

OUTING TO LA ALMORAIMA- 18 APRIL 2009



GONHS Outing led by Jill Yeoman with Albert Yome on Saturday 18th April 2009

Report & photos by Theresa Leverton

The area we know as La Almoraima, or as it is now signposted, La Jarandilla, is included within the boundaries of the Alcornocales Natural Park and despite attempts to attract more visitors with commercial enterprises, it is usually quiet at this time of year and is still an interesting and very accessible place to see a good variety of woodland birds and wildflowers.

We parked our cars on the opposite side of the road to the Venta Jarandilla and walked to the bridge which crosses the Río Guadarranque where we scanned along the riverbanks and amongst the reeds. A pair of Blue Tits have nested somewhere beneath the bridge and were both busily hunting for food for hungry chicks.



We returned to the car park and set off to walk along the old road, now just a track that is bounded on both sides by woodland comprising of mature trees and shrubs that are an interesting mixture of indigenous and introduced species. Following the previous night's heavy, rain the air was cool and fresh and the sun was lifting the moisture to form a light mist. We had heard a Cuckoo calling close by, the first of this year for most of us, but were very surprised to see one perched up on the



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power cables; although difficult to pick out its markings in the mist, its size and outline gave away its identity. There were sounds and sightings of small birds all around, Blackbirds, Chaffinches, Serins, Blue Tits and Blackcaps and upstaging them all with his unrivalled voice, a Nightingale.



Lagging behind the rest of the group, I was fortunate to see a Great Spotted Woodpecker that everyone else had heard. It was circumnavigating one of the wooden telegraph poles at the side of the track, a spot we have seen a Woodpecker on previous occasions. Other heard and saw several Jays *Garrulus glandarius*.

We had a few close sightings of small birds; a Robin emerged from cover to sing briefly from an open perch, a pair of Blackcaps was seen gathering nesting material, the male still somehow managing to sing with his beak full. By far the most frequent sightings were of Blue Tits that we concluded were either numerous or the same few following us. Where there is a gap in the vegetation and a track that leads up to the main road we had some lovely views of Bonelli's Warblers as they worked busily through trees and shrubbery hunting



for insects. When there were no birds to watch there were plenty of other sights and scents to appreciate; the fresh green leaves of the Holm Oaks, water droplets held by the long needles of the pine trees (*pinus canariensis*) sparkling in the sunlight, the clean, fresh scent of Eucalyptus that filled the air around us and the fascinating textures and patterns of their peeling bark that tempted several of us to take photographs.



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We came across a single Bee Orchid (*Ophrys apifera*) and stopped to admire the fascinating flowers and fruits of 'Dutchman's Pipe' (*Aristolochia baetica*).



The track underneath the bridge that carries the main road was flooded, testament to the amount of rainfall we have had over the last few days. Beneath this bridge is a site favoured by Red-rumped Swallow's and there has been a nest, there for a good number of years; this year the nest has been well repaired and another brand-new one has been built, which was really good to see. No sign of the builders though. (Red-rumped Swallow's nests are characterized by their igloo-type entrance tunnels.)



As we approached the bridge we had heard Bee-eaters several times and as we neared the top of the track, stopped and looked across into the large cleared area where a colony of the birds have their nest site, hoping for some good views of them.

From that first vantage point it was possible to see some of the birds reasonably well and a Mistle Thrush was also picked up there. Hoping for better views however, we walked a little further down the main road and

climbed up onto the bank for a vantage point into the field over the fence and were met with a true Bee-eater spectacle. There were performing Bee-eaters just a short distance away, flying around, perched on posts and various other surfaces, sometimes singly and often in groups of three, four or five. They displayed their jewel-like colours to us from every angle, swooping and diving and generally showing themselves off to one another and to us too. We were completely entranced by these charismatic birds, almost to the exclusion of anything else that may have been in the vicinity. Fortunately Albert and Jill were looking around and found no less than three Woodchat Shrikes perched on various bushes and a pair of Stonechats that were in amongst the Bee Eaters; there were Spotless Starlings on the ground too.

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European bee-eater – *Merops apiaster*

We finally managed to tear ourselves away from the Bee Eaters, leaving them in peace, and began our walk back along the main road so we could look into the forested area and perhaps spot some of the birds we know to be there but hadn't yet seen. Overhead we had sightings of firstly a dark phase Booted Eagle, then a little later a light phase Booted eagle and a Griffon Vulture. On the woodland edge we saw and heard a feisty little Winter wren, more Blue Tits, Great Tit, Chaffinch, Goldfinches, Bonelli's Warblers and a female Blackcap but no Short-toed treecreeper, Nuthatch or Long-tailed Tits. We stopped for a while thinking we heard Firecrests but it wasn't until we cut back onto our original track that we saw two as they flew across in front of us.

