

# **Sierra de Guara and Laguna de Gallocanta, Northern Spain**

**9<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> March 2009**

**By David Bowman**

**1. Participants:** Roger Benbow, Mike Miles, Tony Ormond, Kenny McNiffe, Dave Steel, Les Jones and David Bowman.



## **2. Itinerary.**

9<sup>th</sup> March      Fly Stansted to Zaragoza with Ryanair. Depart 0950 hrs, arrive 1300 hrs, local time.      Drive from Zaragoza to Alquezar in the Sierra de Guara. Stay at Hotel Villa de Alquezar. Depending on arrival time, birding the locality for target species.

10<sup>th</sup> March      Stay at Alquezar, birding Sierra de Guara for; Lammergeier, Wallcreeper, Alpine Accentor, raptors etc

11<sup>th</sup> March      Bird Sierra de Guara, leaving in time to reach Laguna de Gallocanta, south of Zaragoza, by late afternoon. Book in to Allucant Lodge. Bird the lakeside for Cranes, bustards, sandgrouse and raptors.

12<sup>th</sup> March Drive to Belchite Steppes, which is the prime area for DuPont's Lark, sandgrouse, bustards, Lesser Short-toed Lark etc. Return to Gallocanta for evening flight of Cranes. Overnight, Allucant Lodge.

13<sup>th</sup> March Early morning birding around the lagoon, then back to the Lodge for breakfast. Leave for 1325 hrs flight to Stansted from Zaragoza.

### **3. Day 1 9<sup>th</sup> March**

The drive down from Lymm to Stansted went smoothly, with the two halves of our party meeting at Sandbach Services before meeting again at the airport. The Ryanair flight was a little late getting off but made up time to arrive punctually in Zaragoza. We then had the annoyance of a two hour delay, while we waited for our van, which we had booked through EasyCar, to be delivered. Numerous phone calls eventually resulted in an apology and a promise that it would be with us by 3.00 pm. Rather than fretting about the lost birding time, we retreated to the airport bar for some nice pasta and beers or coffee, according to taste. Incidentally, for those vegetarians planning to travel in the more remote regions of Spain, it's worth noting that pasta "sin carne" (without meat) comes with some healthy chunks of ham mixed in. Never ones to let principles get in the way of grumbling stomachs, it was good to see Dave and Kenny tucking in.

It is an easy two hour drive from Zaragoza to Alquezar, heading first for Huesca before cutting north east towards the Sierra de Guara. The road winds across some lovely landscapes before revealing the little, mediaeval town of Alquezar, perched on the edge of an extensive gorge. A quick stop for photos and the first birding of the trip, revealed hordes of Griffons and a couple of Egyptian Vultures, plus Crag and odd House Martins. After a couple of wrong turns and the help of some locals, we eventually wound the large van through the narrow streets to the back of the Hotel Villa de Alquezar. The hotel itself is part of the fabric of the ancient town and the view from the balconies really is stunning.



After checking in and being met with great hospitality, we (or rather Roger, Mike and Les) spent a stressful half-hour trying to fix the van's sliding door, which had become derailed. Roger's engineering genius, allied to Mike's big right boot, soon had it sorted. We then went wandering, checking out the birding potential for the following morning. Alquezar is a hotspot for Wallcreepers during the non-breeding season and they are often seen on the crags close to the hotel or on the walls of the church or of houses in the village. There are several superb viewpoints along a gorge-side promenade, all of which offer excellent potential for seeing Wallcreeper and Lammergier. In the short time we had before dusk, we saw plenty of common birds, with a single hawfinch the highlight. With the rising need for food and drink coming to the fore, we ambled to a local bar to grab a beer. The owner, who was French, volunteered the information that every morning, at about 7.30 am, a Wallcreeper would come and feed on the crag directly outside his bar. Then, in the gathering dusk, we walked down to the plaza, over-looking the gorge, where most of the restaurants are sited.



We all ate really well from a varied local menu. I know Les had rabbit with snails and I know I declined the offer of helping him with his generous helping of crustaceans. A few drinks later and we were wandering back up the narrow streets, wondering where our hotel had gone. The castle, under the moonlight, was spectacular.



