

Picos de Europa

16 – 25th May 2011

Tour Review



Wallcreeper – Picos de Europa May 2011 © Jeff Clarke

Note: All images used in this report were taken during the May 2011 tour.

Jeff Clarke & Teresa Farino

Leaders: Teresa Farino & Jeff Clarke

Full Tour Participants:

Pete Copley

Charles Russell

Day Participants:

Lisa Stuart

Margriet De Winter

Bruce De Winter



Courtesy of Charles Russell © 2011

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Introduction

This review covers the highlights of a memorable tour in the Picos de Europa between 15th and 26th May 2011. In contrast to the 2010 tour we had excellent weather conditions throughout in what proved to be a very early spring for the Picos de Europa. As ever, Teresa's intimate knowledge of the weather systems in this mountainous region ensured that we were able to maximise our opportunities during the tour, which is one of the big benefits of working to a flexible itinerary.

Though the tour party was small in number this was more than outweighed by the friendly atmosphere created by all of the participants. The swapping of interesting and often highly amusing anecdotes among the party certainly contributed to a very enjoyable tour for both participants and leaders. As usual, it was only possible to sample a fraction of the biodiversity potential of the region, but it has to be said that on this tour we enjoyed some truly special encounters with wildlife in one of Europe's last great 'Edens'.

Review

Charles Russell joined Jeff on Brittany Ferries' flagship 'Pont Aven' as they travelled from Plymouth to join up with Pete Copley (who hailed all the way from South Australia) and Teresa at the port of Santander, on Spain's north coast.

Sunday 15th May

We set out from Plymouth at 3.00pm and in no time at all we were encountering good numbers of seabirds. As expected the most abundant species was the Northern Gannet, with several hundred birds counted before nightfall. Once out into the Western Approaches a variety of other species put in an appearance, including some reasonably close Manx Shearwaters and a handful of Great Skuas. These were backed up by small numbers of Fulmar and Kittiwake.



Gannet – Bay of Biscay © Jeff Clarke

Monday 16th May

An early start as we crossed the abyssal plain of Southern Biscay. We were into the sector of sea where our chances of cetacean sightings were greatest. Though the big whales didn't show for us we had some superb close views of both Striped and Short-beaked Common Dolphins, whose exuberance and elegant markings were evident as they rode the bow wave of the ship before leaping playfully in the wake.



**Short-beaked Common Dolphin
Bay of Biscay © Jeff Clarke**

The ship docked at midday Spanish time and we joined up with Pete and Teresa. From here we headed to the Lienres sand dunes. The rising tide was creating some wader activity and small groups of summer-plumaged Dunlin skittered along the shoreline, joined occasionally by a few Ringed Plovers. Having feasted on the first of Teresa's scrumptious picnic lunches, we headed out to explore this superb dune system. Pete spotted a movement which eventually resolved itself into

Western Green Lizard *Lacerta bilineata*. The 'tsiu' calls of 'Iberian' Yellow Wagtails caught on the wind and soon we were watching a number of birds with beaks full of insects ready to feed to their brooding young.

This dune system is well known for its flora and in particular its orchids. Charles quickly found the first Small Flowered Serapias. A number of other species were also identified, including Heart Flowered Serapias and Robust Marsh, Lesser Butterfly and Bee Orchids.

The heat of the day meant that birds were pretty hard to find, so we were delighted when a flurry of retreating wings became a female Nightjar. The incessant alarm calls of a Wren betrayed its new hideaway and we had reasonable views of it perched on a dead branch before it melted away into a belt of planted pines.

The dunes held a number of interesting invertebrates, including the impressively jawed Northern Dune Tiger Beetle *Cicindela hybrida*.



***Cicindela hybrida* © Jeff Clarke**

A 'Hawker' dragonfly couldn't be confirmed to species but a female Red-veined Darter proved far more co-operative. A number of butterflies danced across the dune-scape including a few Lulworth Skippers, which turned out to be the only ones we saw throughout the tour. As we headed back to the car park we kept a close watch for one of the characteristic members of the dunes' community of reptiles. Eyes searched just in front of our striding feet and sure enough a number of Western Three-toed Skinks whipped across our path.

We arrived at our hotel – El Hoyal – in Pesaguero in the early evening, stretched our limbs and settled in for a fantastic tour. The hotel is wonderfully situated. It overlooks wooded valleys, pastures and hay-meadows and makes a delightful base from which to explore this sumptuous area of 'Green Spain'.

