

Spring in the Picos de Europa

Saturday 11th – Friday 17th May 2002

Guides: Rob Still & Dylan Walker

Weather: After a cloudy and breezy start in the Bay of Biscay and a shower on the first afternoon in the Picos de Europa, we were treated to glorious sunshine throughout our stay in Spain and the return crossing. This was cut short on the last day by a fantastic lightening storm as we crossed the English Channel.

Cetacean Highlights: Long-finned Pilot Whales, Bottlenose Dolphins, Common Dolphins and Striped Dolphins coming into the bow, affording excellent views.

Bird Highlights: Wallcreeper, Snow Finch, Alpine Accentor, Alpine Chough, Black Woodpecker and 11 different birds of prey.

Land Mammal Highlights: Wild Boar, Red Fox, Red Deer, Chamois, European Hedgehog

Butterfly Highlights: Campberwell Beauty, Moroccan Orange Tip, Chapman's Ringlet, Adonis Blue, Green Hairstreak, Purple Shot Copper.

Reptile Highlights: Slow Worms mating, Adder, Iberian Wall Lizard, Viviparous Lizard.

Amphibian Highlights: Alpine Newt.

Day 1: Brittany Coast and Northern Bay of Biscay

The outward journey on the 12th of May was somewhat disappointing. Weather conditions were not ideal with a sea state of 3-5 and 100% cloud. Off the Brittany coast, there were three sightings of **Harbour Porpoise**, all involving single animals. The only other things of interest that afternoon came in the form of six trawlers actively working an area to the south west of the Brest Peninsula. The day ended with a large flock of wheeling **Gannets** passing by on the starboard side. The sea underneath them was scanned extensively but there appeared to be no cetaceans present. Then, after a few minutes, eight dolphins rose simultaneously, heading for the wake of the ship. The light was poor and no positive identification was made on the animals. The day had also been poor for seabirds, with **Gannets** and **Kittiwakes** most abundant, and a flock of 5 **Whimbrel** providing an unexpected highlight.

Day 2: Bilbao, Santona Marshes and Fuente De Beech Woods

Unfortunately for those who enjoy a lie in, the *Pride of Bilbao* arrived on time, which meant an early start for all of us as we took in breakfast and departed the ship for our onward journey by minibus. The journey took us west, heading along the coast road towards Santander, and onwards to the Picos de Europa National Park. Almost immediately, we were enjoying some exciting encounters – all be it at 50 mph! Whilst the leaders concentrated on their driving, the first **Griffon Vultures**, **Black Kites** and

Common Buzzards were spotted soaring over the road. Other highlights included a statuesque **White Stork** and a patch of **Heart-tongued Serapia**, creating a purple sheen to a roadside verge.

Typically, the strong south-east winds were creating an amazing variety of cloud formations. Southerly winds are known to create hazardous sailing conditions in this region! The coast road also afforded some great sea views but it was clear that this was not a good day for whale-watching. Small fishing boats bobbed up and down between lines of white horses and we were amazed to see two mini tornadoes spinning unpredictably just offshore.

Our first stop along the journey was at the picturesque Santona Marshes. This is the most important wetland on the north coast of Spain, providing an essential staging post for many wading birds and wildfowl. It also supports up to half of the Holland's **Spoonbill** population during the migration season, which explains why we sometimes see Spoonbills passing west during our shore excursions in Bilbao. Sadly, there were no Spoonbills present this time. However, a quick stop at the excellent new bird hide did produce **Grey Heron**, **Common Sandpiper**, **Little Egret**, **Yellow-legged Gull**, **Black Kite**, **Yellow Wagtail** and a marvellous opportunity to compare **Curlew** and **Whimbrel** as they stood side by side on the mud. The marshes also provided us with the chance to pick up the first mollusc species of the trip in the form of some **Mussels** exposed by the ebbing tide. This provided several of the guests with the opportunity to point out that, despite being weighed down with field guides, we still hadn't covered the broad spectrum of wildlife on show during this trip! We will be purchasing a guide to molluscs for 2002!

Two hours later we were leaving the lush green meadows and orchards of the coastal belt behind us and heading inland towards Panes and the Picos de Europa National Park. Armed with a packed lunch of freshly baked bread, local cheeses, chorizo sausage, fruit, yoghurt and delightful chocolate biscuits, we picnicked alongside the River Deva, the cold blue waters cutting through a spectacular gorge. Little did Dylan realise that the **Scarce Swallowtail** which almost managed to mate with the windscreen wiper, would be the only one of the trip.

