

Gorgeous Wallcreepers



To all appearances we had reached the end of the path, sooner than expected. I wanted to continue by scrambling up the rock face, but the others were not interested, content to stay there on that natural stone balcony overlooking the pristine Ordesa valley. It was hard to reproach them, for indeed the views were stunning: crystalline snow still carpeted the valley floor below us, riveted by the course of the surging, sparkling river, still mostly in the shade cast by the imposing snow-capped mountains. From the opposite slopes a forest of pine and fir, warmed by the sun's mid-morning light, reflected back a deep, healthy green, and the light breeze, moving the newly-sprouted beech leaves to a slight shimmer, bore the ethereal scent of spring.

We sat there, stripped to the waist, exposing our flecked or bleached torsos in the style of sun-worship so characteristic of northern Europeans when in southern latitudes. Our bodies, shiny, bathed in a light sweat from the ascent up the steep path, welcomed the light tingling breeze. We were happy just being where we were, exchanging jokes and comments, and the black and green olives we had bought the evening before in Ayerbe.

Despite the apparent calm, we were still impressionable youths exalted by the morning sun, the breeze, and the mountains we had never seen the likes of before. So we spent our time recalling the new sensations of that morning, like a group of friends taking pleasure in recounting good old jokes which everybody knew. We talked about the small group of chamois that had stood in a shady opening in the pinewood, paused, heads raised, their gaze directed at ours, but with hardly a hint of alarm in either their expression or demeanour. And about the resounding echoes of the magnificent Black Woodpecker which we managed to trace to its nest hole in a sturdy fir tree, within a stone's throw of a serpentine waterfall, enshrouded in a fine white mist of its own creation. At the time I was really unaware of how lucky I was to be one of those pale, hairy youths, sat on their throne

of Ordesa and feasting on green and black olives. Now though, looking back, it is clear to me that it was on that April morning, perhaps more than any other day in my life, that I was blessed by rare privilege: I was witnessing a beautifully serene and melancholic performance of "The way things used to be", all the while my head spinning around the

strange blend of freedom and belonging that my body was already happily digesting.

Then, a moment later, comes a breeze, and the mood changes, whimsically and unpredictably. Suddenly the flurry of a little bird's wings becomes the only sound – and if you can't really hear it you can certainly imagine it. A flash of black and carmine mesmerizes every gaze, before someone finally breaks the spell with exalted cries of "Wallcreeper! Wallcreeper!" At last! Until then the Wallcreeper had appeared in all of our lives on paper and celluloid, for the most part. Now, though, it was real. Now the expeditionary members of the University of East Anglia's bird club had set eyes on that almost mythical jewel of a bird, the beautiful, colourful Wallcreeper.

Breeding in mountain ranges as different and as far apart as the Cantabrian mountains in Spain and the Himalayas east to China, the roof of the world, this little bird makes a living by clinging to sheer rock faces and prying out unsuspecting invertebrates from nooks and crannies with its long, slender, decurved bill. Although it's not a particularly shy bird the fact that in Europe it usually chooses to breed on humid crags and sheer rock walls at altitudes of 2,000m or more means that the average birder paying a visit to its summer haunts may have to put in a lot of footwork before seeing it.

But let me assure you that if after having made that inhuman effort to reach its favourite, almost inaccessible cliff, and after having craned your neck for half an hour staring up mindlessly at a huge, overpowering block of limestone, if then you are fortunate enough to actually set eyes on this bird with carmine butterfly flashing wings, you won't regret anything. As you stand there pressing your binoculars into your eye sockets, contemplating one of the milliard of nature's true wonders, that tiny figure flickering and flitting across the face of that immense wall, you somehow manage to hold your breath; perhaps fearing that as if by merely breathing you have the power to shatter that magical moment before it can be properly etched onto your memory.

