which was dominated by larks, moreover, species that one seldom sees. I cannot claim that I would have memorized their songs.

The most numerous lark was Short-toed Lark which I was somewhat familiar with having seen it near my home in Rome, Italy, and in Kotka, Finland, as a vagrant. The easiest mark for this bird is the dark brown cap and black under-tail. Another European point for me was Calandra Lark, very visible and easy to recognize because of its large size and black underwings.

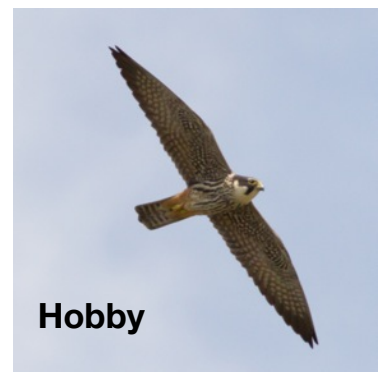
Planerón was good also otherwise. Immediately upon entering the reserve I saw a flock of four **Pin-tailed Sandgrouses**, another lifer, to our right and I managed to get a photo of a pair before they flew off. Steve told me I was truly lucky to see it and at such a short distance. After the larks we drove to a dilapidated building where Little Owl was quietly sitting and a Lesser Kestrel was flying around. When driving out of Lleida, I had seen a Lapwing flying over a field but did not mention it to Steve. When later I said it he responded that it can be seen in May but is not common by any means.



Later we looked around for a couple of hours for Great Bustard but could not find any. Instead, we did see a number of Red-legged Partridges which was a lifer for me, and Stone Curlew was my first in Europe. Turtle Dove was seen. There were a few Southern Grey Shrikes, and I got some nice pictures of Thekla Lark. Steve spotted in the sky Griffon Vulture (new European point for me and threatened by veterinary medicine diclofenac recently permitted by Spain after it had killed 99 % of Gyps vultures in India and Pakistan), Egyptian Vulture and Short-toed Eagle. Kestrels and a Hobby were seen. Black Kites were very common, and we saw a few Red Kites, and a few Marsh Harriers. There were occasional flocks of Red-billed Chough, one Hoopoe, a few Black-eared Wheatears, Stonechat, Linnet, Serin, Woodchat Shrike, and Rock Sparrow.

The most common almost omnipresent birds during the first, and the second day, were Magpie, Carrion Crow, Jackdaw, Spotless Starling (presumably also European Starlings), Common Blackbird, Barn Swallow, and Wood Pigeon.

After lunch in a nice roadside restaurant we visited a small water pond west of Belchite village which was amazing with the variety of birds: Grey Heron, Purple Egret (my first in Europe), Squacco Heron, Yellow-legged Gulls, Black-headed Gulls, a couple of Whiskered Terns (my first in Europe), Black-winged Stilt, Redshank, a **male Hobby hunting dragonflies** and coming so close that photos were possible, and several Great Reed Warblers plus a few Reed Warblers. The most common water birds were gorgeous Red-Crested Pochards (I had seen it in Slovakia in 1973), and there were Little Grebes, Coots, Common Pochards and Mallards.



Steve took me to an excellent surprise, a colony of **Lesser Kestrels** inhabiting a decayed old building and allowing close observation plus photography. Another true stroke of luck was a juvenile **Golden Eagle** which landed behind a hillock near Candanos when we were driving. Steve slowed down, I rolled down the window and prepared my camera when we came near the place where the

Eagle had landed. There it was on the ground, less than 20 meters from us! It saw us and this second year juvenile took to flight peacefully, but only to land on a shed just 30 meters from us where it could be photographed for several minutes. Carrion Crows and Jackdaws were pondering whether to harass the giant and decided not to. The eagle took again to flight and circled around the shed giving us superb views. Both Steve and I were practically breathless and agreed that this was a once-in-a-lifetime close encounter with the Golden Eagle, spontaneously and without bait!

