

Laguna de Gallocanta

A four day holiday in the Spanish region of Aragon

Report by Brian Lennox



Never one to avoid a good pun, Jeremy Brock's presentation "Spanish Steppes" was always going to attract me to the SOC Ayrshire meeting in November 2016. Jeremy's superb illustrated talk didn't disappoint and indeed paved the way for four of us to plan a visit to this less well-known of the Iberian hotspots.

"Steppes" to me conjured up a vision of Dr. Zhivago's train on an endless journey through frozen terrain. In fact, it refers to treeless grassland, too dry to be a forest but not dry enough for a desert. Veld, prairie and savanna are steppes but where would this be seen in Spain? As we were to find out, there is a high continental plain at about 1000m surrounded by mountain ranges to the south of Saragossa in the region of Aragon.

The "Laguna" bit of Laguna de Gallocanta is something of a misnomer since it has had precious little water in it for the past few years. It is an endorheic lake which means it has no natural outflow and it is fed mainly by rain water. Climate change and agricultural practice have contributed to the drying-up process. Notwithstanding that, Laguna de Gallocanta remains an important and spectacular wintering site for **common crane**, and it's for this reason that most tourists/birders might add it to their places to visit. Having said that, the area is on the migration route from Africa and southern Iberia so a visit in spring wasn't going to disappoint.

Flushed with the success of previous trips to Germany for the crane migration and the Grant Arms at Grantown on Spey, and reasonably confident that we could put up with each other's quirks for four days, Sandy Martin, John Macpherson, David Roy and I booked Ryanair flights from Glasgow to Valencia. Unfortunately, David had a biking mishap a few days before the departure date which forced him to cancel.



With Jeremy's input, we decided that we would be able to see a fair amount in a three-night visit (two and a bit days birding), although in the eventuality we transferred back to Valencia in our hire car on Sunday late afternoon since Ryanair changed the departure time to a proper red-eye slot.

We lodged in the village of Gallocanta in the Allucant, which accurately describes itself as a "welcoming rural guesthouse." Javier, the co-proprietor, is charm personified and a superb host, plying us with beer and wine at every opportunity! Jeremy had invited anyone interested in the trip to the area to email him, which I did. Without hesitation he agreed to be our local guide and driver, both of which added immensely to our enjoyment of the trip. He is a most generous person and a fount of knowledge on the local area and its birds. On to the birding list, at last!

Day 1 - Friday 05 May 2017

We arrived in Gallocanta about 17.00 hrs after the two-and-a-half hour drive from Valencia. Jeremy met us (he has a home in the next village, Berrueco), and we set off in his venerable Land Cruiser. We stopped by the laguna and scanned for **great bustard**, which Jeremy had seen at this spot earlier in the day. When we failed to pick out anything I felt sorry for Jeremy, since he wanted to start our trip with a flourish but, just as we were packing up, there was a flock of five of what contends to be the world's heaviest flying creatures coming in to land not too far in front of us. We all agreed that if this was the sum of what we saw on our trip it would still have been more than worth the effort.

The area is criss-crossed by un-metalled roads which, in the main, are not signposted, so it was only with Jeremy's knowledge that our next stop was in a field in which, Jeremy's wife, Jeanette, had spotted **little bustard** earlier in the week. Right on cue, this bird popped its head above the foliage of the field it was probably nesting in. We were thrilled to have two of our target species in the first half hour birding and seriously impressed that this bird had been spotted on a drive by. Other birds that evening included **swallow, swift, yellow wagtail, shelduck, lapwing, red-legged partridge, hoopoe and black-bellied sand grouse**. For the most part we stayed away from the lake shore but we did see **Kentish plover** at one area with a small amount of water. Back to the hotel for a wholesome meal with inclusive wine and beer. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Great bustard



Black-bellied sand grouse



Hoopoe



Day 2 - Saturday 06 May 2017

Jeremy suggested we might want a dawn chorus walk along the lake shore near the village, so we three foregathered at 06.30 hrs and stepped out into the bitter cold. While it was a pleasant stroll through the sleepy village (most of the houses are holiday homes for Saragossians) we didn't see much birdlife. **Robin, blue tit, and skylark** popped up but I think the rest were waiting for the sun to warm them up. **Crested lark, Calandra lark, spotless starlings and linnets** are common in the area.