The sun had brought out more flowers and towards the bottom of the track in the treeless grassy area amongst them we found a Small Tongue Orchid, not quite open yet, Star Clover and pretty Annual or Dwarf Convolvulus (*Convolvulus tricolor*). Close to the hard surface of the track we also found one small Woodcock Orchid (*Ophrys scolopax*) and a single stem of Barbary Nut (iris).



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The group split up when we got back to the cars, some to return home and some to continue walking along the roadway in the opposite direction to the way we had already walked (through the iron gates towards the reservoir). At this stage, a flock of Black kites *Milvus migrans* and a Short-toed eagle *Circaetus gallicus* were further reminders of the Spring migration.

The remainder of us had a reviving cup of coffee (or two) in the venta before setting off up the hill to Castillo de Castellar. It was busier than we had expected it to be up there and vacant parking spaces were very limited but we squeezed in and walked up towards the castle. Building and restoration work has been taking place on the old castle building for a couple of years to prepare it for a new lease of life as a hotel; work has now been completed and the hotel is open for business, complete with a cafeteria that has a terrace with stunning views over the surrounding countryside and the reservoir.

On the way up the sloping pathway we stopped to watch a Barn Swallow and a Crag Martin that were side by side collecting mud that had gathered at the junction of two walls. It was interesting to see them like this to compare their size and build; I had never seen a Crag Martin this closely before either and hadn't realized how pale their plumage is – it certainly blends well with the local stone.



Crag Martin (*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*) & Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

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Tiger Moth on castle wall (left)

We had come hoping to see some of the birds that are either resident here or return to breed each Spring; we were particularly keen to see if the building works had disturbed the Lesser Kestrels that nest in the holes in the front wall of the castle. A first look was not hopeful as every available hole seemed to be occupied by noisy pigeons; then one Lesser Kestrel flew in intent on getting into one of the holes but harassed by pigeons that clearly don't want them as neighbours. Eventually it seized an opportunity to dive straight in to a hole high up on the wall, but the poor Kestrels look set for a troublesome nesting season. We saw other Lesser Kestrels flying around a little further away from the castle but saw only the one pair that appeared to be nesting here, at the moment at least. This is often a very reliable place from which to have close views of Griffon Vultures and one or two did oblige us, passing quite low overhead, including a very tattered-looking one. We had excellent views of a Light Phase Booted Eagle too as it hovered overhead for several minutes, seeming to have stopped still in the air, appearing to be keeping something in its sights.



Griffon Vulture –*Gyps fulvus* (above)

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Booted Eagle (light phase) – *Hieraaetus fasciatus* (above)



Lesser Kestrel - *Falco naumanni*

The early morning rain had possibly put a few people off joining us which is a pity as it turned out to be a lovely day and there was a lot to see and experience in addition to some lovely birds. Although we didn't see some of the birds we may have expected to, their absence was more than made up for by those we hadn't expected to see. The sightings of the Cuckoo, the Bonelli's Warblers and the spectacle of the Bee-eaters more than made up for anything we may have missed. Albert and the Yome family also walked up a road towards the reservoir (which is closed to traffic) from where they heard Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* and overhead a Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*.

Through a short tunnel that emerges to overlook a reservoir dam, they saw a large number of House Martins *Delichon urbica* feeding. More surprisingly, there single Ringed plover *Charadrius hiaticula* and Little ringed plover *Charadrius dubiosus*, as well as a White wagtail *Motacilla alba*, feeding around the dam's overflow, which was strewn with pieces of cork oak bark.

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Birds we saw:

Overhead: Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagles (1 Dark phase, 1 Light phase) House Martin, Pallid swift, Black kite, Short-toed eagle

In woodland: Cuckoo, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Blackbird, Nightingales (heard), Chaffinches, Greenfinch, Goldfinches, Serins, Robin, Blackcaps, Bonelli's Warblers, Blue Tits, Great Tits, Wren, Firecrests, Cetti's warbler

In open field area: Bee-eaters, Woodchat Shrikes (3), Mistle Thrush, Stonechats, Spotless Starlings Around **venta:** House Sparrows, Chaffinch

Castellar: Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagle (Light Phase), Lesser Kestrels, Crag Martin, Barn Swallows, Blackbird, House Sparrows, feral pigeons!

