

## SPAIN – EARLY SPRING IN ARAGÓN

Thursday 25th February to Thursday 4th March 2027

**TOUR OVERVIEW:** Located in the heart of north-eastern Spain, Aragón possesses vast and varied landscapes framed to the north by the snow-dusted peaks of the Pyrenees and to the south by the rugged Sistema Ibérico massifs. Through its centre winds the mighty River Ebro, carving a fertile valley through arid steppe as it flows eastward to the Mediterranean. Once an independent medieval kingdom before its unification with Spain in 1707 under King Philip V, Aragón today remains one of the country's largest and most characterful regions - wild, beautiful, and steeped in history.

Aragón's ecological diversity is amazing: from mountain peaks and rocky sierras to sweeping steppe and glimmering lakes, each habitat boasting international importance for birdlife. Our tour explores the region's central core, giving us ready access to its most iconic environments.

In the dramatic pre-Pyrenean sierras, towering cliffs and limestone gorges are home to wintering Wallcreepers, whilst the skies are patrolled by majestic raptors such as Lammergeier and Bonelli's Eagle.



To the south, either side of the mighty Ebro, the weather hardened semi-deserts of Los Monegros, and the rolling drylands of Campo de Belchite unfold, hauntingly beautiful landscapes comprising mosaics of open plains and sparse scrub, alive with specialist birds of the steppe. It is here we will search for Great and Little Bustards, Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, as well as the elusive Dupont's Lark, one of Europe's most mysterious and secretive birds and indeed the primary target of the tour.

Further south-west lies the shimmering Laguna de Gallocanta, set in a high-altitude saline basin and surrounded by open countryside. Each winter and early spring it hosts the breathtaking spectacle of thousands upon thousands of Common Cranes, feeding and preparing to head north, their haunting calls echoing across a panoramic landscape.

Our visit will capture a magical transition from winter to early spring. Wintering birds are still present but preparing to migrate north, residents are becoming more territorial and some early summer visitors will have arrived from Africa heralding the warmer days to come.

**TOUR DESCRIPTION:** This week-long adventure is based in three carefully chosen centres to minimize travel time and maximize our immersion into Aragón's unique landscapes. We spend three nights in the Sierra de Guara near Huesca, among the rocky gorges and hillsides of the pre-Pyrenees, followed by two nights near the historic town of Belchite, once a key site in the Spanish Civil War and now gateway to the steppe, and finally two nights in the charming walled town of Daroca, perfectly placed for exploring Laguna de Gallocanta. We begin and end the tour at Barcelona airport, the most convenient hub in the region for our UK clients.

Each hotel offers comfortable, good-quality accommodation and warm hospitality, with regional cuisine and local wines adding to the enjoyment of the tour. We will travel in comfortable nine-seater minibuses, rotating seats to ensure everyone's comfort and access to the best views.

Whilst we have visited the region several times, bird populations and distribution are ever changing and information on the whereabouts of key target species is rightly becoming more strictly guarded. To enrich our experience, we will be accompanied by one of Spain's foremost authorities on Aragón's birdlife, whose local insight and field expertise will be invaluable throughout - a true bonus for Birding Abroad.



The Lammergeier is the only bird whose diet consists of over 70% bone

**PHOTOGRAPHIC OPPORTUNITIES:** With the soft, lengthening light of early spring and ample time at each location, there will be abundant opportunities for both bird and landscape photography. Many of the region's specialities are shy and best observed from a respectful distance, but patient and mindful photographers will be rewarded with memorable shots of Aragón's birds against dramatic backdrops.

**BIRD LIST:** Our list of potential sightings includes an impressive array of species: Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Garganey, Black-necked Grebe, Greater Flamingo, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Alpine Swift, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Common Crane, Little Bustard, Great Bustard, Black-crowned Night-heron, Eurasian Thick-knee, Black-winged Stilt, Lammergeier, Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Snake-eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle, Hen Harrier, Northern Goshawk, Iberian Green Woodpecker, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Lesser Kestrel, Merlin, Iberian Grey Shrike, Red-billed Chough, Crested Tit, Eurasian Penduline-tit, Dupont's Lark, Mediterranean Short-toed Lark, Thekla's Lark, Sardinian Warbler, Spectacled Warbler, Short-toed Treecreeper, Wallcreeper, White-throated Dipper, Spotless Starling, Black Redstart, Blue Rock-thrush, Black Wheatear, Alpine Accentor, Rock Sparrow, Water Pipit, Citril Finch, European Serin, Rock Bunting, Cirl Bunting, and many more.