After breakfast we headed off for a visit to a nearby gorge, but on the way we got spectacular views of a male **Montagu's harrier** which obligingly did a fly-past of the vehicle. By this time we were beginning to think that Jeremy was practising some dark art to attract this great selection of birds for our benefit!

The gorge walk was one of the highlights of the trip. There was an area which was lush and produced **nightingale, zitting cisticola, Cetti's warbler, Bonelli's warbler, Melodious warbler, sub-alpine warbler and Orphean warbler. Great spotted woodpecker** was heard but not seen. **Short-toed treecreeper, black redstart, rock bunting, mistle thrush and rock thrush** were in the more arid section of the gorge which we'd moved in to. Jeremy suggested we keep our eyes open for the solitary **blue rock thrush** which typically picks a high point from which to survey his kingdom. Right on cue, one popped up and we were afforded splendid views. **Crag martins** flicked around the cliff faces, occasionally seen entering nest holes. **Black-eared wheatear** showed on several occasions here.

We had a picnic beside some ancient stone beehives before heading for the main attraction, **griffon vultures**. Jeremy knew of a nesting/roosting area which had two nests with a young bird in each. There were about twelve others perched and they took turns to slowly launch themselves into a thermal and soar, only to return minutes later to their grotto-like indentation on the cliff face. There was a suggestion that a volunteer might like to lie still long enough thereby attracting the birds for a great photo opportunity, but, disappointingly, there were no takers.



The gorge is in an area frequented by **chough** and we had several sightings of their aerial prowess. A **woodchat shrike** was a nice find in this area as were **sedg warbler and spotted flycatcher**. For large sections of this walk we were serenaded by **nightingales** which seemed to know exactly how to maximise the acoustic potential of neighbouring cliff faces.

I should say at this point that the distances we were driving were minimal, perhaps, five to ten miles maximum, and that our walks were at a snail's pace for relatively short distances. The part of the gorge that we walked would not be much more than two miles. Notwithstanding this, we had built up something of a thirst due to the excitement of the birding and now the heat of the day, so we made for a village where Jeremy was sure there would be a pub. Imagine our wee faces when, following an enquiry by Jeremy who is fluent in the lingo, a local lady told us that the hostelry had closed. She directed us to the nearest bar where we slaked our thirst with Ambar, the local brew soon to become John's drink of choice.

The trip back to the hotel was brief but we managed to see **kestrel, carrion crow, raven, corn bunting, house martin, quail and peregrine falcon**. Jeanette and Jeremy joined us for dinner at the Allucant and we retired reasonably early, well pleased with our sighting and feeling no pain, courtesy of the excellent local wine.



Choughs



Woodchat shrike



Nightingale



Great reed warbler



Tawny pipit

Day 3 - Sunday 07 May

We eschewed the opportunity of the early morning stroll and opted for a leisurely after-breakfast departure with Jeremy and Jeanette. A stop not too far from the village let us hear **cuckoo** and gave us good sightings of **turtle dove**. There are a couple of ponds near the lagoon and we strolled around these but the only waders were **common sandpiper** and **common redshank**. We had two sightings of **great reed warbler**. A male **marsh harrier** was quartering a field as we drove along the main road. Then we were off to an area of tundra. Again, I associated tundra with Russia and perma-frost, but then my higher geography was way last century. I was correct in that the term "tundra" comes from a Russian word but it simply means a biome which is too cold for trees to grow in, perma-frost being a feature of more northerly examples.

En route we managed a superb sighting of a **female Montagu's harrier** to complement our male the previous day. On reaching the tundra habitat, our hire car was abandoned by the side of the road and we all piled into Jeremy's vehicle. Jeanette insisted on sitting in the boot, thereby allowing us three guests uninterrupted views of the flora and fauna. As I said earlier, they are most generous people and we were so grateful for their efforts in helping to arrange the trip, plan the days out and directing us to specific area for the variety of species.

