

Iberian Wildlife Tours/Jeff Clarke Ecology

La Cerdanya (Catalan Pyrenees)

11th June – 18th June 2013

Review



Bee-eater - Sanavastre - June 2013 © Jeff Clarke

Note: All images used in this report were taken during the 2013 tour.

Teresa Farino & Jeff Clarke

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Full Tour Participants:

Tony Harbottle

Joyce Harbottle

Jack Swan

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Enjoying the Pyrenean Snakesheads near Coll de Pal © Jeff Clarke

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Introduction

This review covers the highlights from a wildlife-packed tour of La Cerdanya, in the Spanish Pyrenees, between 11th and 18th June 2013. This was the second collaboration between Iberian Wildlife Tours and Jeff Clarke Ecology for this particular location, albeit about a fortnight earlier than in 2011. All of the participants had previously enjoyed tours with Jeff and/or Teresa and made a positive contribution in winking out the floral and faunal gems that helped to ensure a productive and memorable trip.

Review

Tuesday 11 June 2013 –Barcelona to Prullans

We began by collecting Jack, Tony and Joyce from Barcelona airport. We would meet up with Brian and Gill later that evening as they were driving from France. Sadly one of our clients had been forced to withdraw from the tour at the last moment due to a family illness, so we were a small group of seven. As we drove north it was clear that Europe's late spring of 2013 was still exerting its influence. Normally by this time we expect to see butterflies dancing across the highway, but on this day barely a one was seen. We stopped for a late lunch near Cercs and here the minimal plant growth was evident although we did note Nettle-tree *Celtis australis* and the hairy legume *Dorycnium hirsutum*.

By late afternoon we reached the Hotel Muntanya in Prullans and settled in. Before dinner we ventured out to take a look at the surrounding countryside, enjoying the Barn Swallows darting in and out of the cow byres, the familiar scene of Black Redstarts singing from wires and rooftops and the liquid song of Nightingales and Blackcaps emanating from the poplars flanking a nearby stream.

Prullans wayside plants included UK rarities Yellow Vetchling *Lathyrus aphaca* and Fly Honeysuckle *Lonicera xylosteum*. We also encountered a distinctive red and black frog hopper – *Cercopis intermedia* – with its diagnostic red 'knees', which we would see several more times during the tour. The beautifully marked tortricid moth *Olethreutes arcuella* represented our final 'find' of the day, just as the light began to fail, after which we headed back to the hotel for our evening meal.



Wednesday 12 June - Orden & Tallendre

The day dawned bright and reasonably warm and gave us hope that we might find a few of the hoped for butterflies and other invertebrates, for which this particular route is normally very productive. After collecting our fresh bread our first stop was a mosaic of cereal fields, grasslands, scrub and rock-gardens by a tumbledown ruin on the road toward Orden.

Despite the late spring, the environs of the farmhouse provided us with a good range of arable weeds, including a yellow-flowered Pheasant's-eye (*Adonis* sp.), Corncockle *Agrostemma githago*, Prickly Poppy *Papaver argemone* – listed as Vulnerable in the UK – and Cornflowers *Centaurea*



cyanus. An examination of the adjacent rock-gardens turned up Winged Greenweed *Chamaespartium sagittale*, Perennial Flax *Linum perenne* ssp. *alpinum* and a montane subspecies of Sea Plantain *Plantago maritima* ssp. *serpentina*, as well as bulbs such as Dipcadi *Dipcadi serotinum* and Grape-hyacinth *Muscari neglectum*. Patches of scrub were composed primarily of Common Juniper *Juniperus communis*, Box *Buxus sempervirens* and Snowy Mespilus *Amelanchier ovalis*.

The birds were singing hard in the glorious sunshine, including a Woodlark displaying on the hillside above us. A scratchy little song on the small rise by the ruin betrayed the presence of a Subalpine Warbler and after a little persistence a couple of the party managed to get reasonable views. In contrast everyone was able to enjoy the procession of raptors drifting over from the nearby foothills. Griffon Vultures are hard to miss but the undoubted highlight was a superb pair of Short-toed Eagles that gave prolonged views as they slowly circled by.

Reptile-wise we located a number of Common Wall Lizards, but around the ruin itself we found another species, the Catalanian Wall Lizard, which looks like a muted form of Iberian Wall Lizard, although the males often acquire bright orange throats in the breeding season.



A variety of butterfly species was found, including some still roosting on flower-heads waiting for the heat of the day to activate them. Most of the species were 'skippers' or 'blues'. Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper was readily identified, alongside Dingy and Red-underwing Skippers. Common, Adonis and Green-underside Blue were duly noted but the undoubted highlight was several Baton Blues. Other butterflies found here included Spanish Scarce Swallowtail (ssp. *feisthamelii*), Black-veined White, Provence Orange-tip, Clouded Yellow, Painted Lady, Small Tortoiseshell and Small Heath, while a few Red-veined Darters hung out in the vicinity of a small stream.



Further up the road, the limestone plateau harboured more colourful botanical riches. Among the pink-flowered plants were Montpellier Milk-vetch *Astragalus monspessulanus*, Mountain Kidney-vetch *Anthyllis montana* and a stunning pink version of White Rock-rose *Helianthemum apenninum*, while Hoary Rock-rose

Helianthemum oelandicum ssp. *incanum* carpeted the ground with yellow. Alpine Asters *Aster alpinus* contributed splashes of lilac, and clumps of *Veronica orsiniana* a startling shade of blue, among which were dotted Stars-of-Bethlehem *Ornithogalum bourgaeum*.

Birds seen in the surrounding scrub included our first Red-backed Shrike, while Skylarks burbled overhead and a Cuckoo was heard in the distance. Butterflies were abundant here,

including a number of Scarce Swallowtails looking to lay their eggs on the St Lucie's Cherries *Prunus mahaleb* in the hedgerows. New to our growing list were Brimstone, Large White, Glanville and Queen of Spain Fritillaries and Wall Brown.