Spring Gentian



An eye to the sky immediately revealed **Crag Martins** hawking for insects, whilst **Griffon Vultures** soared high above the peaks. Then, just as lunch was laid out on the benches, it rained! Continuing onwards and upwards through the shower, we passed heathland, Oak and Beech woods, pretty pan-tiled villages and hay meadow on our way to the end of the road, our destination at Fuente De. Fortunately, just a few miles from our hotel, the clouds cleared and we were bathed in glorious sunshine. An immature **Golden Eagle** made the most of it, as it swept over the valley. This was also our first chance to enjoy the hay meadows, carpeted with wildflowers, **predominantly Greater Yellow Rattle**, a red-flowered form of **Kidney Vetch**, **Viper's Bugloss** and **Musk Mallow**.

We arrived at the Fuente De Parador Hotel in the mid-afternoon. The position of the hotel is idyllic, flanked on one side by the sheer cliff, which rises to the high tops, and surrounded on the other three sides by grazing meadows and Beech forest. Aware that there were plenty of exciting discoveries to be made within walking distance of the hotel, we unpacked, relaxed on our balcony windows for the chance to enjoy the flock of **Red Billed Choughs**, which were busily feeding outside, and then gathered for a leisurely walk through the woods.

As we entered the cool darkness that is such a feature of mature **Beech** woods, we were greeted by a chorus reminiscent of English woodland on a May dawn. **Blackcaps** and **Robins** dominated the vocals, with **Coal Tit**, **Nuthatch** and **cuckoo** joining in with the choir. The **Short-toed Treecreeper** nest discovered in April was either abandoned or, more likely, deserted following the successful fledging of the young. Fortunately, the parents were still present, feeding up and down the nearby tree trunks. Woodland flowers on show included **Pyrenean Squill**, **Early Purple Orchid** and **Solomon's Seal**, all making the most of sunlight tracks and woodland glades. Finally, an early screech from a drowsy **Tawny Owl** reminded us all that it was time to head back for dinner.

Day 3: Los Urrieles Massif and Fuente De Meadows and Beech Woods

The day dawned clear, blue and warm. For those willing to wake from slumber early, a woodland walk provided splendid views of **Red Deer**, **Red Squirrel** and, for those still asleep, the most gripping bird of the trip – a **Black Woodpecker**! This magnificent bird was even filmed by Steve as it proceeded to demolish an ants nest!

Following breakfast we put on our hats, slapped on some suncream and headed for the high tops. And what better way to climb 800m than in a cable car, which lifted us speedily across the valley in a breathtaking four minutes! At the top the weather was perfect and, after a few minutes admiring the view, we set off on a level track. The landscape here is reminiscent of the moon, as the vegetation is very limited. Almost immediately we saw **Chamois** grazing in the damper areas. They keep their distance but good views were obtained through the telescope. The **Chamois** is as close to an antelope as you can get in Europe and its agility on steep ground is admirable.

By now it was mid-morning, a good time for birds of prey to shake the dew off their wings and get moving. First we were treated to fabulous views of a **Booted Eagle** soaring at eye level at the top of the cliff beside us. Overhead, an **Egyptian Vulture** appeared from nowhere, whilst **Griffon Vultures** circled in the distance.

Exciting though these majestic predators are, everybody seemed a little distracted. We were setting our sights on one bird target, the illusive, crimson-winged, **Wallcreeper!** Restricted to the high alpine habitats of central Europe and Asia, **Wallcreepers** are nowhere common, illusive and tend to spend most of their time high amongst the mountain peaks, holding onto vertical rocks and using their curved bills to dig out invertebrates lodged in narrow crevices. Seeing one, if you are fortunate enough to do so, almost always involves a neck craning experience and a distant telescope view. All of these factors add to the folklore which surrounds this stunning little bird, elevating it to star status as one of Europe's most sought after species. A lengthy stop at our first 'Wallcreeper Spot' proved fruitless, although **Black Redstarts**, **Northern Wheaters** and **Alpine Accentors** kept us entertained.

As we continued along the track and through a boulder field we were rewarded! A birdwatcher ahead of us shouted that he was watching one and we saw it flitting from boulder to boulder before flying up and away behind a cliff. Just a few minutes later we could barely believe our luck as we found two more and a lone individual, all feeding amongst the boulders, searching for insects and catching the occasional day-flying moth. We watched them for 20 minutes. The views were amazing! Everybody was enthralled and we didn't even have to crane our necks as we were looking down on them. Finally, one **Wallcreeper** alighted near the track, fluttered up and landed on a rock just five metres away. It was a spellbinding moment. Never mind a telescope, we didn't even need binoculars!