## **Day 2 10<sup>th</sup> March**

This was our big day. Our only full day in the Sierra de Guara. For those of the party who needed Wallcreeper and Lammergeier, this was the main chance. So, dawn saw Dave Steel and I strolling down to the first watch-point over the gorge, only to find Mike and co already basking in the satisfaction of some great views of Wallcreeper, just as predicted by our French host. Within minutes it was back on the crag and allowed everyone excellent scope views, sunning itself, preening and feeding. Eventually, it moved off and so did we, down the promenade to a mirador which offers wider horizons and maybe the chance of an over-flying Lammergeier. What was that long, metallic trilling? Grasshopper, we agreed, until Messrs Steel and Ormond pointed to the singing male Cirl Bunting sitting in the tree behind us! Red-billed Choughs, Griffons, Black Redstarts, Ravens, Rock Doves et al were all common but no Lammergeiers. Time for breakfast before launching out into the surrounding Sierras, where we had some good Lammergeier sites to explore. Breakfast at the Villa de Alquezar was superb. Fruits, breads, yoghourts, cheeses, juices etc and all of the highest quality, with jugs of strong coffee and hot milk as accompaniments.

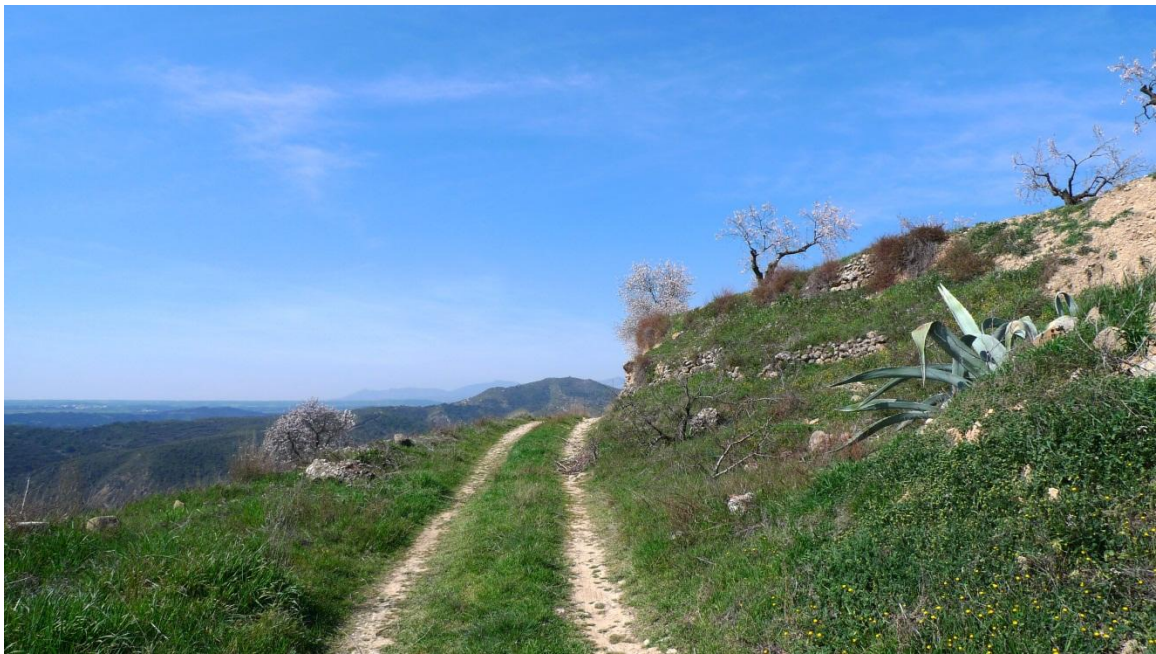
Our exploration of the surrounding sierras began by following the A225 north towards Colungo. A couple of brief stops produced hoopoe, tree sparrows, and numerous Woodlarks. The highlight was a lengthy stop at the gorge of La Choca, which was one of our bankers for Lammergeier. This is located just before the turn off, on the HUV 3421 to Betorz. It really is a stunning location, as you look down into griffon vulture nests, while many hundreds of Griffons rise out of the gorge to forage. Several pairs of Egyptian Vultures also nest in the gorge and gave good views. Highlights were the single Bonelli's Eagle, which circled over the far slopes, a displaying Goshawk, several active Peregrines, numerous Red Kites and a Lammergeier, which flew effortlessly but speedily, out of the gorge before I could get anyone on to it. I really didn't want to be the only one to see such a priceless bird, so on we pressed.