Between the villages of Orden and Talltendre we spent a while exploring a meadow jam-packed with the yellow rattle *Rhinanthus pumilus* ssp. *pumilus*, Mountain Clover *Trifolium montanum* and bluish False Sainfoin *Vicia onobrychioides*. Whitethroats and Linnets were evident in the roadside bushes, and while the locality turned up only Orange-tip as a new butterfly, several species of day-flying moth were spotted, including Mother Shipton, Silver Y, Small Yellow Underwing and Drab Looper.



Small Yellow Underwing © Jeff Clarke

It was on this stretch of the road that Jack and Teresa made a significant discovery as they slowly worked their way uphill. A large and at the time unknown, caterpillar crossed their path. Teresa is familiar with most of the Lepidoptera this part of Spain but not this one. Photographs were duly taken and in the fullness of time an astonishing answer was confirmed. It was the caterpillar of the Patrician's Shrub Moth *Lemonia dumi*: the first record of this species for Catalunya, and one of only a handful of confirmed records in Spain!



Patrician's Shrub moth *Lemonia dumi* © Jack Swan

As we approached Talltendre we were slowly accumulating a fine selection of birds to our list. Most, like the Serins and Spotless Starlings, were to be expected, but the pair of Citril Finch drinking from a roadside puddle at the entrance to the village was something of a surprise and a bonus starter to our sumptuous picnic lunch in the village square. As we took

our fill of delicious local cheeses we were captivated by the sight of a flowering garden Lilac covered in pollinating insects, including a dozen Hummingbird Hawk-moths and a slightly tattered Broad-bordered Bee Hawk-moth.



Synaphe bombycalis egg laying © Jeff Clarke

After our picnic lunch we continued up to the top of the plateau, passing some extremely floriferous clumps of Rock Soapwort *Saponaria ocymoides* on the wall at the side of the track on the way. On the plateau itself, secreted among stunted Mountain Pines *Pinus uncinata*, we located delicate stars of Annual Androsace *Androsace maxima* and its white-flowered perennial relative *Androsace villosa*, plus feathery clumps of Cypress Spurge *Euphorbia cyparissias* and Corn Mignonette *Reseda phyteuma*.

The plateau is home to a rather different community of birds. The dry scrubby tops here can be hard going on a warm afternoon but we did find several of our target species, including Rock Bunting, betrayed by its high pitched contact calls. This was closely followed by Dartford Warbler, whose presence was given away by its characteristic, 'irritable', chittery calls. We also managed to get all too brief views of Rock Thrush, with a similarly truncated sighting of Golden Oriole in the riverside poplars below the plateau.

As ever up here we chanced upon quite a few interesting invertebrates, including butterflies such as Green Hairstreak and Wood and Small Whites, day-flying moths such as Latticed Heath, Marbled Clover and Four spotted, as well as the pyralid *Synaphe bombycalis*, apparently a rare moth in Catalunya. The one that most will remember, however, was a large and fearsome looking female ladybird spider (*Eresus* sp.), with jaws that seemed capable of taking the top off a bottle!



Ladybird Spider female © Jeff Clarke

All too soon it was time to begin our descent and return to the hotel for the evening meal, although as the day drew to a close the photographers were rewarded with roosting Baton Blues and a Bath White. Before dinner we gathered to run through the day's findings and it showed that we had made a fine start, with 43 species of bird, 26 species of butterfly, an array of interesting moth species and many stunningly lovely plants.

Thursday 13 June – Cap d'En Rec, Estanys de la Pera

A pre-breakfast walk through the village brought some delightful ornithological rewards. The Rock Sparrows were calling and soon found, perched on the red-tiled roof of a tumbledown barn and a little further along the track a splendid Red-backed Shrike sat in characteristic sentinel pose atop a thorn-laden rose bush. The Wrynecks failed to put in an appearance but we did have fine compensation in the form of an Iberian Green Woodpecker (recently separated from the European Green Woodpecker as *Picus sharpei*) and the ever-stunning Golden Orioles, calling amongst the poplar trees.



We picked up our regular fresh bread supplies in the village of Martinet in preparation for the lunchtime picnic and took a little while to check out the riverside birds at the same time. As expected we found both Grey and White Wagtails and the local hirundines, busily feeding on the emerging insects, including Crag Martins among the regular Barn Swallows and House Martins.

We made our first stop at Cap d'En Red, at the end of the tarmac road that winds up northwards from the bottom of the valley. A range of habitats was on offer, including an



expanse of short sward, studded with numerous clumps of Spring and Trumpet Gentians, (*Gentiana verna* & *G. acaulis*, respectively), while a more boggy area turned up white-flowered *Ranunculus angustifolius* (stems not hairy under the flower), Marsh Marigold *Caltha palustris* and Marsh Violet *Viola palustris*. The surrounding pine

woodland boasted Hepatica *Hepatica nobilis* and Pyramidal Bugle *Ajuga pyramidalis*.

The birds were proving a little more elusive than normal at this spot, though we did eventually manage good views of Goldcrest, and a Crested Tit put in a brief appearance, as did a Short-toed Treecreeper, but there was no sign of the hoped for Crossbills at this point.



We then took the track heading west towards the picnic area at the foot of the trail up to the Estans de la Pera. Along the way we stopped where the fancy took us, finding our first Alpine Pasque Flowers *Pulsatilla alpina*, of the yellow-flowered subspecies *apiifolia*, Entire-leaved Primroses *Primula integrifolia* and a sweet-scented bush of lilac-flowered Mezereon *Daphne mezereum*, which was attracting not a few butterflies and other insects. Orange-tips appeared to be by far the commonest of



Lythria cruentaria © Jeff Clarke

the whites on the wing, while the blues were represented by Adonis and Common Blue and here we found a few Vanessaids in the form of Painted Lady and Comma. There were also several day-flying moths on the wing including a very attractive *Lythria* species, probably *L. cruentaria* (Geometridae).