At the top of Funte De! Photo: Dylan Walker

The friendly **Alpine Choughs** joined us for lunch, walking almost to within touching distance in order to steal our bread. Heading back along the track we stopped by a stream where an **Alpine Accentor** and a **Water Pipit** had been joined by the only other alpine speciality of the region that we hadn't seen so far – a **Snow Finch**. Two of these striking black and white birds were vigorously showering themselves.

Close to the cable car we left the track in order to visit a small pool. Here we found **Alpine Newts**, hiding amongst the rocks. With flattened heads and fiery orange bellies, they are easily identified. The males also display a distinctive white stripe along the spine. The greener areas around the pool was also more interesting for alpine plants, including the stunning **Spring Gentian**, early flowering saxifrages and the diminutive **Daffodil Narcissus asturiensis**. At this point, the temptation of the nearby snow became too much for some, as Neil pretended that he was buried up to his neck and Alison created her very own snow slide!

Returning to the warmth of the valley below, we grabbed an ice cream and a cold drink to celebrate a fantastic day. A quick saunter around the meadows next to the hotel produced **Trumpet Gentian**, **Iberian Wall Lizard**, (Alan's) **Adder**, **Rock Bunting**, **Moroccan Orange Tip**, **Mountain Dappled White**, **Green Hairstreak** and either **Pearl Bordered** or **Small Pearl Bordered Fritillary**. Finally, after dinner, we went spotlighting in search of nocturnal mammals, and managed to add **Red Fox**, **European Hedgehog** and a mouse tentatively identified as 'Yellow-necked Mouse' by Rob.

Day 4: Potes, Mirador de San Glorio, and Arroyo del Naranco

Our last full day in the Picos started at a leisurely pace, as everybody requested an hour in the pretty town of Potes. Even here, it is difficult to avoid wildlife with two species of **Redstart** and **Serins** singing in trees and gardens, but it is the cobbled streets, stone buildings, pan-tiled roofs and relaxed atmosphere that makes Potes so appealing. Afterwards we set off towards the southern side of the Picos mountains by minibus, winding our way through deciduous woodland of **Oak** and **Small Leaved Lime** towards the high pass at San Glorio. As we rounded a bend, we spotted a **Wild Boar** trotting across a field in broad daylight! A short drive and we caught up with it again, skirting a wooded ridge at pace. A magnificent and unexpected sight!

Next stop, the viewpoint, or Mirador, at San Glorio. Amongst the highlights here were **Chapman's Ringlet**, a butterfly restricted to the Cantabrian mountains. Also on view, a brief **Goshawk**, a singing **Cicada** *Tibicen plebejus*, and a pair of **Honey Buzzards**, one of which caused the leaders an identification headache before it settled on top of the other to mate in a roadside tree. The **Grey Partridge**, one of Spain's most threatened birds, was also heard calling from the rocky hillside below.

Travelling over the pass, the geology changed once more, becoming more acidic in nature and supporting a dry heathland vegetation community. Lunch was taken in the Arroyo del Naranco. This warm, sheltered valley is noted for butterflies and reptiles and so we were not surprised to find two **Slow Worms** mating and a **Viviparous Lizard** sunning itself on a rock, whilst **Green Hairstreaks** and **Holly Blues** sipped nectar from **Broom** flowers. Then a search for a skulking **Blackcap** revealed something altogether more exciting, a magnificent **Camperwell Beauty** feeding amongst the blossoming **Willow**. The obliging butterfly posed in all its glory, allowing us to admire its purple sheen, cream edges and subtle blue spots. Despite all of this, it was a small unidentified grub living inside a bundle of sticks, which held court amongst the guests for longest – well there is no accounting for taste!

Before turning back for Potes, we continued a little further, past fields ablaze with **Daffodils**. We witnessed a **Short-toed Eagle** swoop down to lift a **Slow Worm** in its

talons, and stopped in a damp alpine meadow to enjoy the **Daffodils**, **Globe Flowers** and **Marsh Marigolds**, whilst **Red Deer** and **Chamois** gazed at us from the higher ground.