Coming back to Lleida, Steve had some urgent business and he left me around 6 p.m. at the entrance to Mitjana Municipal Park along the Segre river. What a wonderful spot



to observe forest birds! There were hundreds of local people canoeing, cycling, running, or just walking. What surprised me was that there were perhaps a hundred singing **Common Nightingales**, some of them totally unafraid of humans. My best observation was seeing the Green Woodpecker twice, once climbing a tree and once flying. I know from experience that you can often hear it, but seeing it is a different matter. Another good species was Zitting Cisticola. I got wonderful close-up pictures of Great Reed Warbler. Golden Orioles were common. Other birds were Great Tit, European Goldfinch, Greenfinch, Melodious Warbler, European Bee-eater, Reed Warbler, Chiffchaff, House Sparrow, Tree Sparrow, European Robin, Garden Warbler (passage migrant), Blackcap, Serin, Linnet, Hoopoe, and I heard Wryneck. Three Yellow-legged Gulls flew over. Lots of Swifts, Barn Swallows, House Martins, and one Mallard.

I slept at Hotel Real, conveniently located on the main road along river Segre. On Thursday afternoon at 16:00 hrs I took the train to Barcelona arriving at 18:10.

The morning of Thursday May 15 first Steve took me first to the old Alfés airport in order to find the Red-necked Nightjar, and when we arrived at 06:00 there was promptly one bird calling. We did not manage to see it, but we also heard Scops Owl, without seeing it.

We headed for the Lleida municipal dump. It was amazing to see dozens and dozens of Black Kites, Carrion Crows, Jackdaws, White Storks, Cattle Egrets, and several Grey Herons all scavenging in a concentrated manner, more and more bird flocks in the sky heading that way. The tall buildings of Lleida town have at least a hundred pairs of White Stork breeding on top, and they all come to feed at the dump.

Later we headed to a *lek* of Little Bustard in Bellmunt, and there about 7 a.m. it was displaying while we watched for perhaps 10 minutes from the car at a distance of about 50 m. No jumps, but we saw the posturing and heard the grunts. There was a hide for Steve's clients, properly occupied.

Afterwards we drove around the fields admiring the gorgeous **European Roller** which is here common thanks to several nesting boxes on stilts in between of the fields, and good numbers of



European Bee-eaters, and Hoopoes. A good view of a Stone-Curlew first flying, then walking. Montagu's and Marsh Harriers, a Buzzard. Corn Bunting was common. So were Crested Larks. Red-legged Partridges were seen repeatedly here and in other places. A Hobby in front of "its" hide.

Then a pine forest with **Western Bonelli's Warbler** which allowed photography. The same location held Dartford Warbler, another lifer for me.

Steve then drove me to rocky hills and showed me Black Wheatear – there was a pair exactly where he expected them. But they were too shy to ever try photography. He showed me **Dartford Warbler**, and a bit later Spectackled Warbler in its



particular biotope. Many Sardinian Warblers were heard but not seen. The village of



Camarasa offered spectacular rocky gorge scenery and a variety of biomes with a very good number of birds not earlier seen on this trip. The biggest bonus was **Firecrest**, a lifer for me, which responded extremely well to play-back. I could no longer hear its song, but

fortunately Steve most certainly did and we left the bird in its excited condition to calm down. By the water reservoir there were a few Cetti's Warblers (my first in Europe), impossible to photograph. There were also Cirl Buntings, Spotted Flycatchers, Goldfinches, Song Thrush, Mistle Thrush, Chaffinch, Great Reed Warbler, Reed Warbler, Black Redstart, Cuckoo, Crag Martin, European Kingfisher, White Wagtail, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Collared Dove, one Great Crested Grebe, Coots, Common Sandpiper. Perhaps also a Yellow Wagtail, not clearly seen.

Back near Lleida, Steve took me to a private conservation area owned by an environmentalist farmer and known as having had the only known breeding pair of Lesser Grey Shrike of Spain in 2013. No bird of that species was seen, though. Perhaps it still was early for it, said Steve. But we did have a spectacular presence of a **Short-toed Eagle**, trying repeatedly to sit peacefully on top of a tall tree, but constantly attacked by a **Black Kite**, and also a European Buzzard coming to inspect the situation. I got some nice pictures of a flying Cuckoo! We added a few birds on the list: Whinchat, Penduline Tit and Pied Flycatcher. **European Bee-eaters** were performing in a splendid way. Melodious Warbler gave a concert and was very visible, but too quick to take pictures of. More Red-legged Partridges and European Goldfinches.