We eventually reached the car park that would mark the start of our major walk of the day. Jeff could hear the hollow metallic calls of the local Citril Finches but they declined to show themselves properly at this stage. Coal tits were also calling from the nearby pines.



Pyrenean Gentian © Jeff Clarke

Around the margins of the pond by the picnic area was the chunky Pyrenean endemic Water Saxifrage *Saxifraga aquatica*, just coming into flower, plus the ten-lobed purple blooms of Pyrenean Gentians *Gentiana pyrenaica*.



Crocus vernus © Teresa Farino

Brian and Gill decided they wished to concentrate their efforts on photographing in the vicinity of the car park, so at this point the group split, with the rest of us taking a slow and scenically enjoyable saunter uphill with the intention of rendezvousing for a late lunch. As is always the case in these circumstances the two groups would have different tales to tell when they reunited.

As the main group walked up the hill, the lateness of the season became even more apparent, with Teresa quite quickly locating a drift of White Crocuses *Crocus vernus*, in fact represented by all shades ranging from pure white and quite a deep mauve. These were growing together with Pyrenean Buttercups *Ranunculus pyrenaicus*, also white-flowered, but with noticeably hairy stems under the flower-heads, plus more Spring and Trumpet Gentians and Entire-leaved Primroses, interspersed with the odd clump of the aster-like One-flowered Fleabane *Erigeron uniflorus*. Our best find, however, was perhaps dozen or so shaggy-flowered plants of Alpine Snowbell *Soldanella alpina* in a wet flush.



As the main group climbed higher, Jeff elected to try some 'pishing' to pull some birds into view. This worked a treat and before long we were getting close views of a fine selection of birds including Eurasian Treecreeper, Crested Tit, Coal Tit, Citril Finch and Common Crossbill, the latter sitting prominently and inviting a photographic attempt by Teresa.

As we ascended we would periodically hear the clear ringing calls of Alpine Marmots. We eventually located an animal with our binoculars as it moved between a jumble of rocks on the opposite side of the valley. It was seen well through the scope but we would hope for

better views later in the week. We also managed to get the scope on some distant Southern Chamois.



The marmot calls would sometimes be in reference to a potential predator, and on one occasion the source of the threat was very apparent when we had stunning views of a Golden Eagle cruising the slopes. The obvious white patches in the wings and tail marked the bird out as an immature. Griffon Vultures would periodically appear over the mountain ridges too, but the real excitement came when Jack spotted a large flat-winged shape circling not too far away. The 'bone-crusher' eventually appeared, for

all to see, from behind a screen of pines and gave breathtaking views. This was an adult Lammergeier in all its glory, with every detail of its stunning plumage crystal clear, because for once the sun was directly behind us. It was a little frustrating not to have an appropriate lens to hand to photograph it but at least the memory is indelible.

As we slowly returned downhill we 'pished' out some more Crossbills and Coal Tits before making a concerted effort to find one of our missing target birds. It took a while but eventually flitting shapes among the pines resolved themselves into the blackbird of the mountains and our band of merry travellers eventually scoped the Ring Ouzels, resplendent with their white gorgets and pale-edged primary feathers.



Once reunited back in the car park, we heard that Brian and Gill had been able to photograph a fine selection of plants and animals. They certainly hit the jackpot when they encountered a snake, although – sadly – it didn't wait around to be photographed, but the description and altitude suggest that it was an Asp Viper. Just before lunch we also turned up another geometrid moth that was new to all of us: the day-flying Frosted Yellow (*Isturgia limbaria*).

Following one of Teresa's delicious picnic lunches, we took a circuitous route slowly back downhill with heavy rainclouds gathering. Mistle Thrushes, Jays and a Common Kestrel posed briefly on roadside perches.

Photographically this had been a very fruitful day but, as ever, photographers are never satisfied, so we took advantage of the residual warmth in the day to stop just before we reached the bottom of the valley for few extra images, notably of Adonis Blues that perched conveniently. At this locality too, Teresa found and photographed a superb long-horned beetle called *Agapanthia kirbyi*, whose larvae develop in the stems of mulleins (*Verbascum* spp.).



Friday 14 June – Sanavastre gravel pit and the Segre Valley

When we ran the equivalent tour in 2011, albeit two weeks later, we felt like we were in the midst of high summer. June 2013 could not have been more different and this day's venues provided the starkest contrast of the week. We began with a bird-oriented visit to the Sanavastre gravel pit, which lies amid cereal crops, as reflected by many of the birds noted.

Upon alighting from the vehicle, we were regaled by the rather repetitive "wet my lips" calls of Common Quail, alongside the dulcet notes of a distant Hoopoe, while somewhere high in the azure a Skylark was singing. Soon we were watching Spanish Yellow Wagtails, Tree Sparrows and Corn Buntings, and listening to the rasping call of a Great Reed Warbler from the water's edge. A Common Whitethroat



showed well and a Red Kite appeared overhead, but both visual spectacle and soundscape were dominated by a bird more akin to a rainbow, as the air was filled with the "kroop-kroop" calls of many European Bee-eaters. They perched conveniently on some dead tree branches, giving excellent opportunities to scope them.

A few invertebrates were becoming active as the day gained some warmth, including many Small Heath, Common Blues and the odd Queen of Spain Fritillary and Dingy Skipper. Black-and-red 'flower beetles' (*Trichodes alvearius*) feasted on the spurge blossoms, while

detailed examination of some all-blue damselflies hovering in the tall grass along the edge of the track revealed them to be male Blue-eyes (*Erythromma lindenii*).



The warmth had also brought out a few lizards to sunbathe on some trackside rubble mounds. Most of those scrutinised appeared to be Common Wall Lizards but one or two looked different and on closer inspection proved to be more Catalonian Wall Lizards.