Once in the tundra area, which is about 1200 m above sea level, we thought we had been transported to the moon, albeit that there was a splendid array of plants in bloom which provided a carpet ablaze with colours. This part of the trip was directed at various lark species and it didn't disappoint. Very quickly we spotted **short-toed lark** distinguished by the dark patches on its cheeks and its smaller size. **Crested lark**, the clue being in the name, followed. Then **Thekla lark** with its strong streaking on the breast and lack of hook at the end of the upper mandible. **Skylark** was also present but not in great numbers at this altitude. We spent some time in a vain search for **Dupont's lark**, which Jeremy assured us was known to be in this area but didn't turn up on the day. Even Jeremy was initially stumped by a confiding bird, brown above, pale below, which sat on a post adjacent to the vehicle, but he quickly identified it as **tawny pipit**, a very elegant bird. Jeremy and I left the others to stroll in the strong sunshine while we went back for the, by now, very dusty, hire car, and on the way we got good views of a **hoopoe**. Back on the road as a two car convoy about 16.00 hrs, we made a stop for lunch at a roadhouse. Around 17.00 hrs we parted company with Jeremy and Jeanette who headed back to their house to prepare for their drive home to Gatehouse the next day, while we took to the motorway for Valencia and a night at the Travelodge before early departure next morning for Glasgow, the upside of which being, we were back in Ayrshire by 11.00 hrs on Monday morning.

In total we got 80 species with some high value ticks amongst them. The habitats we visited were stunning as was the constantly changing scenery in the massive bowl formed by the surrounding sierras. We were enthralled by the place and, given an opportunity, would return if only to bag the **Dupont's!** **Thanks go to Jeremy and Jeanette for their superb efforts in making our trip most memorable.**

Mysterious Isles

Heidi Scott

*Written on 28.07.1987 after a holiday on the Orkney Isles
Heidi was 13 at the time.*

Golden dawn breaks.
Sapphire skies awake
reflecting on the still seas,
merging into unity
at the far horizons

Tiny sparkling wavelets
like priceless jewels,
lap at the shimmering, silver beach.
Buttercups wave gently
their golden mass rippled by a light breeze,

oystercatchers rising from the yellow haze.
each colour glows intensely, deeply,
the islands are aflame with their own
mysterious light.
Above, spectacular clouds
arch the unending skies, changing always,

each glorious scene in a moment gone for
ever
Changing hues illuminate the glassy sea,
deep emerald and powerful blues
fleet across the surface with the shadows of
the sky.

The call of the birds is in harmony
with the thundering of the sea,
in harmony with the whistling of the wind,
and in harmony with their peaceful world.

Each whispering grass, each sighing breeze
holds deep, unequalled happiness,
freedom calls in every joyful sound.
Colours change, grow more delicate,
a world of silvery grey and sparkling blue.

Seals appear, their dark, liquid eyes
stare inquisitively filled with deep wonder,
then swim off into the mist.
Disappearing as mysteriously as they came.

The hazy sun throws golden shafts on the
silver scene,
as pastel blue and turquoise mingle
in a moonstone mist.

Slowly, now, the sun begins to set,
bathing the islands in a deep, blood red,

the evaporating mist is tinted pink.
Like a living ruby, the last of the sun
disappears.

For a moment, the sky is alight with red glory,
then fades slowly into another Orkney night.



Evening meetings at
Monkton Community Church Hall
and Pioneer Café
Tuesdays 19.00 for 19.30hrs.

