

# SPAIN'S PICOS DE EUROPA

## 5-12 JUNE 2015

### TRIP REPORT – ARNSIDE & DISTRICT NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Naturetrek Leaders: Andrew Cleave  
Laura Benito

Participants:

David Talbot	Esme Kitchen
Mike Walker	Janet Milwain
Mark Evans	Peter Moreton
Jean Williams	Brian Hancock
John Webb	Stuart Imm
Jill Webb	Ann Imm
Roger Spooner	Madeline Robertson
Dorothy Bates	

#### DAY 1 MANCHESTER-BILBAO

**Weather: cloudy 16°C**

Our EasyJet flight to Bilbao was delayed around 45 minutes whilst we waited for the food to be delivered and loaded, not that most of us cared as we clutched our Boots Meal Deals.

This trip was the reverse of the one usually offered by Naturetrek so we had a long drive to Espinama, first following the coast and then heading down to the Picos N.P., arriving around 20.45, just in time for dinner.

On the way we saw a few birds, notably Y.L Gulls along the coastal highway.

#### DAY 2 POTES CABANA

**Weather: 16°C, cloud with sunny intervals**

First stop was the delightful town of Potes where we strolled the quiet streets and walked by the river whilst our guides stocked up with provisions.



The river gave us views of Grey Wagtails, Dipper and both Redstarts. The sky was full of hirundines and swifts and through most of our time there we had good views of a Booted Eagle. Just as we were returning to the vehicles we had distant views of a juvenile Golden Eagle. From Potes we drove up the mountain road to Cabana where we spent the remaining part of the day. A gentle walk gave us a taste of the mountain scenery and moorland habitat. Our pre-lunch walk gave us what would

become the ubiquitous sight of dozens of Griffon Vultures but also distant views of Red-billed Choughs on the cliffs, plus a couple in a field a little closer.

Brian quickly found us a Marbled Fritillary and then later a splendid and co-operative Long-tailed Blue, both of which were heavily photographed!

This is a good site for Wryneck but only the advanced group of walkers managed a quick flypast, but several more heard its distinctive call. We also had a hovering Short-toed Eagle over a ridge.

Andrew and Laura knocked up a delicious picnic, the highlight for many being our first taste of the local Picos blue cheese.

Roger and Dorothy started their impressive plant list.

On returning to the hotel we then set off on a walk to the nearby village of Pido, initially on the road and then returning on a track by the river to the hotel.

### **DAY 3 FUENTE DE 20°C Warm/sunny**

**Weather:**

If ever we needed a good day it was today .... and oh how we were blessed. We even sought out the shade as we queued for El Cable (said to be the longest single-span cable car in the world) surrounded by cyclists and runners preparing to ascend in a somewhat different manner to us!

We were some of the first to arrive at the top and dallied briefly to admire the fantastic view and spent some time exploring around the buildings, quickly experiencing close views of Alpine Chough, Alpine



Accentor and terrific, albeit brief, views of Snowfinch on the ground. Below our feet our first real taste of the wonderful



alpine flowers including Spring & Trumpet Gentian, Scrambling Gromwell and Alpine Forget-me-Not.

Then we were off on our long but relatively gentle walk back to Espinama after a short foray, a little higher still, to look for Wall Creeper. A determined party of David, John & Jill, Stuart & Ann and Mark went a little further on and after an hour or so managed to get a good view of our quarry, as it

flew along the cliff for 20 seconds or so. At this point we also had good views the many Chamois, mainly cooling off on the few remaining patches of snow.

Our party became quite spread out as we ambled down first to the café (very welcome) and then on the long track to the old village, meadows and eventually back to the hotel. Progress was necessarily slow with so many flowers, new butterflies and birds to pick out and photograph.

The track by the stream on the way to the village was highly productive, especially with the 'puddling' butterflies taking minerals from the ground amongst interesting plants like Greater Butterwort. Here we had Gavarnie Blue, De Pruner's Ringlet, Olive Skipper, some Fritillaries and the odd lizard.

Beyond the village we had good views of a Melodious Warbler singing its heart out close to its nest and then, in the wooded part of the path, heard a strident Bonelli's Warbler. David missed the subsequent meadow as he stalked the bird til he got a photograph, ably aided by Laura.

The meadow came up with Pink Butterfly Orchid after the wonderful displays of Heath-spotted, Fragrant and Burnt Orchids we had just had by the village.

Not too long after we were back at the hotel, first stop the bar for a well-deserved cerveza.

Happily tired, we headed for the showers after what most thought the best day of the holiday.

### **DAY 4 HERMIDA GORGE ERDUN GORGE**

**Weather: 21°C, warm/sunny**

First stop today was the delightful old church surrounded by meadows in the Hermida Gorge.

On what was the warmest, sunniest morning of the week we were treated to many butterflies, especially around the graveyard – Cleopatras, S.W. Fritillary, Clouded Yellows, Spotted

Fritillary and many more. Lizards were everywhere, mainly Common Wall Lizards but John and

Esme were lucky enough to spy on the wall in the corner of the excellent close views of feeding on valerian.

After an excellent lunch Laura (and yes, more Picos to our second hotel but with exploring the narrow path on hydro-electric plant.

More interesting plants were to be found including both Bee and Woodcock Orchids. Butterfly species included Pearly Heath, Wall Brown and Lefèbvre's Ringlet. We even had a Common Toad precariously balanced on the delightful bridge at the end of our walk.



the huge Oscellated Lizard graveyard. We also had Hummingbird Hawk Moth

courtesy of Andrew and Blue) we set off on our way time for a couple of hours the Erdun Gorge beyond the

It was then a drive north to Arenas de Cabrales for our final four nights. After a quick check-in we hit the bar for some of us to sample the famous local cider and with a little tuition on how to pour it, had a go ourselves – it seemed popular with Esme and Janet at least!