Our other sites for Lammergeier were on the western side of the Sierra de Guara, which meant retracing our steps, via Alquezar. We headed towards Bierge, where we'd read that there was a feeding station for vultures, which was regularly visited by Lammergeiers. En route we made a stop at an ancient bridge across the Rio Vero, where Chiffchaffs were passing through in numbers and Cetti's Warbler was singing.



En route to Bierge, several Short-toed and Golden Eagles performed well and Red Kites were common among the hoards of Griffons. Best of all, several flights of Cranes were seen, beating their way north against the snowy backdrop of the high Pyrenees. Magnificent! We then made a stop at the visitor's centre for the Sierra de Guara, just outside Bierge, only to find it closed. Just as we were about to leave, a woman emerged and I managed to find out that we should head for the plaza major in Bierge. I wasn't sure whether she was saying that we could find further information there or whether the feeding station was visible from the heights of Bierge. Les somehow managed to squeeze our big van through some very narrow, ascending streets, till we emerged at the edge of a farmyard with a commanding view of the surrounding valley. No plaza major but who cared! Off we went and were rewarded with incredibly close views of Short-toed Eagle, plus many other raptors but no Lammergeier.



This was the point, reached on many a trip, when you begin to think that the birding gods, for once, won't smile on you - but "desperate times etc". Re-reading some past trip reports, I noticed that another feeding station was mentioned, at a place called Santa Cilia, about twenty kilometers north-west of Bierge. It seemed like a long-shot but a tinge of desperation was setting in. Kenny's pleas for a lunch stop were politely ignored and on we pressed. The drive up to Santa Cilia was both beautiful and bird-rich. We reached the village in the late afternoon, not really expecting much and uncertain about where to go. Fortunately, there were signs indicating where to head for the feeding station so, not too expectantly, we parked the van and set off. A well-marked track led us into a wide, high valley, backed by snow-covered peaks. A perfect setting. Even more perfect when Dave Steel, who has always wanted to see Lammergeier, raised his bins and saw a single bird effortlessly gliding towards us. Definitely a high point of the trip and more so as the first bird was joined by its partner and then a second pair and finally a

fifth bird, which came in high from the east. Three birds finally dropped onto the open rocky area, on the opposite side of the valley to the village and entertained us by sparring for scraps on the ground. It was a wonderful end to a great day's birding and, somewhat reluctantly, we trudged back to the van, only for Kenny to find that the Lammergeiers had flown off with his carefully stashed clothing – it isn't only kites which look for "lesser linen".



Tearing ourselves away from such a beautiful place was hard but we hadn't really eaten since breakfast and Les was ready for some more snails. We drove back to Alquezar in the warm sunlight of late afternoon, knowing that everything was a bonus from then on. On arrival, Dave Steel and I bumped into an English birder we'd met, earlier in the day at the gorge. We passed on our information about Lammergeiers and he told us that he'd seen alpine accentors from a footpath which ran from the lowest viewpoint, back under the largest crags. Dave and I investigated, without luck but did see another Wallcreeper and Rock Sparrow, which was a nice prelude to our evening meal. I can't remember what everyone else had to eat, except that Tony and I had the duck and Les didn't have the snails. What I will always remember, though, is walking into the corner bar, after the meal and watching Liverpool beat Real Madrid 4-0. Who'd have thought that I'd get home on the Saturday and watch them do the same to United at Old Trafford (well 1-4 anyway!). Some weeks are just perfect.



So, after a few drinks, we headed back to the hotel after a most satisfying day. The sky was clear, Orion's belt was shining and the next day promised much.