From here we drove down to the Río Segre and parked on the edge of a stretch of water-meadows. Small, canalised streams in the area hosted Blue Water-speedwell *Veronica anagallis-aquatica*, with narrow, pointed leaves, growing together with its congener Brooklime *V. beccabunga*, distinguished by its broad, rounded leaves. Shady spots provided shelter for some enormous Common Comfrey *Symphytum officinale* plants, while the dry, sunny edges of the walkway along the river were coloured yellow with umbrella-shaped spikes of Woad *Isatis tinctoria*. Other plants of interest found here

included Meadow Crane's-bill *Geranium pratense*, a robust cinquefoil with extremely large, pale yellow flowers, which we keyed out as *Potentilla recta*, and French Figwort *Scrophularia canina*, with tiny purplish flowers.

Almost immediately we left the vehicle it became clear that at least a few Odonata were on the wing. The iridescent form of a male Beautiful Demoiselle begged to be photographed as he flexed his wings on his streamside perch, though getting a decent image required a knee-deep wade in the surprisingly



cold water. Here too, several Common Bluets 'tandems' were doubled into their characteristic heart-shaped copulating pose among the reeds.

There is plenty of dense cover along the banks of the Segre and it makes spotting some of the various birds rather frustrating, none more so than the Nightingale, whose exquisite song seems to pour from every other bush. Clapping your eyes on one is another matter altogether, but after much effort Jeff managed to get a few folks on to this 'skulking serenader'.

Thankfully some birds were more cooperative and a succession of raucously calling Ravens was unmissable. Black Kite was another species that showed repeatedly, if briefly, either overhead or through a gap in the tree line. On the warbler front both Garden Warbler and Blackcap belted out their confusingly similar songs, albeit largely from invisible perches, while little clusters of Long-tailed Tits foraged noisily overhead. Repeated loud piping also alerted us to the presence of a couple of Common Sandpipers poking about on a shingle bank mid river.



Orange-tips mating © Jeff Clarke



Synaema globosa crab spider eating Orange-tip © Jeff Clarke

Horses were grazing along some sections of the riverside and as a consequence the vegetation looked a little trashed, not helped by the limited growth of the late spring. It was perhaps for this reason that butterflies were only present in small numbers this year. Orange-tip was comfortably the commonest species on view and giving a lesson in life's struggles, as we saw them patrolling, mating, egg laying and being eaten.

We were rather more pleased to find a few spring-generation Map Butterflies (only two weeks later in 2011 we had been watching the summer generation!). Purple-edged and Sooty Coppers were welcome additions to the list, along with a possible Provençal Short-tailed Blue

that didn't really show itself well enough to enable us to separate it definitely from the more widespread Short-tailed Blue. Nearby we also located Duke of Burgundy Fritillary, Pearly Heath, Black-veined White, Provence Orange-tip and Spanish Scarce Swallowtail.



After a time we reached an area of flooded track. This area is usually very productive for Odonata, but on this occasion the volume of melt-water entering the river system made the water too deep to paddle through, so we had to make do with those species visible around



the margins of the pool: Broad-bodied and Four-spotted Chasers, Red-veined Darter, both Large and Small Red Damselflies and more Blue-eyes.

The pool having blocked our onward progress, we began a slow return towards the minibus, accumulating a few extra species or getting improved views of what had gone before. A few colourful moths revealed themselves in the form of Small Yellow Underwing,



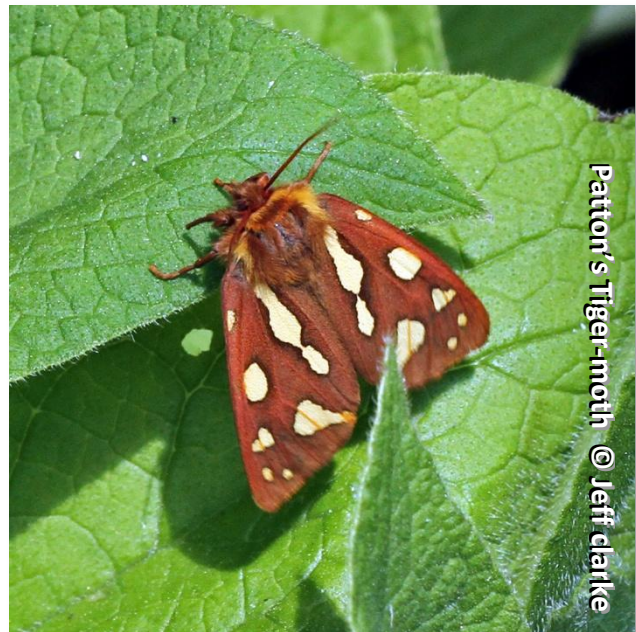
Zygaena contaminata © Jeff Clarke



Large Red Damselfly female © Teresa Farino

Clouded Buff and the burnet *Zygaena contaminata*. The most unexpected lepidoteran of the walk came very close to the end when Jeff and Joyce chanced upon a well- marked tiger moth revving its wings in preparation for take-off. There was just time to fire of a couple of shots before it zoomed away. Sadly the rest of the group missed it which was a pity, as it was Patton's Tiger-moth *Hyphoraia testudinaria*: a species on Teresa's all-time wish list!

It was getting pretty hot by the end of the morning; in fact one of the local dogs had taken shelter beneath our minibus and was loath to leave its shady retreat. We decided to find some shade of our own for lunch and headed off to the pinewoods just below the La Molina ski-station. After lunch we explored upstream, and were once again surprised by just how early the spring was; instead of Martagon Lilies in flower we found ourselves walking through a delightful carpet of Yellow Anemone *Anemone ranunculoides* and Green Hellebore *Helleborus viridis*. Clumps of Wood Crane's-bill *Geranium sylvaticum* and Greater Cuckooflower *Cardamine raphanifolia* flourished in wetter patches, with Pyrenean Vetch *Vicia pyrenaica* noted on dry shingle by the stream, and Wood-sorrel *Oxalis acetosella* and Three-leaved Valerian *Valeriana tripteris* on the shadiest banks.



