

# Spring in the Picos de Europa

Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> April – Friday 26<sup>th</sup> April 2002

**Guides:** Dylan Walker

**Weather:** The outward voyage took place in fair weather with a sea state 3 with the wind in the south west. Northern Spain was bathed in sunshine for the entirety of our stay with hot, sunny and calm days throughout. The return leg through the Bay was cooler with some cloud and a strong breeze. Sea state averaged a 4.

**Cetacean Highlights:** Long-finned Pilot Whales, Common Dolphins, Striped Dolphins and a Minke Whale.

**Bird Highlights:** Wallcreeper, Snow Finch, Alpine Accentor, Alpine Chough, Rock Bunting, Short-toed Treecreeper, Montagu's Harrier.

**Land Mammal Highlights:** Red Fox, Red Deer, Red Squirrel (black form), Chamois.

**Butterfly Highlights:** Scarce Swallowtail, Cleopatra, Clouded Yellow.

**Reptile Highlights:** Iberian Wall Lizard.

**Amphibian Highlights:** Alpine Newt, Midwife Toad.

## **Day 1: Brittany Coast and Northern Bay of Biscay**

The day began with an illustrated talk on the whales, dolphins and other wildlife of the Bay of Biscay and the Picos de Europa. We began watch at about mid day with fair weather; good visibility and a sea state four. As we rounded the Brittany Peninsula and headed SSE, less than half an hour into the survey we came across our first two pair trawlers. They were trawling a net estimated to be 0.5km wide and heading in a southerly direction. The name of one of the vessel suggested that it might have been of French origin. The sighting took place at approximately 140 N.M. west of Saint Nazaire. Thirty minutes later, a pod of 15 **Common Dolphins** came racing past on the port side.

Later that afternoon, between 15:00 and 16:00 we came across two more sets of pair trawlers. The sight was almost identical to the one before, as both sets of trawlers were active, moving steadily side by side, tilting slightly inwards with the weight of the net that they dragged between them. With the second of the two sets of trawlers still in sight, we saw **Common Dolphins** again. A pod of five raced into the bow, leaping high as they passed beneath us. As the afternoon slipped by, we observed a **Minke Whale** feeding underneath a flock of whirling **Gannets** at 16:15, a lone trawler at 17:07 and three **Long-finned Pilot Whales** at 17:46.

Seabirds were present in good numbers during the day. **Gannets** were most abundant but there were regular sightings of **Lesser Black Backed Gulls**, **Kittiwakes** and the occasional **Great Skua**. The main highlight was a large influx of **Little Gulls** on migration to their northern European breeding grounds. A total of 133 birds were counted during the early afternoon. Most were in flocks of around 20 birds sitting on the sea. It is possible that this area may well be very important for this species during the spring migration.

## **Day 2: The north Spanish coast, Pido and Fuente De**

Following an early breakfast we took the coast road west past Santander. After an hour and a half we were able to see the dramatic peaks of the Picos rising ahead of us, still capped with substantial quantities of snow, despite the glorious sunshine and warm weather we were enjoying.

By the time we reached the National Park we had already notched up five species of raptor, in the form of **Red Kite**, **Black Kite**, **Common Buzzard**, **Kestrel** and **Griffon Vulture**. As we entered the park we made a stop alongside the River Deva. A **Grey Wagtail** was hunting for insects amongst the rapids and **Crag Martins** flew at impossible speeds towards their cliff nests. The warm weather had also brought out the butterflies. Unfortunately the constant attendance of the sun meant that they never landed, making identification very difficult. The **Scarce Swallowtail** was easy, but the blues and fritillaries remained a puzzle unsolved.

Lunch was taken at Pido, with views of the mountain range Puertos De Salvaron and down the valley to the Sierra Corielta. A flock of **Red-billed Chough** wheeled above us accompanied by a pair of **Common Buzzards**, which looked gigantic in comparison. A **Large Tortoiseshell** flew powerfully past, whilst a **Clouded Yellow** took a more leisurely pace. As we arrived at the hotel we were greeted, not only by the friendly staff, but also by the friendly wildlife! A **Water Pipit** was picking insects from the lawn, **Black Redstarts** used every chimney on the hotel to announce their presence and **Griffon Vultures** gazed down on us from the skies above.

After the journey, an early evening walk the Beech woods was definitely required. As we wandered along the track, we found the woodland floor blossoming with spring flowers, including **Pyrenean Squill**, **Wood Sorrel**, **Solomon's Seal**, **Wild Daffodil** and **White Asphodel**. We stopped at several clearings to enjoy the spectacular views and search for birds. A **Tree Pipit** sang from an Elm tree in an open glade, a **Cuckoo's** call echoed through the valley and a **Goshawk** circled briefly over a distant wood. Further along we discovered misplaced turf's where **Wild Boar** had recently been digging up spring bulbs. We startled a **Roe Deer**, which barked loudly as it sped off up and over the nearest ridge.