**OTHER WILDLIFE:** Aragón's wild beauty extends to its mammals and flora. With luck, we may encounter Iberian Ibex, Red Fox, Roe Deer, Iberian Hare, or even Eurasian Otter. Early wildflowers begin to brighten the hillsides, Spanish Broom, Giant Fennel, and the pink-and-white blossoms of almond, peach, and cherry trees, paint the countryside in soft hues of spring.

**EASE AND PACE:** This is a leisurely tour, suitable for anyone with basic fitness. Most birding will take place close to our vehicles, with some gentle uphill walks taken at a relaxed pace. Breakfasts will be taken around 7:00 am, though we will venture out earlier on certain mornings (such as for the dawn search for Dupont's Lark) with a welcome breakfast upon our return. Packed lunches will be enjoyed in the field, with regular comfort and coffee stops. We return by 6:00 pm most days, leaving time to relax before dinner and reflect on the day's highlights.

**ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD:** All hotels offer comfortable en-suite rooms and full-board meals, including regional dishes and fresh local produce, one of the hotels having an arrangement with the restaurant next door for our evening meal. Expect generous Spanish hospitality, hearty breakfasts, and evening meals complemented by good local wine and our usual fun conversation.

**WEATHER:** Early spring in Aragón brings quite fresh mornings and milder afternoons. Days are often bright and sunny, though at altitude and on exposed plains it will feel cool, especially when the cierzo wind blows down from the Pyrenees. Some showers are always possible, so as ever having layered clothing ensures comfort in the changing conditions.

**PRICE:** The cost will be £2195 per person sharing a room. This includes all birdwatching excursions and travel around Aragón, full board accommodation (starting with dinner on day 1 and ending with breakfast on our final day), bottled water in the vehicles and accompanying Birding Abroad leaders. For added value, we have decided to enrol the services of a local birdwatching expert who will be with the group throughout. Being resident in the region, he has more intimate knowledge of the whereabouts of our most sought-after birds, and will act as a ground agent, sourcing the most appropriate accommodations for the tour, a genuine asset for our group.

Not included are your international flights, and any drinks other than those supplied with meals. A single room supplement is available at £260. To reserve your place on this fabulous tour please complete and submit a booking form together with a deposit of £300.

**FLIGHTS:** We plan to take advantage of local UK airports for this tour. Jet2 have morning flights from Manchester, arriving in Barcelona at lunchtime, whilst flights with closely matching times are available from several London airports. More on the flights your Birding Abroad leaders will be taking, plus any other flight options will be shared nearer the departure date. Please allow for a day or so either side for schedule changes.

**GROUP SIZE:** Five with one leader and 11 with two Birding Abroad leaders.

## DAY TO DAY ITINERARY

**Day 1: Thursday 25 February 2027.** Our morning flights from Manchester and London arrive in Barcelona at lunchtime, where we will be warmly welcomed by our local guide. From here, we journey west through the landscapes of Aragón to our charming hotel nestled in the pre-Pyrenean foothills of the Sierra de Guara, north of Huesca. En-route, we can pause for our first glimpse of some remnant steppe habitat near Lleida, now mainly given over to agriculture.

Here we have a chance to spot Little Bustard and perhaps our first Black Kites, gliding gracefully northwards on their spring migration.

Depending on our arrival time at the hotel, we may enjoy a late afternoon excursion to explore some spectacular rock formations, where Thekla's Lark, Blue Rock-thrush and Rock Sparrow can be found. This area also offers our first chances to encounter Griffon Vulture, and with luck, even the majestic Lammergeier.

Three nights at our first hotel in the Sierra de Guara.

