



The group – still smiling at the end of the walk!

Those of you who had to miss this outing for various reason really did miss out - this was a wonderful day, thoroughly enjoyed at different levels, by all who took part. As you can tell by the array of sunglasses in the photo, we were blessed with a perfect day for walking; sunny but not too warm for those amongst us who were fit enough and game enough to make it to the top of 'El Picacho' itself and lovely for those whose aspirations were less lofty and preferred a more leisurely approach, stopping often along the way to admire the beautiful spring flowers, watch the butterflies and admire the amazing views.

The day began well, everyone was on time at the frontier and those we had arranged to meet en route were in the right place at the right time. We took a quick break at the packed Palmosa services, where Bob very generously treated us all to coffee, but we were thwarted in the comfort department by ultra-long queues! No matter, we drove on the short distance to the town of Alcalá de los Gazules, stopping in the car park which is perfectly placed for watching the delightful colony of Lesser Kestrel that nest in and around the church tower and the old castle walls. They appear to be settling in to their nesting sites now and were flying to and fro various apertures in the buildings and perching on roofs, ledges and even atop the church bell. We counted at least 20 Lesser Kestrels and there were plenty of Spotless Starlings, Feral Pigeons and House Sparrows around there too, also House Martins, Barn Swallows, a Black Redstart and a lone Black Kite that flew over in the distance.

Tearing ourselves away from this fascinating scene, we continued on our way, heading out of the town and into the unspoilt countryside beyond. The bird sightings began immediately; there is a small farm on the first part of the

road marked to El Picacho and today there were Collared Doves, House Sparrows and Spotless Starlings around some small farm buildings where House Martins were on the ground collecting mud for nest building or repairs. A little further along we pulled off the narrow road and stopped to look for some of the smaller birds that gather here in good numbers; we saw Meadow Pipits (10+) and Goldfinches perched on the overhead cables, a displaying male Serin, a Corn Bunting singing his heart out from the middle of a bush, a whole flock of Cattle Egrets feeding in a field, a Song Thrush flying, Stonechats in the field across the road and Crested Larks perched on the wire fences. Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs were also heard here, singing from amongst the nearby olive trees and there were distant sightings of a Griffon Vulture and a Short-toed Eagle.

We arrived at the car park of El Picacho and immediately had a Great Spotted Woodpecker to add to our list. We headed into the woodland and stopped at the edge of the Laguna, which is presently full of water, adding a wonderful extra dimension to the picturesque views from this spot.



We hadn't planned to stay here for long, but suddenly there was so much to see; a Tree Frog in a Cork Oak just over our heads, Pool and Iberian frogs plopping in and out of the water's edge and then Newts (we don't know what species they were). There were Chiffchaffs in the trees on the left-hand edge of the lake, a Grey Wagtail on the rocks on the opposite side and a Song Thrush broke cover and flew across the far side of the lake. The star attractions here though were a pair of Nuthatch that have made their nest in a very exposed branch of a tree that is close to the water and also, surprisingly, to where people will be close by. They didn't appear to be too bothered by that today and were seemingly adding finishing touches to their nest regardless of our proximity. Amongst the trees a very short way further along the track around the lake a whole range of birds were spotted in a very short space of time; Great Tit, Chaffinch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit and Long-tailed Tit were all seen by most of us. We could easily have spent more time here, but the arrival of a rather noisy group of people was our cue to get going.

It felt wonderful to be out in this beautiful place on such a perfect spring day; there is just so much to see here – birds, butterflies and colourful early flowers surround you and at almost every turn a different aspect of the mountain or breath-taking vista of the surrounding landscape is presented. Blue Tits and Great Tits could be heard almost constantly and were occasionally seen, Blackcaps, Blackbirds, Robins, Wrens and Sardinian Warblers were heard often and Griffon Vultures circled lazily around the peak of the mountain. Those at the front of our group had a glimpse of a snake, probably a Horseshoe Whip Snake, when they disturbed it sunbathing on the wooden bridge that crosses the stream.



Nuthatch & nest-hole entrance neatly plastered with mud.

Flowers and Butterflies



Green Hairstreak

The warm sunshine brought out good numbers of butterflies, some of which were new species to some members of the group. Those we saw with some regularity throughout the day included Red Admirals, Cleopatra, Painted Lady, Large Whites, Small Copper, Spanish Festoons, bright Green Hairstreak and a number of the less- common Large Tortoiseshells, which were probably individuals that had hibernated over the winter.



Spanish Festoon



Romulea

The track wends its way, in places steeply through what is effectively a natural rock garden where shrubs and flowers have placed themselves creating displays that no amount of contrived landscaping could come close to replicating. From the bases of large limestone rocks where moisture is retained more fortunate plants thrive, often several species pushing through in a tiny space.



Large Tortoiseshell

and in sheltered spots a few early Star of Bethlehems blooms and the occasional Three-cornered Leek, both of which will be more apparent in a week or two. A profusion of golden gorse blossom released its delicious coconut perfume into the air and pink heather had painted large sweeps of colour over the upper reaches of the mountain slope.



Star of Bethlehem

Towards the top of the first stage of the upward pathway, where it is divided by the road, the group temporarily separated; those with mountain-goat tendencies, led by the ever-intrepid Ian struck out resolutely to conquer the peak (El Picacho). A few others followed behind with less-lofty aspirations, content to walk until they reached their personal limit and one or two made their leisurely way back down to wait by the lake. When we eventually re-grouped and exchanged notes, each party had something to add to the day's 'pot' of experiences. The mountaineers reported sightings of Short-toed Eagle, Goshawk, Raven and Blue Rock Thrush. Some



of us had spent a fascinating few minutes watching a pair of Firecrests collecting material to add to their nest sited high up and at the end of a branch of a large Cork Oak tree, while back at the lake, Gonzalo and Rosemary had been watching a pair of Crested Tits similarly engaged, although all activity ceased when we reappeared on the scene. However, they had not seen the Nuthatches, which reappeared for us as though cued to do so; furthermore we timed it perfectly to witness the performance they were displaying for one another, which involved much calling back and

Squill or Scilla

forth and some outrageously flirtatious moves by the female that culminated in their (very brief!), but affectionate mating on a branch close to their nest-hole.

It was almost sad to end this lovely day out, but all the exercise and fresh air had given everyone a very healthy appetite and we headed back to Alcalá de los Gazules, with no dilly-dallying to watch anything but the road ahead, to the excellent Venta that our advance party had tried and tested last weekend. The tapas and shared plates of food we enjoyed, that included generous portions of the especially tasty locally-produced cheese, combined with very friendly company and interesting conversation rounded off the day perfectly.

Thanks to Jill for coordinating everything and to everyone that turned out to support us; we hope you all enjoyed it as much as we did and that those who were unable to join us will make the outing themselves in the next few weeks, it 's well worth the effort.



A discretely soft-focused (!) shot of the Nuthatches



El Picacho

Bird checklist at and in the region of Alcalá de Los Gazules and El Picacho on 4th and 10th March 2007

Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
*Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	Nuthatch	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>
Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>
Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
Great-Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		* <i>On migration 4/3/07 over</i>
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		<i>Alcalá de los Gazules</i>
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		
Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>		
Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		
Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>		
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		

I have included in the list a few migrant birds that we have seen in this area at about this time in previous years that will most likely be there within the next few weeks.