Tuesday 17th May



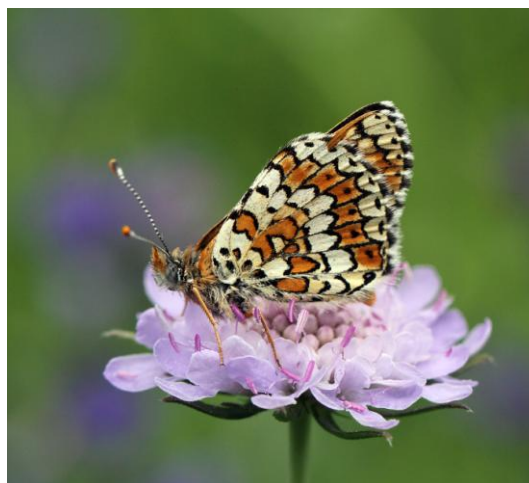
Pete Copley exploring the Espinama meadows © Jeff Clarke

and Fuente Dé, part of which covers the glacial moraine of Fuenfría. We were joined by local naturalist and hotelier Lisa Stuart for our first full day in the Picos de Europa.

Butterflies were much in evidence as we slowly made our ascent. Fritillaries, so scarce and threatened in the UK, were in abundance. The spectacular Queen of Spain Fritillary was almost constantly in view and regularly joined by Glanville, Knapweed and Duke of Burgundy Fritillaries, though the latter is not a true fritillary. Blues were also abundant, especially Adonis, while the diminutive skippers were represented by Iberian Grizzled and

The day started with a pre-breakfast check on the contents of the moth trap set on Teresa's terrace. A fine selection of species, despite a cool night, included the rich red-brown Fox Moth and subtly patterned Lobster Moth.

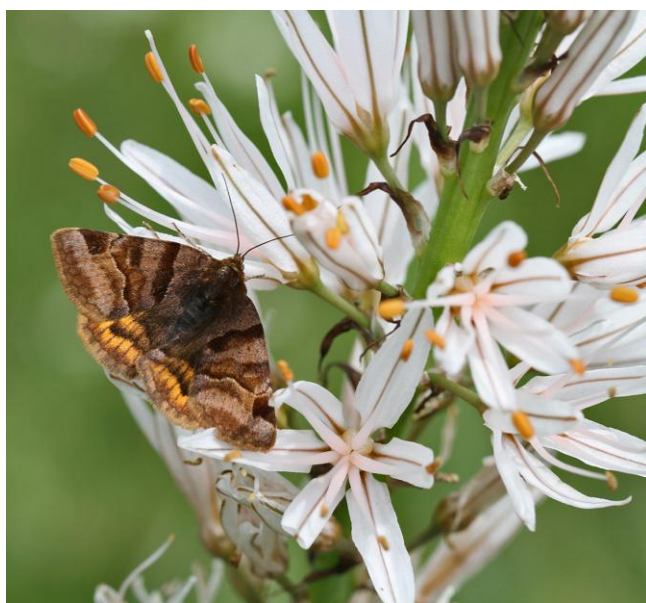
The weather forecast prompted a switch in our itinerary and we headed for the sun-drenched mosaic of meadows between Espinama



Glanville Fritillary © Jeff Clarke

Red-Underwing, that fairly fizzed over the flower-heads. Green Hairstreaks turned pirouettes each time they landed and Clouded Yellows never seemed to settle for more than a few seconds. This was in contrast to the glider-like Scarce Swallowtails that patrolled a favourite beat, chasing off intruders and checking out potential mates, before returning to a favoured lookout perch. Their Common Swallowtail cousins vied for attention but these were more restive and camera shy.

The Picos de Europa is also a hotbed of day-flying moths so it was not unexpected that Speckled



Burnet Companion on White Asphodel
© Jeff Clarke

Yellows, Burnet Companions and Small Yellow Underwings were abundant amongst the riot of colour in the meadows.

A feature of these meadow areas is the sheer abundance and diversity of invertebrates. The meadows literally buzzed with life and the incessant chirruping of Field Crickets was, at times, quite deafening. You had to be patient to get a decent view of the males at their burrow entrances as they prepared to serenade passing females. The candy-striped shieldbug *Graphosoma italicum* sat openly on umbellifer flowers, as did *Clytra quadripunctata*, a Chrysomelid beetle that could possibly be mistaken for a ladybird.

Cruising around the meadows with the butterflies there were a great many 'Owlflyies'. These look like a cross between a dragonfly and an ant lion. The species found here was *Libelloides coccajus*.

Birds were playing 'hard-to-get' and the advanced season meant extensive leaf cover, such that the Blackcaps and Garden Warblers were more seen than heard. The Tree Pipit that serenaded us during lunch was more cooperative and its cascading song matched its parachuting display flight into the tops of adjacent Pyrenean Oaks. Despite the good weather conditions raptors were largely notable by their absence, though an Egyptian Vulture at close range looked dazzling against the azure sky.