**Day 2: Friday 26 February 2027.** This morning, we drive northwest to the awe-inspiring Mallos de Riglos, immense vertical rock pillars rising nearly 300 metres above the landscape. Formed around 65 million years ago by ancient river deposits from the Pyrenees, these striking cliffs are now a world-renowned destination for rock climbers, as well as for birders, being one of the best places in the area to find wintering Wallcreeper, shown below in typical pose. We'll check for these delicate grey-and-crimson birds flitting effortlessly along the sheer rock faces, while Alpine Accentors may be seen feeding near the bases of the cliffs.



The surrounding scrub and village edges host Black Redstart, Sardinian Warbler and Cirl Bunting, adding colour and song to the scene.

Later, we can visit a nearby castle whose grounds offer sweeping vistas across the countryside. The castle surrounds hold Rock Bunting, while a stroll in the pines should reveal Crested Tit and occasionally Citril Finch, the latter preparing to return to the alpine heights of the Pyrenees.

We conclude the day at a vulture feeding station, where dozens of Griffon Vultures gather at carcasses (as show in the photograph overleaf), these birds often roaming more than over 100 km each day in search of carrion.



**Day 3: Saturday 27 February 2027:** After breakfast, we head east to explore the dramatic landscapes surrounding a large reservoir in the Sierra de Sant Salvador. Local streams host White-throated Dipper and Grey Wagtail, while Eurasian Crag Martins dart overhead in graceful flight. Raptors frequenting this area include Northern Goshawk and amongst rugged cliffs and rolling hills, we search for the magnificent Bonelli's Eagle shown below, which may already be displaying over its breeding territory.



A short drive south takes us to sandstone cliffs near Alcolea, home to Red-billed Chough, Iberian Grey Shrike and Black Wheatear. With luck, early arrivals of Alpine Swift or Red-rumped Swallow are also possible at this time of year, heralding the coming spring.

**Day 4: Sunday 28 February 2027:** This morning, after checking out, we journey south into the semi-arid landscapes of Los Monegros, a largely depopulated region often described as the “living desert of Europe”. Vast, weather-beaten plains and sculpted badlands unfold before us, their muted ochre and silver colours glistening under the wide Iberian sky. Despite its harshness, life clings on here. Isolated farms survive through irrigation, and patches of hardy vegetation add a fragile green to the earth-toned expanse. Travelling along dusty tracks bordered by ancient yews and stands of young Aleppo pines, we search for iconic steppe birds, their elusive presence being part of what makes this stark and timeless landscape so unforgettable.

Our quest will be to locate the impressive Great Bustard, the smaller yet equally charismatic Little Bustard, as well as flocks of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, a delightfully colourful bird as shown in the super photograph below.



Abandoned farm buildings often host Little Owls, while stony ground and sparse vegetation conceal Eurasian Thick-knee and several species of larks, including Mediterranean Short-toed Lark.

Raptors are ever-present here too, so we look skyward for Golden Eagles, usually immature birds biding their time before heading to north to mountains to claim territories of their own.

Most of the day will be spent exploring this special habitat, which forms part of the EU Natura 2000 network, a programme endeavouring to protect special natural environments for generations to come. In the late afternoon, we continue to our next hotel south of Belchite, where the battle-torn ruins of the old town have been left as a memorial to the conflict of the

1936-39 Spanish Civil War. We will be ready to relax after a day of extraordinary birding in one of Europe's most unique landscapes. We stay here for two nights.

**Day 5: Monday 1st March:** Today we venture out before breakfast to the Belchite steppe, a vast, otherworldly plateau of rugged, red eroded earth. This remarkable landscape, more evocative of Morocco or Kazakhstan than Western Europe, stands as one of Spain's finest examples of true steppe habitat.



Here, in this wild and windswept terrain, we have our best opportunity to encounter the rare and elusive Dupont's Lark, shown below. Its distinctive, plaintive and rather melancholy song often betrays its presence before the bird itself can be seen.



With patience and quiet observation, one or more of these secretive creatures may emerge from the low tussocky grasses, briefly revealing itself before vanishing again into the short vegetation. Occasionally, a lark will take to the skies in a sudden display, its haunting aerial song echoing across the steppe before it plummets back down, disappearing once more into the ochre earth.