Public testimony to the power of attraction of this wonderful wall-climber, the mark of its ability to appeal to more than just the ornithological eye, lies at both extremes of its Eurasian range. In the Far East the Chinese generously graced the bird with the charming, evocative name of "rock flower"; a name which in itself hints at a vein of sensitivity in the Chinese national conscience, which one would think must surely belong to a time before the onset of the all-consuming



communist era. Strangely enough, however, Romania was also governed by the dictates of communism when, in 1959, it became the first European country to pay homage to the Wallcreeper by reproducing its image on a stamp. The idea caught on quickly, and from there it did a tour of Eastern European post-office services, with Poland in 1960, Czechoslovakia in 1965, Albania in 1968, Yugoslavia in 1972 and East Germany in 1973 all printing their own version of the Wallcreeper stamp. Now that's one particular propaganda battle which western Europe was unable to equal as, with the exception of neutral Switzerland in 1969, the Wallcreeper went without philatelic recognition until 1981, when tiny Andorra finally paid its dues, followed by the equally tiny Monaco the following year.

As a small aside I would venture that the only shortcoming of this remarkable bird is its English name. Quite inexplicably English-speaking naturalists have equipped a large number of birds – even some brightly-coloured, unique, fascinating birds – with qualifiers such as “common”, “lesser”, “Eurasian” or even “short-toed”, when just a little bit of imagination or poetry could do so much more justice to their presence in our lives. “Wallcreeper” may not be the worst of the lot, but a 300 metre vertical mountain rock face can be so much more than a “wall”, and since when is “creeper” a compliment? Gentlemen! We are not talking about someone's Ivy plant growing at the back end of a suburban garden! So how about something a little more adventurous, something like “Cliffhanger”, for example?

As the members of our party stole hurried glances at each other, and with great dissimulation turned back to scan the walls anew, we were soon approached by a pretty 8-year old girl in a frilly white dress with a large pink ribbon tied proudly around her waist.

Nowadays, in European birding circles, the Wallcreeper is big news. Swayed by this megabird's well-deserved fame, birders intent on tracking down a Wallcreeper in its mountain haunts often make a hopeful pilgrimage to the Spanish Pyrenees in late spring. In my early days of guiding in Spain there were a number of locations where the master crag-clinger could be seen in action with a little luck and with much more ease than was demanded of the members of the UEA bird club on that sunny April day in Ordesa; there were in fact two or three sites in the Spanish Pyrenees which could almost be called “Wallcreeper drive-ins”: river gorges where you could just pull off the road, occupy your position on the bank of a raging torrent and scan the sheer rock face opposite you. With a little patience, paying close attention to the wetter patches of stone dotted here and there with the white blooms of hanging saxifrage and patches of yellow lichen, you could spot a flicker of vividly coloured wings.... One such place is in the Hecho valley, one of the westernmost valleys in the Pyrenees of Aragón. The gorge here is known as the Barranco del Infierno, “Hell's gorge”. However, as long as you don't mind the wind, it's a heavenly spot. Furthermore, as a Wallcreeper drive-in it fits the description perfectly: a normally quiet road, snaking its way up a steep limestone gorge, with plenty of overhangs, nooks and crannies and generous humidity provided by a

deafening torrent of a river. The sheer rugged beauty of the site is an attraction in itself, and if you add to that its accessibility, the chance of seeing Lammergeier and, of course, Wallcreeper, then it's no wonder that this was a regular port of call for many a passing birder and organised birdwatching tour.

Not all red vehicles are fire engines however. What I mean is, although any half-cued up birder would surely stop at the *barranco* if he or she was in the vicinity, not all vehicles that stop are necessarily occupied by birders. That's particularly true of the ones occupied by large groups of noisy Spaniards typically endowed with a heightened sense of social curiosity. And with time on their hands. Despite my many years of residence in northern Spain it never ceases to surprise me, often to the point of exasperation, that the Spanish are so damned sociable. They have this inborn need to rub the shoulders, pat the backs and exchange laughs and smiles with complete strangers that they have come across in the middle of nowhere in particular. You'd think I would have learnt from experience, but no not yet. How often have I taken a break from driving along an almost empty road, tired and ready to convene with nature in silent contemplation of the inspiring countryside, when....? When the driver of the only car to pass in 10 minutes sees me, screeches to a halt, backs up, parks by my side and 3 generations of Spaniards pile out of the car, peering over with unashamed curiosity to see what I could possibly be looking at. By the time they have realized that I am only minimally communicative and generally uninteresting it's usually too late. In true domino effect a variation of the same scene has been repeated by another passing car as, surely, if there are two cars parked in the middle of nowhere there must be something exciting going on?