Graphosoma italicum
© Jeff Clarke

The various meadows looked glorious in the sunshine dotted with vibrant splashes of colour, as if some pointillist artist had recently passed by. The Ophrys orchid genus was particularly well



Sombre Ophrys pollinated by solitary bee sp.

© Jeff Clarke

the woods we encountered White Helleborine and Common Twayblade. The Bird's-nest Orchids took a fair bit of searching for as they hid, phantom like, amongst the beech leaves of the woodland floor, but eventually we spotted them.

There were many other plants in the meadows too, including swathes of the majestic White Asphodel, Tassel Hyacinths, Tuberos Comfrey, Columbine, Rock Cinquefoil, Maiden Pink, *Carduncellus mitissimus*, Rampion Bellflower and much, much more...

Wednesday 18th May

A warm night gave us hope that the morning check of the moth trap would prove to be productive and we were not disappointed. The wall was coated in a fantastic array of species but, sitting in the bottom of the Robinson trap, looking like a highly decorated dinner-plate was not one but two individuals of Europe's largest moth, the Great Peacock. What a start to the day! Other notable highlights included Spanish

represented, with Sawfly, Early Spider and Sombre Ophrys all in evidence. The latter was photographed whilst male solitary bees were duped into mating with them and thereby pollinating the deceiving plants. As we drifted through the meadows the orchids came thick and fast: Barton's, *Dactylorhiza sulphurea*, Early Marsh, Elder Flowered, Heath spotted, Green-winged and Early Purple Orchids, plus flamboyant Pink Butterfly and Common Tongue Orchids, diminutive and manikin-like Burnt Orchids, including one without a burnt tip, and the even more human like flowers of Man Orchids. In



'Unburnt' Burnt Orchid

© Jeff Clarke

Tiger, Small Elephant Hawkmoth, Great and Tawny Prominents, Dewick's Plusia and The Passenger.

The weather forecast suggested a reasonable morning but possible deterioration to rain later, so we headed for the heights of Puerto de Piedrasluengas. We were joined by a delightful Dutch couple, Margriet and Bruce de Winter. Margriet was a keen

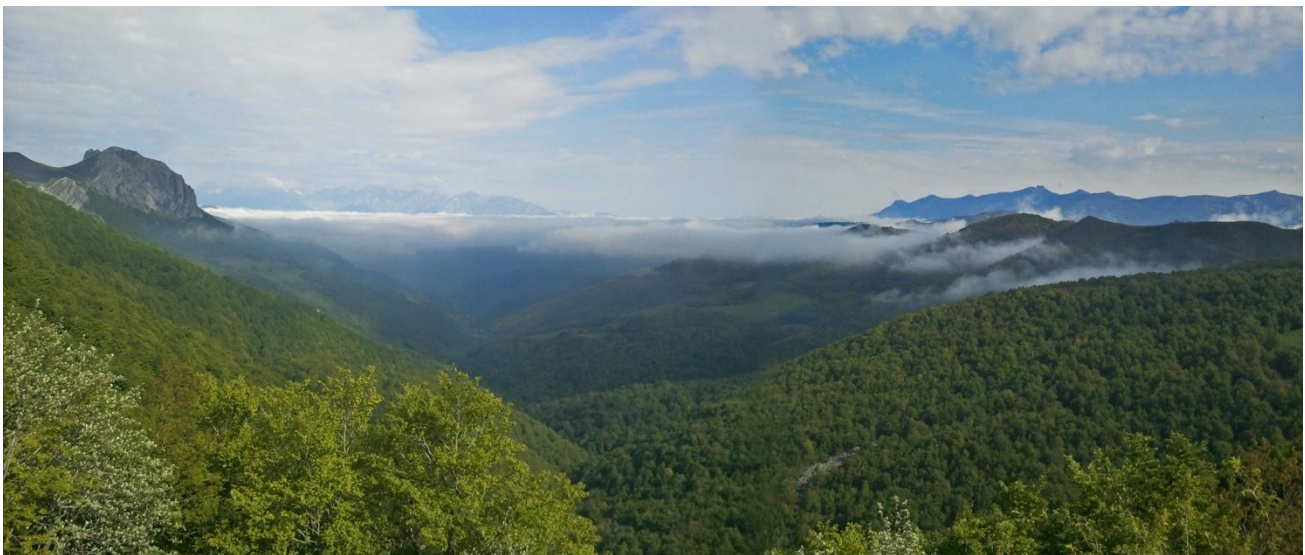


Great Peacock moth © Jeff Clarke

botanist and the chance to see some true alpine plants was her

ambition, so we headed towards some rock gardens. Here we found *Anemone pavoniana*, *Globularia repens*, *Saxifraga caniculata*, Livelong Saxifrage, Alpine Forget-me-not, Prostrate Toadflax, *Erysimum duriaei*, *Asperula hirta*, Alpine Calamint, *Viola bubanii*, Spring Gentian, Grape Hyacinth and, in the grasslands, lots of Wild Daffodil, though only a few of the latter remained in flower.