## **DAY 5 COVADONGA LARGO ENOL CANALES**

**Weather: 16<sup>0</sup>C (down to 10<sup>0</sup>C), low cloud**

The day started with a visit to Covadonga, famed for its basilica perched high on a rocky peak overlooking a small park.



No sooner had we got out of the buses we heard and then saw Firecrest in a local garden. We ambled up the steep hill to the basilica and admired both the church and the view. At the foot of the hill a large cliff face with cave and shrine brings the religious tourists in droves apparently.

A few of us enjoyed a coffee whilst a few others were lucky enough to see a Lammergeier fly over the valley bottom.

From Covadonga we set off up the mountain road, quite precipitous and nerve-wracking, especially when we met a large bus on its way down! We had come here to view two montane lakes but unfortunately the weather had a different idea, so a small group of us walked back up the hill to at least walk around one of these lakes, Largo Enol though the area was swathed in cloud. We did however see Water Pipit and Black Redstart. After a cold, damp lunch by the vehicles in the car park we cut our losses and headed back down.

Andrew promised us a coffee-stop at the village of Canales followed by a walk along the roadside which proved most fruitful. Whilst still cool and dull, what butterflies we did see were obligingly still and we got lovely views and photographs of Marsh Fritillaries, Marbled White and S. Brown Argus. The flowers too did not disappoint with 3 species of Serapia orchids, Pyramidal and literally hundreds of Bee Orchids right by the side of the road.

**DAY 6 CANALES - MOLINA****Weather: 16°C, cloudy with sunny intervals**

Back to Canales and another chance to view the verges while Andrew and Laura took our vehicle down to the village of Molina in order to ease the journey back ..... a good move! We then commenced the slow walk down to the pretty village of Molina, taking in the flowers and a few butterflies en route. In the brief spell when the sun did come out butterflies stirred in the meadows near the village with dozens of Marbled White taking to the sky. Madeline really got her eye in with beetles and bugs, supplying David with more macro photography opportunities.

Once in the village we picnicked by an old barn with vultures and buzzards above us.

Most of us then set off down the rocky path to the river and truly magical views down to the water from tiny drovers' bridges.

Once by the side of the river we settled down to explore the riparian banks for flowers, adding tall Common Spotted Orchid to the list. The odd Dipper and Grey Wagtail graced the river itself. Mark (our technical consultant!) tried out his underwater photography with camera on stick, all linked to his laptop! Some strings of toadspawn seemed a little ill-placed in the fast stream.

On returning to Canales, a gave a great view of a most interesting "thick-wire" beetle, *Oedemena nobilis*. A short evening walk allowed us to spot a Tawny Owl on a track behind the hotel in



further quick look at the roadside pristine Marsh Fritillary and the "thighed" beetle, *Oedemena nobilis*. allowed us to spot a Tawny Owl on a Nightjar, including one sat on the the gloom.

**DAY 7 CARES GORGE (Tielbe) ARENAS - POO****Weather: 15°C, low cloud and drizzle**

Our last full day was meant to be a high level walk at the top of the Cares Gorge but once again the weather conspired against us. A short walk around the vehicle near Tielbe presented little other than a few Fragrant Orchids and noisy Serin plus the ubiquitous Blackcap. After a quick discussion it was decided to cut our losses and head back to Arenas.

On the way down though we did stop to observe the river where we could see a number of Brown Trout including one or two sizeable fish. Sand and House Martins patrolled the gorge.

Coffee (and a plate of chips for Jean!) and we decided on a walk along the river to the nearby river of Poo (that's pronounced Po!!!). After a quick lunch we set off along the riverbank, picking up Redstart, Bonelli's Warbler, Golden Oriole and both Griffon & Egyptian Vulture on the way.

Once at Poo the party split with some retracing their steps to Arenas whilst 6 of us started off on the other bank, walking the road back towards town. This hardy half dozen headed up a steep road with the intention of doubling back to the high ridge behind our hotel. We did manage to find a path, of sorts, on which we found Large Thyme and another Woodcock Orchid by a disused mine. Birds included Stonechat and Tree Pipit. The path disappeared, as they so often seemed to do, presenting us



with a real challenge of descending to the meadow by the hotel which we could see but was separated from us by a small but sheer cliff. Eventually we fought our way through tall grass and bramble on a somewhat longer path to reach the hotel for a welcome beer.

**DAY 8 ARENAS – BILBAO Weather: 20<sup>0</sup>C, dull but much warmer once in Bilbao**

Due to the fact that we had wanted to fly from Manchester and not London, Bilbao was our chosen airport but because of this we had to be dropped off early so our guides could drive to Santander to meet the next tour.

This meant a 6-7 hour wait at the airport and whilst 6 very kind souls very kindly stayed and guarded the luggage, the rest of us took the bus to Bilbao, the main purpose of which was to see the Guggenheim Museum. The highly efficient bus service whisked us into the city in 20 minutes for a very reasonable €1.40.

Lots of photos of the Guggenheim from the road bridge and then a walk along the opposite bank of the river before crossing to a delightful outdoor café by the museum for coffees and later lunch.

Those with a bent, or at least mild curiosity, for modern art ventured through the doors of the museum to see what effectively was a one-man event, the mainly “inflatable” works of Jeff Koons.

The same speedy bus had us back to the airport for our flight, which after much concern about potential air-traffic controllers’ strike, left on time bringing our holiday to a close.