Almost back at the hotel, we discovered a **Short-toed Treecreeper** nest half way up the trunk of an old Oak tree. We watched in delight as the adults busily feathered their nest, carrying leaves selected from the nearby foliage. At one point, one adult brought in a leaf so large that it appeared not to be able to see where it was flying, and then dropped the leaf when it wouldn't fit in the nest hole! Other bird highlights included a **Crested Tit** and a stunning male **Rock Bunting**.

## **Day 3: Los Urrieles Massif**

After breakfast, we decided to head for the mountains whilst the weather was still sunny and calm. We certainly chose the right day for it! Following an exhilarating chairlift ride, in which we came so close to the cliffs that we wondered whether we might be able to spot a Wallcreeper before we had arrived, we left the tourists behind and headed off into the wilderness. We soon came across some **Chamois** grazing on the greener slopes. Their distinctive black facemasks were dulled slightly as they were undergoing a spring moult. They did, never the less, look very handsome. Further along we heard a strange call. We were surrounded by high pitch 'plink plink' calls resonating from a colony of **Midwife Toads**. The call of this little amphibian is very distinctive, and is most likely to be mistaken, bizarrely, for that of a Scops Owl! **Midwife Toads** are unique amongst

European amphibians, in that they do not require water during the early stages of their offspring's development. Instead, the males carry the eggs on their backs and around their legs – hence the name 'midwife'. All of the toads were hidden under rocks where they had protection from predators and the heat of the day. However, a quick lifting of the appropriate rock and we were all able to get a closer look.

Our next stop was at the base of a large cliff, surrounded by a boulder field. This was our first '**Wallcreeper** hotspot' and we decided to give some time to searching for this illusive bird. After 20 minutes one appeared, jumping from boulder to boulder and singing a flutey song reminiscent of the Clangers! Although the views were brief, they were much closer than we had expected.

*Alpine Accentor by Dylan Walker*



Despite the hot day, we took lunch surrounded by snow. **Alpine Choughs** skulked around looking for a free meal, whilst an **Alpine Accentor** showed off amongst the rocks below us. Walking back through the valley floor, we came across **Spring Gentians**, a pool full of **Alpine Newts** and a mixed flock of

**Alpine Accentors** and **Snow Finches** picking up wind-blown seeds less than ten metres away.

#### **Day 4: Lebena, Mirador de San Glorio and the San Glorio Pass**

Hardly living up to its reputation for unpredictable weather, this was the third straight day of scorching sunshine! Our first stop involved a short walk through the scrub and meadows at Lebena. Whilst **Griffon Vultures** and **Black Kites** soared over nearby hillsides, we enjoyed **Redstarts**, **Serins** and **Bonelli's Warblers** holding territory. The meadows of this warm valley were also blossoming early, with the red form of **Kidney Vetch**, **Vipers Bugloss**, **Early Purple Orchid**, **Cowslip** and **Greater Yellow Rattle** all abundant. A **Cleopatra** added a splash of yellow and orange on the wing.

We continued on, journeying over to the north-west side of the mountains, heading for the glacial lakes of Enol and Ercina, but unfortunately, our journey was ended abruptly by 20 miles of roadworks! Turning around, we had lunch by the River Deva, although only the leader dared to dip his feet in the icy cold water!

Stopping in the early afternoon at the Salmon statue near Lebena, we were just in time to watch an immature **Golden Eagle** soaring high above us, its white wing patches appearing translucent in the bright sky.

By mid afternoon we had arrived at the Mirador San Glorio, one of the most spectacular views in the Picos de Europa. The view alone is worth the journey, but we also found **Iberian Wall Lizard**, **Painted Lady** and **Brimstone** butterflies, whilst a herd of **Red**

**Deer** raced down from the high ground to graze in some nearby fields. Late in the afternoon we took a walk through the heathland and grassland of the San Glorio Pass. **Dogs tooth violets** studded the ground and the pools were full of the tadpoles of an unknown species of frog. **Northern Wheatears** and **Skylarks** were holding territory. A migrant **Whinchat** rested on a **Broom** bush and two **Ravens** enjoyed a siesta on the clifftops. Back at the hotel, we had time for one last look around the Teleferico. It was well worth it, with further splendid views of a pair of **Rock Buntings** and a **Red Squirrel** of the continental black-coated form.

**Day 5:**

An early morning departure for the ferry was interrupted by one stop, which turned out to be very exciting. Having made use of the local ‘Servicios’ we were watching a **Stonechat** and a ‘zitting’ **Fan-tailed Warbler**. A pair of **Black Kites** were hunting over the hay meadow directly behind when a **Montagu’s Harrier** appeared. After a brief aerial battle, the kites moved on and we watched the harrier quartering on buoyant wings, searching for small mammals.

The return journey from Bilbao over the deep waters of the southern and central Bay of Biscay was quiet until late afternoon. Three pods of **Striped Dolphins**, involving 112 animals and a pod of seven **Common Dolphins** were encountered. Several pods came in close to the bow, giving us some great views of dolphins travelling underwater.



*Striped Dolphins by Dylan Walker*

Finally, on behalf of The Company of Whales, Dylan would like to express our thanks to everybody for a memorable week!

Happy wildlife watching,

*Dylan*