12 September 2017 CHRIS ROLLIE on Jack Gordon's "*Birds of Wigtownshire*"

10 October 2017 IAN POXTON *Birds of prey in the Lammermuirs*

14 November 2017 KENNY KORTLAND *Plantations: lifeless monocultures or biodiversity hotspots*

12 December 2017 MARK NEWELL *SEABIRD STUDIES ON THE ISLE OF MAY*
"*Spreading our wings after 40 years*"

09 January 2018 BRIAN MORRELL (WWT) *Incredible journeys*

13 February 2018 BARBARA HELM *Biological clocks help birds stay on time*

13 March 2018 BEN DARVILL (BTO) *Technology, tags and tracking*

10 April 2018 - TOM BYARS *Dynamite in the dunes:*
A natural history of Ardeer Peninsula



WINTER SWANS & WADERS At RSPB Leighton Moss and WWT Martin Mere

Saturday/ Sunday 18/19 November 2017
by COACH from AYR
Leader: Jim Thomson

A joint SOC Ayrshire and RSPB Central Ayrshire Local Group WEEKEND TRIP. [Leaving Dodds coach depot, East Road, AYR at 07.30 hrs on 18 November.](#) We will be driving to RSPB LEIGHTON MOSS Reserve for lunch and an afternoon of birding. [We will stay overnight on a Dinner, Bed and Breakfast basis at a 3* hotel near Southport.](#) Next day we will visit WWT MARTIN MERE to spend time from 09.30 to 15.00 hrs. [Returning to AYR for around 22.00 hrs and stopping en- route for dinner in Carlisle.](#) Registration will be from September onwards or register earlier by e-mailing Tony Scott on : da.scott@tiscali.co.uk or telephone 01292 281 085. **The cost should be in the region of £145.00 per person.** This trip will operate with numbers of 15 to 20 people.

A full information leaflet will be available at the first and subsequent meetings of RSPB Central Ayrshire Local Group and SOC Ayrshire. Please book as early as possible for best prices.

Field Trips and tours jointly with RSPB Central Ayrshire Local Group

Field Trips 2017

Saturday 23 September MAIDENS & GIRVAN

Meet 10.30 hrs at Maidens Harbour car park (toilets). On to GIRVAN early afternoon. Please bring a picnic lunch. Finish around 16.00 hrs.

Saturday 21 October RSPB MERSEHEAD RESERVE

Meet at the reserve car park for 11.00 hrs. Please bring a picnic lunch. Finish c.16.00 hrs.

Saturday/Sunday 18/19 November WEEKEND TRIP by COACH from AYR

RSPB LEIGHTON MOSS & WWT MARTIN MERE Meet 07.30 at Dodd's coach depot, East Road, Ayr. Cost including DBB in a 3* hotel near Southport and all coach travel - estimated at around £145.00. Return to Ayr on 19.11.17 around 22.00 hrs. Full details later.

Saturday 16 December

STRANRAER, LOCH RYAN & WIG BAY Meet at 10.30 hrs. at Ballantrae (toilets). On to Stranraer and Loch Ryan. Please bring picnic lunch. All day trip. Finish around 15.30 hrs.

Field trips 2018

Saturday 20 January GREENAN SHORE AND DOONFOOT.

Meet at 10.00hrs Greenan Castle car park. Trip lasts until 12.00 hrs.

Saturday 17 February IRVINE HARBOUR AND BEACH PARK

Meet at 10.30 hrs. at the old Harbourmasters office, Irvine. Food available at Harbour Arts Centre or the Ship Inn, or bring a packed lunch. Finish around 15.00 hrs.

Saturday 24 March DUMFRIES HOUSE ESTATE AND GARDENS

Meet 10.30 hrs at Dumfries House car park (toilets). Walk and birdwatch the riverbank, woodlands and gardens. Café on site or bring a picnic lunch. All day trip until 16.00 hrs.

Saturday 21 April LOCH DOON & NESS GLEN WOODLANDS

Meet at the Roundhouse (Loch Doon) for 10.30. Please bring a picnic lunch or food and drink available at the Roundhouse (toilets for customers). Finish c.15.30 hrs.

Monday 28 May to Wednesday 06 June

An ten-day coach holiday from Ayr

BIRDS AND LANDSCAPES OF THE DORSET COAST by COACH

Coach travel from Ayr. Staying at three or four-star hotels on a DBB basis. Visiting RSPB Arne reserve: Studland Heath reserve: RSPB Radipole Lake and Lodmore reserves, Weymouth: Chessil Beach and the Jurassic Coast: Portland Bill: the breeding seabird cliffs at Durlston Head: Brownsea Island and the protected nature reserves around Poole Harbour and the Isle of Purbeck. We will also visit Corfe Castle and the Swanage steam railway. Price will include dinner, bed and breakfast and all coach travel from Ayr. We will be staying at 3* hotels on the way south and north, and visiting nature reserves en route. Estimated cost for a maximum of 16 participants will be around £1100.00pp inclusive of half-board hotel accommodation and coach travel. Full details available later.