### Day 3      11<sup>th</sup> March

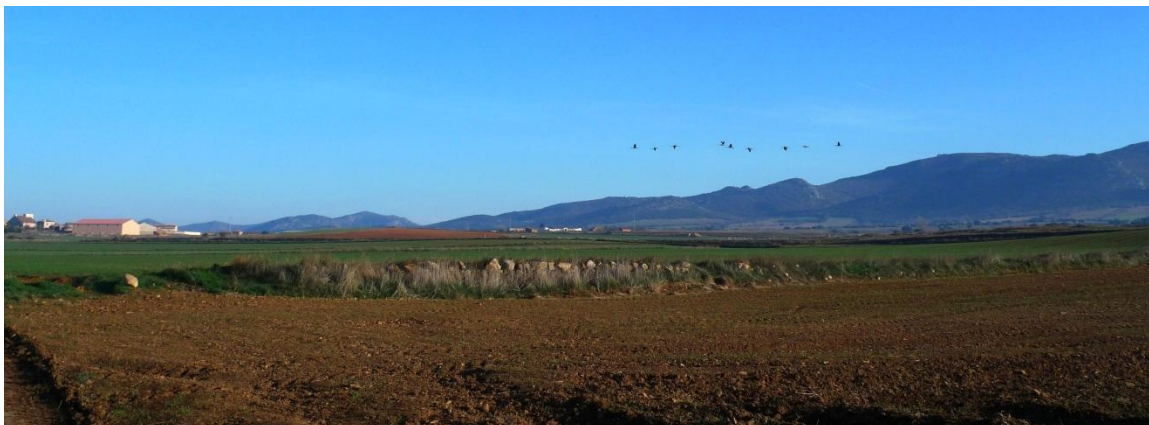
We started the day with a jaunt down to the track below the crags for alpine accentor. This, too, was the last chance saloon for these birds of high elevations. An enjoyable hours pre-breakfast birding produced no accentors and with the usual platitudes about it “being good to leave one to come back for” we headed off for breakfast. Ploughing our way up the steep streets from the viewpoint, Kenny gave a side-long glance and an inclination of the head – no, it wasn’t a senorita - there on the roof top were three stunning Alpine Accentors doing a fair impression of passer domesticus. Lovely birds and we couldn’t have wished for better views or a better ending to our stay in Alquezar.

Another sumptuous breakfast ended with us wrapping a load of home- made cakes and almond biscuits in napkins to fuel us through the day. The drive to Gallocanta is straightforward and takes about three hours. In Les’s capable hands it passed smoothly, allowing the rest of us to enjoy the scenery and the birds. More cranes were heading north, again looking dramatic against the snow-capped peaks. Raptors were also prominent but the bird of the drive was a Great-spotted Cuckoo, which was chased across the front of the van by a magpie. After leaving the motorway, at the turning for Daroca, the countryside gets really empty and wild. Red Kites became common and larks were abundant. At last the open waters of Laguna Gallocanta came into view and after a short hiatus in the village of Gallocanta, we rolled up on the car park of Allucant Lodge. This is the ideal place to stay, if visiting. It is a plain but friendly lodge, overlooking the Laguna and offers a nice three course meal, with wine, bread and water included, for eight Euros.



After some banter about who was going to share with whom (I can't quite remember what this was about, maybe something to do with snoring?) we'd unloaded the van and were ready to go birding. An anti-clockwise circuit of the Laguna, stopping at the recommended viewpoints, was the plan. The Lodge supplies good maps of the area, free of charge. We knew, because we were late in the season that many of the 45,000 common cranes, which winter at Gallocanta, would probably have moved on. Indeed, we'd been lucky enough to witness many phalanxes moving north through the Sierra de Guara. There were still a few thousand present, though, providing an evocative spectacle. Raptors were plentiful, with Marsh and Hen Harriers, Peregrine and Merlin among the more common Griffons and kites. Large numbers of wildfowl, including Shelduck, Pintail, Mallard, Teal, Shoveler, and Coot were present alongside the numerous Grey Herons and small numbers of waders, including Avocets, Black-tailed Godwits, Golden Plover and Lapwings. Perhaps the most dramatic memory is of the huge numbers of larks. Everywhere you walk, large flocks of larks are flushed. Many hundreds of Short-toed and with smaller numbers of Crested, Calandras, Lesser Short-toed and Skylarks, all allowing a close approach so that the differences could really be appreciated.

While watching these lark flocks, Kenny picked up three Great Bustards, which subsequently treated us to a brief display. Perhaps best of all, because it was something none of us had seen before, was the Raven, noticed by Dave Steel, in hot pursuit of a hare. For several minutes the raven harried the hare, which twisted and turned in desperation, while the Raven would soar and stoop in an effort to bring its pick-axe of a bill into contact with the hare's skull. Eventually, just when it looked as if the hare might come off second best, it darted in our direction, which deterred the Raven from further pursuit. The day ended with a dusk watch from an elevated hide before heading back to the lodge for a good, cheap meal, with wine thrown in, a quick log-call and then an early bed in anticipation of a dawn dash to the Belchite Steppes.