In the garden of my daughter's flat in Gracia, I was surprised to see a flock of three Red-eared Waxbills, an African finch seen from Senegal to Ethiopia. They must have escaped from somebody's cage. There was also a Sardinian Warbler.

Pia, Aili and myself hired a car and drove to the Montsant Nature Reserve where we stayed at the very pleasant Hotel Balcó de Priorat in La Moreira de Montsant, at the altitude of 700 m, just under the imposing cliffs 400 meters above us, with a superb view over a large landscape. The hotel is owned by Tomás from Slovakia, and we were waited by Katařyna from the Czech Republic. The food





cooked by Tomás was excellent. I saw Red-rumped Swallows along the road when approaching La Moreira. Climbing up the mountain, I could see Kestrel, Sparrow Hawk, Rock Bunting, Raven, Subalpine Warbler, many Sardinian Warblers, Black Redstart, Serin, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Golden Oriole, Jay, Hoopoe, lots of Stonechats and many of the same birds of the earlier days. On top of the mountain, **Woodlark** was the most conspicuous species with many singing males. The biggest attractions of the region eluded us, such as Bonelli's Eagle and Ring Ouzel.

List of species (those of particular interest for North Europeans are with bold letters)

- Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* one male at Lleida municipal park, also in ponds near Belchite
 Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* a few birds at large pool near Belchite
Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* pools near Belchite, about 16 at the large pool
Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa* frequent and widely spread
 Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* one pair at large pool near Belchite
 Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* one bird at Camarasa reservoir
 Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* dozens at Lleida municipal dump
 Squacco Egret *Ardeola ralloides* one pair at Belchite large pool
 Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* widely spread, about a dozen at Lleida municipal dump, several at Camarasa
Purple Egret *Ardea purpurea* two birds at Belchite large pool, one at Camarasa reservoir
 White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* several dozens at Lleida municipal dump and in town, also in countryside
Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus* half-a-dozen individuals flying near Belchite and Camarasa
Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* one adult flying near Belchite
Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* single adults flying near Belchite, Camarasa and Lleida
Red Kite *Milvus milvus* two adults flying near Belchite
 Black Kite *Milvus migrans* very common, perhaps up to a hundred at Lleida municipal dump
 Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* individual adults flying near Belchite and Camarasa
 Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* male and female first flying then grounded in fields near Camarasa
 Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* one adult near Lleida
 Sparrow Hawk *Accipiter nisus* one bird flying toward the Montsant mountaintop at dusk
 European Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* many individuals flying or perched in all fields visited, also Montsant
Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* one adult male at Planerón, a colony (half-a-dozen?) near Lleida
 Hobby *Falco subbuteo* flying adult individuals near Belchite fields, Camarasa and male hunting at Belchite pool
 Common Coot *Fulica atra* half-a-dozen at Belchite large pool, about a dozen at Camarasa reservoir
Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* one male at lek at Bellmunt. Also one adult bird flying.
Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* one pair at Belchite large pool

Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus* one at Planerón, one near Bellmunt
Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* one seen flying when leaving Lleida in the morning, possibly also another
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* one flying at Camarasa reservoir
Redshank *Tringa tetanus* one at Belchite large pool
Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* several at Belchite large pool, a few at Lleida municipal dump
Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michaelis* several at rural pools, dozens at Lleida municipal dump, 3 at Lleida Mitjana Municipal Park
Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* one pair at Belchite large pool
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse *Pterocles orientalis* flock of four at Planerón
Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* very common, probably wild pure birds near rocky gorges
Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* very common in rural and urban areas
Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* one bird near Camarasa village
Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* one bird near Belchite
Eurasian Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* one male called behind Camarasa reservoir, one male near Lleida
Little Owl *Athene noctua* one adult perched on building at Planerón, one dead on the road
Scops Owl *Otus scops* one male called shortly near the old Lleida airport
Red-necked Nightjar *Caprimulgus ruficollis* one bird called actively at dawn near the old airport
Swift *Apus apus* fairly common in most locations
Hoopoe *Upupa epops* not in Planerón, elsewhere more common
Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* one bird flew across the Camarasa reservoir
European Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* common and visible spottily where nesting in sandbanks
Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* at least one pair at Lleida Mitjana Municipal Park
Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* male called at Lleida Municipal Park
Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* very common wherever fields
Thekla Lark *Galerida theklae* common wherever fields, likes rocks
Woodlark *Lullula arborea* most visible bird on top of Montsant, several singing males
Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* common at Planerón
Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens* numerous at Planerón, also other fields
Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* numerous at Planerón, a few also in other fields
Dupont's Lark *Chersophilus duponti* small number of males singing in flight at Planerón
Crag Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* at rocky canyons near Camarasa
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* common all over
House Martin *Delichon urbicum* several at Belchite large pool and at Camarasa reservoir
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* one adult at Camarasa reservoir
Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* possibly one bird at Camarasa reservoir
European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* common and singing at Lleida Municipal park and at Montsant
Common Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* very common and singing everywhere except the driest areas
Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* near Camarasa reservoir and La Moreira de Montsant
Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* common wherever stony areas
Black Wheatear *Oenanthe leucura* one pair at a rocky slope
Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* one male near Lleida
Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola* perched males near Belchite, common around Montsant
Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* song heard from forest near Camarasa
Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* one near water pond on a lawn, Camarasa reservoir
Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* very common everywhere except most dry areas

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin* song heard at Mitjana Park
Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* several heard at Mitjana, Camarasa
Western Orphean Warbler *Sylvia hortensis* heard in Camarasa
Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala* much heard, seen in Montsant and Barcelona garden
Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* found only in its typical biome near Camarasa
Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* singing male at Montsant
Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata* seen near pine forest near Camarasa
Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaeus* heard and seen in reeds at large pond near Belchite, Mitjana Park, Camarasa reservoir
Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* several at large pond near Belchite, at Mitjana
Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* one seen in Mitjana
Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti* a few heard and some seen in bushes and reeds along Camarasa reservoir
Melodius Warbler *Hippolais polyglotta* actively singing and seen near Camarasa and near Lleida
Western Bonelli's Warbler *Phylloscopus bonelli* heard and seen in pines near Camarasa, Montsant
Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* two singing males in Mitjana Park
Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla* one singing male at Camarasa reservoir
Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* several birds at Camarasa reservoir
Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* at least one near Lleida
Great Tit *Parus major* seen in Mitjana and Montsant
Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus* seen at Camarasa reservoir
Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinum* heard near Lleida
Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* at least one in Planerón
Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator* one seen near Belchite
Jay *Garrulus glandarius* one seen in Montsant
Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* fairly common in most environments
Carrion Crow *Corvus cornix* widely spread but in small numbers
Common Raven *Corvus corax* one flying around and below Montsant
Red-billed Cough *Pyrrhocorax graculus* two flocks of about 20 seen in fields near Belchite
European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* spottily
Spotless Starling *Sturnus unicolor* very common in open country
European Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* heard and seen in Mitjana and Montsant, heard at Camarasa
House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* occasional near buildings
Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* one seen in Mitjana
Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia* individuals seen in Planerón and near Camarasa
Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* a few seen at Camarasa reservoir
Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* individuals or pairs seen near Camarasa, Mitjana, Montsant
European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* small flocks seen in Mitjana, Montsant
Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* observed at Camarasa, Mitjana, Montsant
Serin *Carduelis serinus* individuals or pairs seen in different environments in Belchite, Mitjana, Camarasa, Montsant
Cirl Bunting *Emberiza cirlus* a pair seen at Camarasa
Rock Bunting *Emberiza cia* a pair seen on the higher slope of Montsant
Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* common in agricultural areas near Belchite, Camarasa
Red-eared Waxbill *Estrilda troglodytes* a flock of three birds seen in a garden in Gracia, Barcelona.
This is an African species and the birds must have escaped from a cage.



**Lesser
Kestrel**



**Thekla
Lark**



European Roller