So, on this particular occasion we were standing in the *barranco* scanning the rock walls in the usual birder's fashion. The five of us there that day - 4 American clients and myself as their guide - waited by the side of the road for the approaching car to pass, but instead of passing it slowed down and then came to a complete halt, along with the six other cars that were following it. Car doors opened and out came grandmothers, fathers, mothers, aunts, cousins, brothers, sisters and best friends, all smartly dressed in their best clothes. As the members of our party stole hurried glances at each other, and with great dissimulation turned back to scan the walls anew, we were soon approached by a pretty 8-year old girl in a frilly white dress with a large pink ribbon tied proudly around her waist. Emboldened, perhaps, by the fact that this bristling entourage was there in honour of her communion, she squeezed between two out-splayed tripods to peer over the edge down at the rushing river. And then up at us, as if to question the logic of our seemingly ridiculous behaviour. Had we been fellow countrymen who knows how long that impromptu meeting would have lasted, but things being as they were we managed to muster as much polite Anglo-Saxon aloofness as the situation permitted. Even then it was a good 20 minutes before the whole party had finished hovering around and, amid much good-natured shouting and laughter, had got back into their cars and had at last driven off towards the head of the valley.

Then there are also those who try to stretch the definition of "passing birder" a bit too far. Like the day in early May when I was at the Barranco del Infierno with two clients



at around 9 in the morning. It was our second visit to the site in two consecutive days, but as we were staying at a hotel in the nearby village of Siresa a return trip was a luxury we could well afford. The most recent updates I had received from tours preceding us was that the Wallcreeper was not behaving well and that no-one had yet seen it at the *barranco*. But still, one had to try. Especially when the clients, perhaps sensing a weakness in their know-it-all guide, would talk about nothing else! So there we were craning our necks to the left and to the right when a black Seat Ibiza pulled up behind us and a young couple got out. The clean-cut man, in a crumpled suit and his mid-twenties, was obviously not one to beat about the bush. Without wasting any time scanning walls he approached us and asked, in a northern English accent "Have you seen the Wallcreeper?"

The others waited for me to answer, "No", I said. "Not so far". He hesitated for a moment, "What do you mean, not so far?" he asked.

"I mean not so far this year. Not here anyway", I replied.

His jaw dropped. He looked at me in disbelief, his vision flicking involuntarily up at the walls and then back at his peroxide girlfriend, who had already got back into the car and now seemed to be fiddling with the radio dial. He muttered a curse under his breath and then sighed dramatically.

"Where have you come from?" I had to ask.

"Roses", he replied "Near Gerona".

I knew where Roses was. "Roses!" I exclaimed, "But that must be, - what -, a five or six-hour drive?"

"More or less", he answered, now completely absent.

My two clients and I exchanged furtive glances and returned our attention to scanning the walls of the gorge. My fellow Englishman stayed around for a few minutes more, mostly to kick a few stones around with his hands in his pockets, muttered "Bye" and got back into his car with his girlfriend. He did a three-point turn and started on what was going to be a long and unenviable drive back to Roses.

Bob, one of the clients, turned to me and asked, "Did I hear that right? That he'd driven 5 or 6 hours to get here?"

I nodded, "Yes, Bob, you heard right."

"But that means he must have got up at about 3 in the morning!"

Judging by the suit and the girlfriend I would hazard the guess that they hadn't gone to bed at all the previous night.

"And what time do you get up to do the spring counts in Maryland?" asked Bill, the other client.

Bob hesitated, but only for a moment. "OK, Bill. But I don't drag my wife with me. In fact she makes me sleep in the spare room when I have to get up that early."

Bill and I laughed.

"You and Anne have been married for 30 years now," replied Bill.

"33," corrected Bob.

"33. Anne's no longer interested in following you around the countryside. Once she was sure that you really were watching birds, and that it wasn't an excuse to get out and see other women, she found she had better things to do".