**Day 4****March 12<sup>th</sup>**

Belchite and the surrounding steppe area is reached, from Gallocanta, by heading back to Daroca and taking the E-7 motorway back north towards Zaragoza. Exit at Paniza and and take the rough, minor road, the A-220, east from Carinena towards Belchite. It takes a leisurely hour or so to get there. To reach the El Planeron reserve, leave Belchite on the ZV306, pass through Codo and then just look for the signs for El Planeron, on the left-hand side of the road. There are two entrances, both signed and we took the latter of these. As we drove down the rough track, the impression was of wide-open spaces with colourful mesas in the distance. A stark but beautiful landscape. As soon as we got out of the van, lark-song was evident everywhere. There is a small marsh on the left hand side of the track and two Great White Egrets were standing sentinel on its edge. After jumping out of the van and getting great, close views of numerous Short-toed Larks, along with Calandras and the odd Skylark, we had still not heard any Dupont`s Larks singing, nor picked up any sandgrouse, the main target species. Tony`s sharp eyes soon picked up a pair of Southern Grey Shrikes, sitting up on some bare shrubs.

Ahead of us the track rose to cross a low ridge, which promised wide views over the steppes towards the distant mesas beyond. I offered to drive the van to the top of the rise, as the others wanted to walk and bird. Having done so, I jumped out of the van and immediately heard the unmistakable sound of two Dupont`s Larks in full song, on either side of the track. Knowing, from past experience, the impossibility of seeing such notorious skulkers in the daytime, I started scanning the horizon. Immediately two pairs of Black-bellied Sandgrouse came whirring past. Soon, we`d all seen more sandgrouse and heard several more Dupont`s, though the latter were to elude our best efforts to see them.



As the morning wore on we decided that we would try again for Dupont's Lark at dusk, when birds rise in song-flight and offer some chance of being seen. What to do in the meantime? We had some information on a meander of the River Ebro, which offered the chance of some riverine species. This was reached by returning to the road from El Planeron and turning left towards Quinto de Ebro. Passing through Quinto, you take a left over the railway and follow a rough track down to the river. We then enjoyed a warm afternoon saunter along the river bank, where Kingfishers, scores of Chiffchaffs, Little Egrets and best of all, two Penduline Tits were ample reward. Then, time for a breather in the heat of the day, which saw us holed up in a bar in Quinto, enjoying tortilla and cakes with beer and coffee. The plan then was to visit the La Lomaza reserve, which is a few miles north of Belchite, on the A-222 to Mediana. The reserve is found about halfway to Mediana, on the right hand side of the road and is signed.

La Lomaza is in another, stunning setting and is at a higher elevation than El Planeron, with a different soil composition and more rounded, eroded mesas. A good walk was highly productive, with excellent views of Thekla Larks and particularly of a party of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, which Mike picked up as they dropped into a weedy field. We were all able to get good scope views of these birds and to enjoy their unique calls, when they eventually flew.



The day ended with a return to El Planeron to try again for Dupont's Lark. Although birds were still in song, we weren't lucky, though just being in that setting at sundown was pleasure enough. So, back to the lodge for a good meal and the chance to star in a TV commercial for the Lodge's "Cuban Night" – but that's a whole other story!



## **Day 5          13<sup>th</sup> March**

This was our last day, with just the opportunity for a last hour or so's birding before breakfast at 0930 hrs and a return to Zaragoza for the flight home. The dawn was misty and beautiful and few of us opted for a saunter down the track to the edge of the Laguna, to drink in the last drop.

As the sun started to burn away the mist, a ring-tailed Hen Harrier hunted close by, a couple of Red-crested Pochard were scoped and a Tree Pipit, newly arrived no doubt, fed actively. A phone call on my mobile was from Dave Steel, letting us know about a Quail which was calling in the lodge grounds, a further sure sign that the warm weather was beginning to push migrants on northwards. So, a quick breakfast was followed by another smooth drive to the airport (thanks again to Les for his sterling efforts) and a timely flight home. It had been another truly enjoyable trip, with great birds (all seven target species seen or heard – that damned Dupont's!), stunning landscapes and the very best kind of companionship. Guess we'll just have to do it all again next year.