Patton's Tiger-moth © Jeff Clarke

This location can be superb for butterflies but it was hard going in that department on this visit and it was the same for 'herp'-hunting; Jeff turned over endless number of stones and logs for scant reward.

Certainly the invertebrates were less plentiful at this altitude but nonetheless a diligent search of flower-heads and stems allowed us to find a beetle gem, or two. The first was an Eyed Ladybird, a species strongly associated with pine trees, and the latter was the accurately named Bee Beetle *Trichius fasciatus*, literally drenched in pollen, located by Teresa.



Anemone ranunculoides © Teresa Farino



Bee Beetle *Trichius fasciatus* © Teresa Farino

We then drove down to a known site for Mountain Alcon Blue, but weren't expecting to find any due to the very late season, and in fact couldn't even locate any of the food plant, Cross Gentian (*Gentiana cruciata*). The stop was not without interest, however, as a few butterflies were dotting around the slopes, most noticeably Common Swallowtail and Duke of Burgundy Fritillary – not a 'true' fritillary, but in reality a 'metal mark' – with Lewes Wave the most

exciting of the moths, but the cooling stiff breeze kept most things bottled up. Thankfully a few birds kept us entertained and Woodlark and Crested Tit showed for a time.

Saturday 15 June – Coll de Pal

The photographers on the trip had expressed a desire to head back toward Sanavastre to try and obtain photographs of the Bee-eaters. On our previous visit we had noted their favourite perches and so shortly after dawn we pulled into position and, as hoped, the birds

came in. It was a delight to be so close to these winged gems without disturbing them, as they displayed and presented tokens of pair-bonding in the form of their favourite food. Unfortunately, despite their close proximity, photographic opportunities were few and far between.

After breakfast we headed back through the Cadí tunnel for a quick stop in Bagà, where the Natural Park information office is located, where sundry postcards and maps were



Large White © Jeff Clarke

purchased. We then headed in a north-easterly direction up the winding mountain road that leads up to the Coll de Pal. A gentle breeze and fine sunshine held the promise a good raptor day.

Our first stop entailed a walk up to some old mine workings, which provided us with a wealth of flowers and butterflies. The short turf was decorated with gentians and dandelions in full flower

and these acted like a magnet for Queen of Spain Fritillaries and masses of Large Whites, the latter in pristine condition and looking superb. Our first de Prunner's Ringlets were also among the butterflies taking advantage of this wealth of nectar.

Whilst we were enjoying the butterflies the shout went up: "Lammergeier"! There, barely a few metres above our heads, circled this magnificent vulture. If ever there was a moment for a telephoto lens this was it, but – as always seems to be the way – sadly we were all set up with small macro lenses. The same bird was enjoyed several more times but never came as close again.



Pyrenean Golden-drop © Teresa Farino

New plants for our list here were a white-flowered clump of Alpine Pasque-flower *Pulsatilla alpina* ssp. *font-queri*, the stork's-bill *Erodium glandulosum*, Pyrenean Golden-drop *Onosma*

bubanii, Alpine Forget-me-not *Myosotis alpestris* and Matted Globularia *Globularia cordifolia*, but as we'd suspected might be the case, the Pyrenean Saxifrages and Ramonda were not yet in flower.

Following our mid-morning snack, as we walked back downslope toward the minibus, Brian paused by a sunny bank and disturbed a snake. We only had a few moments before it vanished into a crevice, but Gill managed to get off a couple of shots, which later proved it was an Asp Viper.



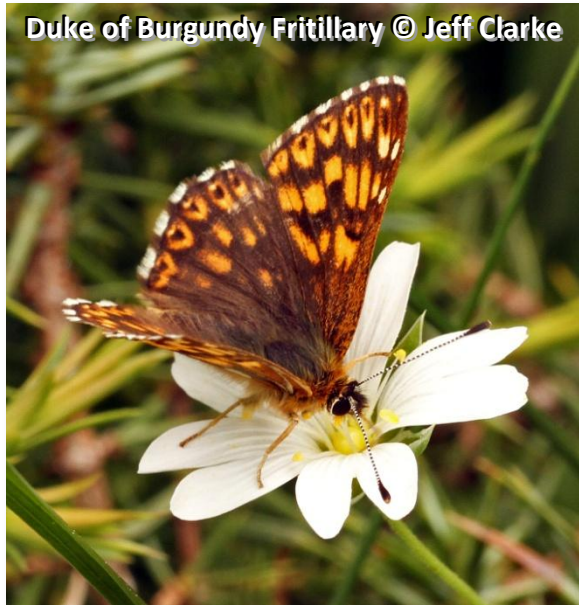
Moments after this the Lammergeier reappeared and was followed shortly afterwards by a pair of cavorting Golden Eagles. While we watched they talon-grappled and twisted around

acrobatically. As we'd suspected, it was proving to be a particularly good raptor day, and before long we'd added Booted Eagle and Egyptian Vulture to our haul.

We had lunch at a nearby mountain refuge, having first artfully strewn some chunks of apple around in case the Alpine Marmots were hungry too (obviously not as we didn't see any at this point!). Periodically we could hear a Wallcreeper calling from the rock wall above us, but despite a diligent search it never fluttered into view. After lunch the group set off along the so-called 'Marmot Trail', while Teresa took the vehicle to the top end of the walk to pick everyone up. It wasn't a particularly floristic walk but everyone stopped to photograph the splendid Pyrenean Snakesheads.



We also enjoyed the sight of Northern Wheatears playing around on the short-cropped turf. As we approached the end of the trail, several of the party glimpsed an Alpine Marmot streaking across the hillside, but it was too quick for us, and disappeared into a hole under the road.