"Well, judging by the look on the face of that guy's girlfriend it won't be long before he has to decide whether it's going to be her, or the birds," said Bob.

"You could be right about that," I said, knowing that that particular ultimatum had been received by a considerable number of our birding brethren. For an instant my mind played out the situation, my wife on one side...the bird guide on the other... I shuddered, and decided firmly that that was a topic best avoided.



Birdwatchers based in Britain have had very few chances to see the Wallcreeper in their homeland, where there have been fewer than a dozen sightings. The first one on record was of a bird in Norfolk, some years ago, in 1792. Almost a century later, in 1886, the third bird to grace the shores of Albion was seen scaling the walls of Greyfriar's Chapel at Winchelsea, and was "promptly" shot! Promptly! No dithering, no soul-searching, just nail the blighter before he gets away. Of course, under

our current state of enlightenment towards rare birds that would seem a highly reprehensible procedure. At that time though it must have been one of the most effective ways of countering the doubting Thomases. Furthermore, the unfortunate bird duly stuffed and presented in a fine glass cabinet on the mantelpiece would have been a great conversation piece at dinner parties.

More recently, across the sea in the Dutch capital of Amsterdam, where Wallcreepers are decidedly scarce and suitable cliffs even more so, a lone bird was unexpectedly discovered gleaning the walls of the University. There, having wisely chosen more erudite surroundings for its winter sojourn it was widely observed and admired, its crimson-flicking wings bringing a touch of class and colour to the otherwise drab Dutch winter. And what's more, no-one dreamt of spraying it with buckshot!

Those not prepared to go to such lengths as the Englishman who came from Roses will be pleased to hear that there is another option: you could wait until the winter months arrive. Then all but the most foolhardy or inexperienced Wallcreepers depart from their mountain homes to take up residence in their winter resorts where the winter cold

doesn't bite so hard, and where there are still enough insects to be gleaned from crevices. And it really doesn't seem to matter to the elegant Wallcreeper if those crevices are to be found on dam walls, quarries or river gorges in the Pre-Pyrenees, on gothic churches in the World Heritage Boí Valley, or on the ramparts or parapets of the medieval walled town of Alquézar in the lonely Sierra de Guara. What's more, some



birds take to wandering even further from their Pyrenean ranges, delighting and momentarily bewitching the most observant of visitors to the rocky headlands of Cap de Creus, the easternmost point of the Iberian Peninsula, or else living the life of a winter hermit, singing to their echoes in the solitude of some lesser known range.

As for Wallcreeper drive-ins, well, in my opinion, a really good bird is like a good wine: the exquisite pleasure it produces on the palate can only come with time and dedication, and a good degree of anticipation. Go to a drive-in to see the bird, by all means, if you can still find one. However, if you are seeking something more, perhaps food for the mind and spirit, then I can heartily recommend dining on black and green olives to the flurry of Wallcreeper wings, somewhere similar to that limestone balcony overlooking the pristine Ordesa valley.

The olives finished, the t-shirts back on the youthful torsos, the time had come to retrace our steps, following the steep, shady path that would take us down to the valley floor. Almost at the bottom we came across Matthew, his characteristic old grey tweed overcoat hanging open, his stubble-covered chin pulled up into a cheesy grin. He had stayed behind to pry into the leaf litter in the ice cold waters of a small, slow-flowing stream that at one point ran parallel to the raging river, and it was obvious that he was pleased with himself.

"You'll never guess what I've seen" he said.

Our minds raced. What had he seen? Eagles displaying? Lammergeiers breaking bones? Two Wallcreepers? We had to ask.

"No, what?"

"Well, I spent hours turning over stones and rummaging among the fallen leaves and eventually I did it! I found a Pyrenean brook salamander!"

A newt! He'd spent all that time with his head bowed in the shadows seeking out newts? We were all fond of Matthew, so we said nothing that would hurt his feelings. We decided there and then to avoid mention of the Wallcreeper until a better moment presented itself. We briefly exchanged glances to that effect, which was probably the final act of deep complicity among that very fortunate group of youths.

This is an edited version of the first chapter of the book "Flying over the Pyrenees, standing on the plains" by Steve West