David Bowman





Species	09/03/09	10/03/09	11/03/09	12/03/09	13/03/09
Little Grebe			2		
Great-crested Grebe			4		
Great Cormorant			8		
Cattle Egret	2			3	
Little Egret	1			5	
Great Egret				2	
Grey Heron		1	25	2	6
White Stork	20		25	12	
Greylag Goose				1	
Common Shelduck			40		
Mallard			C	12	
Northern Pintail			C		
Northern Shoveler			C		
Eurasian Teal			C	10	20
Pochard			FC		
Red-crested Pochard					2
Black Kite	40	1	12	2	3

Red Kite	1	15	25	40	60
Lammergeier		6			
Egyptian Vulture	4	8			
Griffon Vulture	C	C	FC	20	26
Marsh Harrier			4	2	2
Hen Harrier			2		1
Short-toed Eagle		8			
Golden Eagle		3	1		
Bonelli`s Eagle		1			
Sparrowhawk		4	1		
Goshawk		1			
Common Kestrel	10	20	40	6	20
Merlin			1	1	
Peregrine		3	1		
Red-legged Partridge			2	1	
Quail					1H
Common Moorhen			H	2	
<b>Species</b>	<b>09/03/09</b>	<b>10/03/09</b>	<b>11/03/09</b>	<b>12/03/09</b>	<b>13/03/09</b>
Common Coot			150	1	
Common Crane	200	70	2,000	7	20
Great Bustard			3		
Snipe			1		
Avocet			24		
Common Sandpiper			1		
Northern Lapwing			FC		
Curlew			10		
Black-tailed Godwit			5		
Black-headed Gull	40		FC		
Black-bellied Sandgrouse				14	
Pin-tailed Sandgrouse				7	
Wood Pigeon	12	20	U	4	
Feral Pigeon	100	60	C	C	C
Rock Dove	16	40			
Stock Dove	2	2			
Collared Dove	4	6	U		10

Alpine Swift			3		
Hoopoe		2	2		
Green Woodpecker			3		
Great Spotted Woodpecker		1			
Great-spotted Cuckoo			1		
Woodlark		12			
Skylark			C	1	
Short-toed Lark			300	FC	FC
Lesser Short-toed Lark			40	300	
Crested Lark		20	FC		
Thekla lark				6	
Calandra Lark			C	C	C
Dupont`s lark				5H	
Barn Swallow	1	1		1	
House Martin	1		3		
Crag Martin	FC	FC	FC	3	
Meadow Pipit		1	25	20	4
<b>Species</b>	<b>09/03/09</b>	<b>10/03/09</b>	<b>11/03/09</b>	<b>12/03/09</b>	<b>13/03/09</b>
Tree Pipit					1
White Wagtail	2	5	12	5	3
Grey Wagtail		1		1	
Dipper			1		
Alpine Accentor			3		
Robin		6	5	2	
Black Redstart	FC	FC	C	C	FC
Stonechat	2	8	FC	FC	3
Blackbird	2	FC	U	2	
Song Thrush		2		1	
Mistle Thrush	1	4		2	
Cetti`s Warbler		1		8	
Blackcap	FC	FC	C	1	
Sardinian Warbler			1		
Spectacled Warbler				1	
Chiffchaff		2	6	60	
Long-tailed Tit		6			

Great Tit	FC	FC	FC		
Blue Tit	FC	FC	FC		
Penduline Tit				2	
Wallcreeper		2			
Southern Grey Shrike				3	
Spotless Starling	FC	FC	VC	FC	FC
Magpie	15	6	10	6	8
Red-billed Chough	FC	FC	FGC		
Jackdaw	15	15	FC		
Raven	6	10	12	2	4
Carrion Crow		4	10	8	6
Tree Sparrow			60		
House Sparrow	FC	FC	10	FC	FC
Rock Sparrow		1	2		
Brambling		1H			
Chaffinch	FC	FC	U		
Serin		FC	30	FC	
<b>Species</b>	<b>09/03/09</b>	<b>10/03/09</b>	<b>11/03/09</b>	<b>12/03/09</b>	<b>13/03/09</b>
Greenfinch		2	4	3	
Goldfinch	2	6	12	10	
Linnet		8	60	200	
Siskin		5			
Hawfinch	1	4	3		
Corn Bunting		FC	VC	VC	C
Cirl Bunting	1	1	1		
Reed Bunting			2		

## OTHER SIGHTINGS

### Butterflies & Moths

Clouded Yellow  
 Small Tortoiseshell  
 Small White  
 Brimstone  
 Red Admiral  
 Fritillary sp.

Hummingbird Hawkmoth

**Mammals**

Rabbit

Hare

Fox

Wild Boar

Vole sp.

Bat sp.