Duke of Burgundy Fritillary © Jeff Clarke

In the absence of very much either in flower, or on the wing at this altitude (over 2000m), we decided to drop back down the valley to one of our favourite walks along a small river. Here we uncovered a veritable butterfly treasure trove, with more species on the wing than anywhere else during the week. Old favourites included Oberthür's Grizzled and Red-underwing Skippers, Provence Orange-tip, Glanville and Queen of Spain Fritillaries, the diminutive Duke of Burgundy Fritillary, with Provençal Fritillary new to our list for the week. One butterfly

stood out 'head and shoulders' above the crowd, though, and was in fact a 'lifer' for Jeff and Jack, the range-restricted and sumptuously lovely Chequered Blue.

The other lepidopteran that caught the eye at this location was the Hummingbird Hawk-moth and although it's always a challenge to arrest their antics on camera, we couldn't let the opportunity pass!

The streamside flora was equally diverse, and treated us to a fine selection of orchids, namely Sword-leaved Helleborine *Cephalanthera longifolia* and Common Spotted *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and Early Purple Orchids *Orchis mascula*, as well as Columbine *Aquilegia vulgaris* and Livelong Saxifrage *Saxifraga*

paniculata, but unfortunately the Martagon Lilies *Lilium martagon* that flourish here were still tightly furled in bud. Birds were difficult to locate in this tight little valley but persistence did provide brief but reasonable views of Blackcap and Firecrest.



Chequered Blue © Jeff Clarke

Wending our way homewards, we took a slight detour up a track to the right, where we located the splendid pale-yellow snapdragon *Antirrhinum latifolium*, growing amid a luxuriant tangle of Pitch Trefoil *Bituminaria bituminosa*, Perennial Yellow Woundwort *Stachys recta* and the showy Feverfew relative *Tanacetum corymbosum*. Butterfly-wise, Small Blues dotted the trackside vegetation and



Hummingbird Hawk-moth © Jeff Clarke

Large Wall Browns appreciated the warm microclimate, accompanied by the distinctive Narrow Rose-banded Wave moth (*Rhodostrophia calabra*).



Narrow Rose-banded Wave moth © Teresa Farrino

A further stop between sheer limestone cliffs turned up clumps of white-flowered Pyrenean Flax *Linum suffruticosum* ssp. *salsoides*, Large Selfheal *Prunella grandiflora*, Pyrenean Honeysuckle *Lonicera pyrenaica*, Blue Aphyllanthes *Aphyllanthes monspeliensis* and a few Fragrant Orchids *Gymnadenia conopsea*, as well as a magnificent display of Ramonda *Ramonda myconi* and Soft Snapdragon *Antirrhinum molle* in a rather inaccessible river cutting: a great floristic finale to our last stop of the day .

Sunday 16 June – Tossa d’Alp

One of the highlights – literally – of the week is a trip up in the *telecabina* to one of the loftiest peaks in the area: Tossa d’Alp (2,536m), although dismounting the constantly moving contraption complete with laden rucksack, photo and optical gear is no mean feat!

Although only scattered snow-patches persisted, the flora was more reminiscent of April than the middle of June, and we located several species that Teresa had never seen here before, in more than 20 years: an occasional Spring Pasque-flower *Pulsatilla vernalis*, drifts of the exquisite Spring Bulbocodium *Bulbocodium vernum* and brilliant-yellow mats of the primrose relative *Vitaliana Androsace vitaliana*.



As we slowly ascended towards the summit we encountered some of the smaller birds of these high peaks, though they were in noticeably lower numbers than on previous visits, possibly due to the limited insect food supply. Nevertheless we enjoyed reasonable views of the ubiquitous Black Redstarts together with good numbers of Northern Wheatears and a few Water Pipits. Similarly there were fewer Alpine and Red-billed Choughs to keep us company as we toured the higher reaches, although these were periodically joined by crouching Ravens. Alpine Accentors are usually easy to catch up with at this location, but on this occasion they proved uncooperative and some of us failed completely in our bid to see them. With the exception of the occasional Griffon Vulture and a hunting, Common Kestrel, raptors were mostly absent.



Thankfully the botanists had much to enjoy. Clumps of other early-flowering species, included such delights as Yellow Whitlow-grass *Draba aizoides* ssp. *aizoides*, Pyrenean Whitlow-grass *Petrocallis pyrenaica*, Purple Saxifrage *Saxifraga oppositifolia* and Garland Flower *Daphne cneorum*, amid the more characteristic

June offerings of Parnassus-leaved Buttercup *Ranunculus parnassifolius*, Spoon-leaved Candytuft *Iberis spathulata*, Hairy Saxifrage *Saxifraga pubescens*, Spring Gentians, and Alpine Fleabane *Erigeron alpinus*.



Hairy Saxifrage © Teresa Farino



Pyrenean Whitlow-grass © Teresa Farino

The view from the top is pretty dramatic and this is where we decided to have part of our lunch break. It has to be said there are worse places to stop and take in the view.



View from the summit of Tossa d'Alp © Jeff Clarke

While we were pottering around close to the summit we became aware of a number of hill-topping butterflies. Obviously it was getting pretty warm down in the lower valleys and the rising air was bringing a succession of Queen of Spain Fritillaries, Small Tortoiseshells, Clouded Yellows, Red Admirals and Painted Ladies up and over top as they dispersed to new feeding and breeding sites.

We also caught up with a few brown butterflies, all of which proved to be de Prunner's Ringlets, which are resident high-altitude lepidopterans and so anticipated at this location; but what about the numerous 'white' butterflies? Jeff was most surprised when he thought he spied a Green-veined White very close to the highest point. Luckily Teresa's antennae were up and alerted us to the possibility that it could be Peak White. We soon relocated the wee beast and sure enough it was a Peak White but just as the shutter was about to be pressed the butterfly was disturbed by a walker. Would we get a second chance? Thankfully "yes" was the answer, as we worked our way back down we found a couple more specimens and eventually one posed beautifully for Teresa to take a fantastic shot of this true high mountain butterfly. A genuine highlight for all of us!