Returning to Potes, the road verges ablaze with **White Asphodel**, we made one last stop before dinner. Rob had previously found a roadside meadow being used as a roost site by several species of butterfly. **Wood White**, **Comma**, **Purple Shot Copper** and **Small Skipper** were all present, and nearly everybody took photographs of an obliging **Adonis Blue**, absorbing the last of the afternoon's warmth before snapping shut for the night. **Small-flowered Catchfly**, **Buttercup**, **Pale Flax**, **Greater Yellow Rattle** and **Clover** combined in a sea of colour. Finally, as we left, a beautiful insect was spotted, perched wings outstretched like a butterfly. The wings were partially transparent with a combination of deep brown markings and a hint of green. A flick through the insect book on our return revealed this to be *Libelloides longicornis*, a fast-flying relative of the **Ant-lions**. They tend to be most active during the day, feeding on small insects, which they catch in mid air! It was a fitting way to end a day that had been dominated by the beauty of insects!

Day 5: From the Picos de Europa to Bilbao and the Southern Bay of Biscay

Journeying back to the ferry, we observed two **Black-bellied Dippers**, three **White Storks**, our closest **Griffon Vulture** and our only **Red Kite** of the trip.



Griffon Vulture by Hugh Harrop

Despite a medical emergency holding up the return sailing by an hour, we began watch in the afternoon with some excitement as the weather conditions were excellent. The warm wind was coming from the south-east, and the temperature was in the late 20's centigrade. Overall, it felt like an August day, and to add to the late summer feel, the ship was buzzing with wind blown insects. As we left Spain, a **Red Admiral** flew powerfully by, followed a little later by a **Clouded Yellow**, an excellent record for this time of year at sea.

Within sight of shore we observed two probable and then one **definite Cuvier's Beaked Whale**. The lone animal was a typical pale and scarred 'male type'. A **Tuna** leaped twice from the water before eight **Striped Dolphins** raced into the bow, the pale blaze on their flanks showing clearly when viewed from above. Just before 15.00 we observed another group of beaked whales. Unfortunately, identification was not clinched, although they were most likely **Cuvier's Beaked Whales** or **Northern Bottlenose Whales**.

The group, which consisted of at least 5 individuals was some way off. They were moving quickly at the surface at a shallow angle. Their blows were low, bushy and obvious (somewhat reminiscent of a Pilot Whale). A slightly bulbous forehead was observed on one animal but they dived before any diagnostic features could be ascertained. This kind of high-speed swimming had not been seen by the observers in either of these species before, making the observation an intriguing one.

As we left the sub-marine canyons of the southern Bay behind, **eight Long-finned Pilot Whales** passed by on the port side. We then had a wait of two hours before a large whale surfaced some distance away. It was great to see its blow lingering in the breeze. The animal surfaced several times and was identified as a probable **Fin Whale**.

We were then treated to a dolphin spectacular as 180 **Common** and **Striped Dolphins**, alternating in groups of different sizes, came into the bow, allowing excellent comparisons of the key identification features of these two similarly shaped species.

A few **Swifts** and **Swallows** drifted by and a pair of **Collared Doves** hitched a lift before evening greeted us with another two **Cuvier's Beaked Whales**, whilst 60 **Striped Dolphins** raced along the port side and leapt high in the wake of the ship. Then we spotted some **Long-finned Pilot Whales** a mile ahead of the vessel. They appeared to be moving lethargically and could clearly hear our approaching vessel as one animal started to spy-hop regularly, apparently taking a look at us. Thankfully, they did not elect to move out of the way and, as they approached, we realised that they were accompanied. Five Bottlenose Dolphins were travelling alongside their larger companions. The mixed group swam up to the bow before veering off to the starboard side. The Pilots continuing to travel leisurely as the dolphins breached in the wake of the ship. Again, we had been afforded excellent views and the opportunity to compare two species swimming side by side.

The day ended with another three beaked whales, probably **Cuvier's**, and some great cloud formations as the sun set.

Day 6: The English Channel

The last day dawned with flat calm seas in the English Channel. Unfortunately though, watching was made impossible by a severe thunderstorm and regular patches of fog, which dramatically reduced visibility. Following the excellent pyrotechnics display, a few nice **Gannets**, **Fulmars** and a distant **Manx Shearwater**, it was time to relax and enjoy all that the ship had to offer before our departure at 16.30.

Finally, The Company of whales would like to say congratulations to Joan and Alan who scooped the prizes for the best cetaceans spotted during the trip. Joan must have borrowed a pair of eyes from a Golden Eagle whilst Alan looked down effortlessly on to

a pod of Cuvier's Beaked Whales swimming right next to the ship! We would also like to express our thanks to everybody who joined us for a memorable week and for keeping us on our toes with those molluscs!

Happy wildlife watching,

Dylan & Rob