The air may soon fill with the chorus of other larks too, their calls overlapping in an impressive soundscape that rewards careful listening. Black-bellied Sandgrouse are another highlight here, often encountered as they 'whirr' low across the plains. With luck, we may spot the first a Great Spotted Cuckoo of spring, or perhaps Lesser Kestrel, whose arrival is imminent.



[Lesser Kestrel, a stunning small falcon, requiring significant conservation efforts to support the Spanish population](#)

After an exhilarating early morning, we return for a well-earned breakfast before heading south to the River Martín, which winds through a striking valley of rocky gorges and sunlit hillsides. This rugged landscape supports a thriving population of Iberian Ibex, often to be seen on the cliffs and boulder-strewn slopes. Birdlife here is equally rich: Black Wheatear and Spectacled Warbler frequent the boulders and low scrub, while a majestic Bonelli's Eagle may appear overhead, patrolling its vast territory. By afternoon, we make our way back to the hotel, crossing once more through the wide-open plains that define this beautiful region.

**Day 6: Tuesday 2nd March:** Depending upon how successful we were on the previous day, we have another opportunity to track down Dupont's Lark, a most stealthy of species. Then after breakfast and checking out, we set our course for the historic walled town of Daroca.

Though not far as the crow flies, our journey will take us all day as we meander through the mosaic of some of northern Spain's most scenic habitats. Our route winds through rolling hills draped in mixed pine forests, weaving between fertile farmland and tranquil villages, a patchwork of habitats that invites unhurried exploration.

This is the perfect setting to appreciate the everyday birds of rural Spain. We can take time to enjoy good looks at Crested Lark, Zitting Cisticola, White Wagtail, Common Stonechat, and Corn Bunting along the field edges. Woodlands might host Hawfinch while the cheerful European Serin and sociable Spotless Starling are common around villages. Across the plains, Hen Harrier and Merlin patrol the fields in pursuit of flocks of finches and larks.

By late afternoon, we arrive in Daroca, nestled in the Jiloca river valley. The ancient town, encircled by more than four kilometres of medieval walls and adorned with elegant churches, exudes timeless charm. Here, in this atmospheric setting, we settle in for our final two nights.

**Day 7: Wednesday 3rd March:** Today promises to be one of the highlights of our journey: a full day at the Laguna de Gallocanta, a spectacular lake set more than 1,000 metres above sea level straddling the provinces of Teruel and Zaragoza. The lake's endorheic nature, meaning it has no outlet to the sea, creating a dynamic ecosystem that ebbs and flows with rainfall and evaporation according to the seasons.

Gallocanta is internationally renowned as one of Europe's most important sites for waterbirds. Most famous of all are the Common Cranes, with gatherings sometimes representing up to 80% of the Western European population. Watching these elegant birds arrive and depart in huge flocks, trumpeting across the sky as they move between the lake and surrounding fields, is an unforgettable experience.



The waters teem with life. Garganey, recently arrived from Africa, mingle among the many species of wintering duck, with Red-crested Pochard being particularly numerous. Along the muddy margins we may find Eurasian Golden Plover, Ruff or Green Sandpiper, joined by the first Little Ringed Plovers of the spring. Occasionally, rare waders are discovered here too. The slightly saline waters attract Greater Flamingos; their pink forms reflected in the still surface with several species of heron including Eurasian Spoonbill alongside. White Storks stride elegantly through the fields, while overhead, a variety of raptors circle and pounce, scattering the flocks below.

In the hedgerows, patient watching may reveal Spanish Sparrows, and as the day warms, swallows and martins sweep low over the lake, their northward migration underway. To end the day, we stroll a dry riverbed lined with curiously sculpted rock formations. Returning for our final dinner together, we will no doubt share our favourite moments and reflect on what has been a superb birding adventure in Aragón.

**Day 8: Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> March:** After breakfast, we depart for Barcelona airport ready to board our early afternoon flights back to the UK. We will carry with us vivid memories – open skies, wild landscapes, and the unforgettable birds of northern Spain.

Thanks to Simon Pearce, Antonio Guarerra and Steve West for allowing us to use their photographs.



For a booking form please see the booking page on [www.birdingabroad.com](http://www.birdingabroad.com)

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