There was a cold wind blowing, however, so we hastened back down in the *telecabina* to a lunch spot amid the Mountain Pines at the foot of the peak. Marshy patches here were home to Globeflowers *Trollius europaeus* and Yellow Wood Violet *Viola biflora*, with a couple of spikes of Pale-flowered Orchid *Orchis pallens* perhaps of most note. We also located some plants of the UK rarity Whorled Solomon's-seal *Polygonatum verticillatum* here, as well as the chunky hound's-tongue *Cynoglossum dioscoridis*.

There was a fair amount of bird and butterfly activity to keep us entertained for an hour or so after lunch, and one particular moisture-laden patch was attracting quite a few skipper butterflies including several specimens of Iberian Grizzled Skipper: a welcome addition to the tour list.



Pearly Heath © Jeff Clarke

Jeff had a complete change of scene up his sleeve for our final foray of the day: a visit to an area of Mediterranean scrub and dry grasslands near Montellà where – earlier in the week – he had located singing Orphean Warblers. By the time we arrived it was late afternoon and very hot, but as we alighted from the minibus we could hear Common Quail calling and the jangling keys song of Corn Bunting. Thankfully the Orphean Warblers co-operated by singing along, and soon everyone had obtained a reasonable view of this pale-irised scrub warbler. There were plenty of other birds to

enjoy as well; Cuckoo and Hoopoe were both present, as were Melodious Warbler and Red-backed Shrike. A reptile-hunting Short-toed Eagle was probably the highlight for most people and the scuttling presence of Common Wall Lizards suggested that it would not go hungry.

There were also masses of butterflies to bolster the day list, with Chequered, Adonis, Common and Small Blues, Black-veined White, Pearly Heath and Provence Orange-tip being some of the most noteworthy.

Monday 17 June – Orden road; Meranges

Up and out at first light for Jack and Jeff for a quick return to the Montellà site. On the approach, a massive male Wild Boar pranced across the road right in front of the minibus, while at the location itself the birds were of a similar composition to the previous afternoon, but the quiet and calm early morning atmosphere allowed even better sightings of the Orphean Warblers. We also had excellent views of Dartford, Bonelli's and Subalpine Warblers before returning to the hotel for breakfast.





Convolvulus lineatus © Teresa Farino

We had been so impressed with the wildlife to be found along the Orden road on our first day that we decided to make a second visit. Further rummaging around turned up Meadow Clary *Salvia pratensis*, Silvery-leaved Pink Convolvulus *Convolvulus lineatus*, Stemless Carline Thistle *Carlina acaulis*, a scattering of St Bernard's Lilies *Anthericum liliago* and the 'brown bluebells' of *Dipcadi serotinum*.

Good numbers of butterflies were on the wing once again which gave us plenty of opportunities to photograph the likes of Baton Blue and Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper, as well as our first Spotted Fritillary of the week. One or two Owl Flies were observed zooming around and a careful examination of one briefly perched up showed it to be *Libelloides longicornis*. We explored a little further up the road in search of new plants and butterflies and found a conveniently perched Wood White and a Bath White.



Wood White © Jeff Clarke



Broad-leaved Marsh Orchid © Teresa Farino

The lush Meranges water-meadows were our next port of call, where a very different plant community awaited us, dominated by Globeflowers, Bistort and Alpine Knotweed (*Polygonum bistorta* & *P. alpinum*, respectively), Great Burnet *Sanguisorba officinalis*, Wood Crane's-bill and Viper's-grass *Scorzonera humilis*. Marshy areas alongside the many streams riddling this area hosted Starry Saxifrage *Saxifraga stellaris*, Whorled Lousewort *Pedicularis verticillata*, many Heath Spotted-orchids and one huge Broad-leaved Marsh Orchid (*Dactylorhiza maculata* & *D. majalis*, respectively).

Thankfully there were also a fair few butterflies to enjoy, including showy species like the Common Swallowtail, Spanish Scarce Swallowtail, Brimstone and Black-veined White. Subtler relatives included Duke of

Burgundy Fritillary, Sooty Copper and Green-veined White, the latter surprisingly our first specimen of the week. A small, rather dark lycaenid grabbed Jeff's attention as it fluttered by; Teresa then came across to investigate and suspected it was Geranium Argus and so it proved to be. We were delighted as it was a new species for most of the group. It eventually settled beautifully allowing everyone to obtain some fine images for posterity.

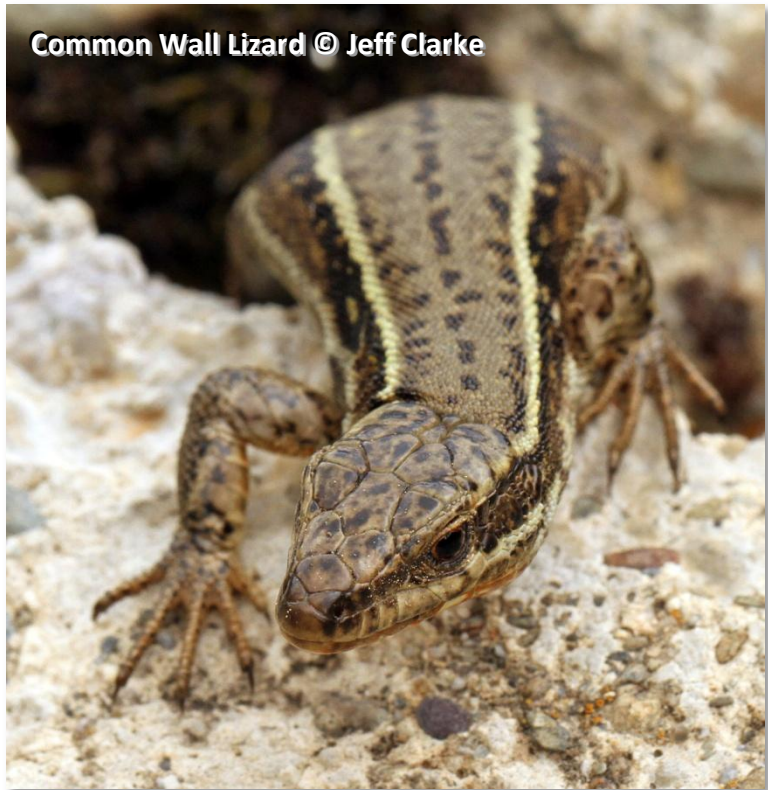
As we returned towards the vehicle the



Geranium Argus © Jeff Clarke

temperature had dropped noticeably, but a pair of Common Wall Lizards on the parapet of the bridge across the stream were still active and were also remarkably obliging when it came to being photographed; they were clearly used to passing pedestrian traffic. We could have stayed longer, but a glance at the gathering clouds prompted a swift departure.

For lunch we headed up to the Estany de Malniú, where setting up our picnic in the shelter of some massive pines – whose lower branches were occupied



Common Wall Lizard © Jeff Clarke



Crested Tit © Jeff Clarke

by busily feeding Crested and Coal Tits – proved to be a good move, as it rained intermittently while we were eating.

There were a few other birds in and around the picnic ground, including more Citril Finches, but the only new species we added here was Mallard, looking rather scruffy as the males were entering their eclipse plumage phase.

Our week of good luck weather-wise held, because after lunch the clouds had lifted sufficiently for us to make a foray into the surrounding pastures and boulder chokes. The flora was rather sparse here, however, although we did come across the luminous-pink, spherical flower-heads of Alpine Catchfly (*Lychnis alpina*) and the rather more muted shades of Alpine Clover (*Trifolium alpinum*).

The piercing calls of Alpine Marmots punctuated our floristic ramble and having failed to secure a decent view, or image, all week this represented our last opportunity. We crossed a closely cropped area to reach a distant tumble of large boulders and after some judicious

stalking we got the views we craved. Once the animals were confident we were not a threat they were remarkably tame! It was a fitting and memorable end to our time in Cerdanya.

Alpine Marmot © Jeff Clarke



Tuesday 18 June – Serra d'Odèn en route to the airport

Today was moving day. Following breakfast we said our goodbyes to Gill and Brian, who were motoring up to France for further photographic adventures, and shortly after 10.00am the minibus was packed up and on the road towards Barcelona by a circuitous route.



Because the season was so late this year, we were still missing some of the real choice plants of the Catalan Pyrenees, so Teresa consulted colleague Mike Lockwood as to an alternative locality for the likes of Pyrenean Saxifrage. He suggested that we try the Serra d'Odèn, to the south-east of the Cadí ridge, and hit the nail right on the head.

Having driven past hundreds of drooping spikes of Pyrenean Saxifrage *Saxifraga longifolia* adorning the cliffs of the narrow winding road, we were finally able to park just after the village of Alinyà. Other archetypal Pyrenean plants we encountered here included some stunning Pyrenean Bellflowers *Campanula speciosa*, plus Crown Vetch *Securigera varia*, Straw Foxglove *Digitalis lutea* and the diminutive Fairy Foxglove *Erinus alpinus*, as well as elements characteristic of a more Mediterranean flora: Mediterranean Spurge *Euphorbia characias*, Coris *Coris monspeliensis*, the lovely reddish-bronze flowers of *Tragopogon crocifolius* and Cone Knapweed *Leuzea conifera*.



There was also a good variety of birds to be enjoyed along this stretch of road, including a Hoopoe that sat up conveniently in some dead tree branches. Among the butterflies of note here was a very obliging Glanville Fritillary, but it was another invertebrate that really caught our eye: a stunning male jumping spider *Philaeus* cf. *chrysops*.

Glanville Fritillary © Jeff Clarke



We stopped at a variety of locations a little further on, including one with a small pond in an opening in the woods from which the deafening sound of Iberian Water frogs emanated, and where a freshly emerged Broad-bodied Chaser was also on offer.

Lunch was taken at the Coll de Jou (1480m), in the hope of spotting a

Black Vulture – though none materialised after which we headed due south towards Solsona. We decided there was time to make just one more stop before we went our separate ways – Teresa back to the Picos de Europa, and Jeff and other members of the group to Barcelona to catch the plane back to the UK – so just north of Solsona we pulled off the road into some sparse evergreen oak woods and patches of Mediterranean grassland. In stark contrast to the lush montane habitats of the Pyrenees, we struggled to find much of interest on the botanical front, with Blue Cupidone *Catananche caerulea*, the spiky-fruited scabious *Lomelosia stellata* and a species of *Gladiolus* perhaps of most note here.

Striped Oil Beetle © Jeff Clarke



In contrast to the plants, however, there were several new invertebrates on show. Butterflies included Western Dappled White, Berger's Clouded Yellow and Iberian Marbled White, but it was the Striped Oil Beetles that probably stole the show, trundling along in typical fashion, flaunting their aposematic colouration as a challenge to would-be predators.

This was our last hoorah before departing. The tour had thrown up some interesting challenges; the exceptionally late spring meant we had to continually rethink our strategy to get the best from the available options. It also brought opportunities, and although we

inevitably missed a number of anticipated species, in compensation we found many things that, had the season been more advanced, we would have completely missed.

As always with group tours the willingness of the participants to assist in searching out interesting species and sharing their discoveries really enhanced the tour, and meant that most people got to see the majority of the flora and fauna described in this report. We hope that reading this review rekindles the memories of all that we saw during the week, and will perhaps inspire you to join us on a future tour to one of Spain's biologically rich areas.

Finally Teresa and Jeff would like to thank all members of the party for contributing so many of their fine images and thus helping to bring this report to life.



Cercopis intermedia © Jeff Clarke

For information about future tours please visit our websites:

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

Teresa Farino: <http://www.iberianwildlife.com/teresa-farino.htm#Teresa-Farino-Trips>

Teresa Farino & Jeff Clarke; 2014