A dark ringlet type butterfly lead us on a merry dance. One was finally captured, allowing its certain identification as De Prunner's Ringlet. On the top of one of the rock gardens we found a few chunky black and orange Apollo caterpillars. There were also a few interesting day flying moths including *Metaxmeste schrankiana* and the Bordered White lookalike *Isturgia famula*.



View from Puerto de Piedrasluengas. © Jeff Clarke

Among the rock gardens we watched a number of Common Wall Lizards including a large and variegated green male with blue spots on his side. Here too we found some of the typical bird species of this habitat. The most interesting observation involved a pair of Rock Buntings; everyone had lovely views of these birds 'anting'. A Short-toed Eagle posed on a pinnacle, easily identified by its huge head; we later had superb views of a pair in display, with the male carrying a snake to the female. The calls of a Cuckoo rebounded around the rock walls and after a time it was located perching on the same rock pinnacle previously occupied by the Short-toed Eagle. Black Redstarts were common as were Northern Wheatears and as we headed back towards the car park we added Corn Bunting and Yellowhammer to our list.



Emus hirtus Staphylinid beetle © Jeff Clarke

On our return Teresa had a 'rootle' around in a dung heap and winkled out a spectacular Staphylinid beetle called *Emus hirtus*: a fearsome and – as its name suggests – 'hairy' predator of other dung-dwelling invertebrates. Approaching the car park, Jeff noticed a movement and looked down to see dozens of ants swarming around a striped longhorn beetle. A little later Charles also found one. Our investigations suggest that they were both specimens of *Iberodorcadion albicans*.

After lunch we headed further into the province of Palencia (Castilla y León) and stopped at a short limestone gorge. The streamside was a combination of willow carr and wet meadow and here we found Aconite-leaved Buttercup, Pyrenean Valerian, Water Avens, Globeflower and Marsh Marigold. We also found Irish Spurge, Wood Crane's-bill, Pyrenean Squill and Ramsons along the adjacent Beech forest margin. There were a few more butterflies here, the best of which was our first Moroccan Orange -tip.

During the afternoon, the gathering rain bearing clouds chased us further south. We settled at the village of Vañes, on the shores of the Embalse de



Iberodorcadion albicans © Teresa Farino

la Requejada. On our approach significant numbers of White Storks dotted the roadside fields. As we alighted from the vehicles, a Black Kite passed so low overhead that you could see every detail of its plumage without the use of binoculars. We then set course for some more rock gardens. To get there required us to cross a stream and here we found Iberian Water Frogs. We also found a



Iberian Water Frog © Jeff Clarke

single specimen of Winter Damselfly *Sympecma fusca*. The rock gardens themselves were very productive, turning up Star of Bethlehem, *Potentilla montana*, False Sainfoin, *Lathyrus pannonicus*, *Erodium glandulosum* and Beautiful Flax. The musical backdrop was provided by several Nightingales singing from dense shrub cover but we had to be content with fleeting glimpses. As we tramped across the meadows the colourful caterpillar of The Lackey moth was found.

The reservoir had a few birds dotted around on its surface, including Great Crested Grebe and before leaving we took time to watch and enjoy the nesting White Storks atop the various buildings in the village. At the same time Pete found Greenfinch and a pair of Stonechats popped up on the wires but the Rock Sparrows remained elusive and would have to wait for another day.



White Storks © Jeff Clarke

Thursday 19th May

The morning round of the moth trap brought another Passenger, Three Humped Prominent, Dusky Marbled Brown, Spanish Puss Moth, Pale Shoulder, Cream Spot Tiger, and Bordered White, to name but a few.

After breakfast, we were once again joined by Lisa. Our first stop was the Dobres *mirador*. With vertical cliffs to the rear and a dramatic 'karst' limestone landscape spread before us this was a truly scenic and productive location. Red-billed Choughs called and wheeled above our heads and a few were found probing the vegetated areas of the scree runs below our vantage point.

Though we had already watched large numbers of Griffon Vultures 'sail-planing' across the mountain-scape, this was our first really close encounter with these huge and dramatic birds. Some cruised past at eye level and below and many came close enough to hear the air ripping across their vast wings. A significant number of pairs nest at this location and birds were constantly in view, often in sizeable wheeling flocks around the towering cliffs. They were occasionally joined by a Booted Eagle.

Initially there was no sign of the hoped-for Blue Rock Thrush but we eventually found a strongly singing bird after we had passed through the first tunnel. Crag Martins nest within the tunnel and many more could be watched scything across the face of the cliffs. As ever in these mountains Black Redstarts were fairly obvious, though we had to work a little harder for the Rock Buntings.



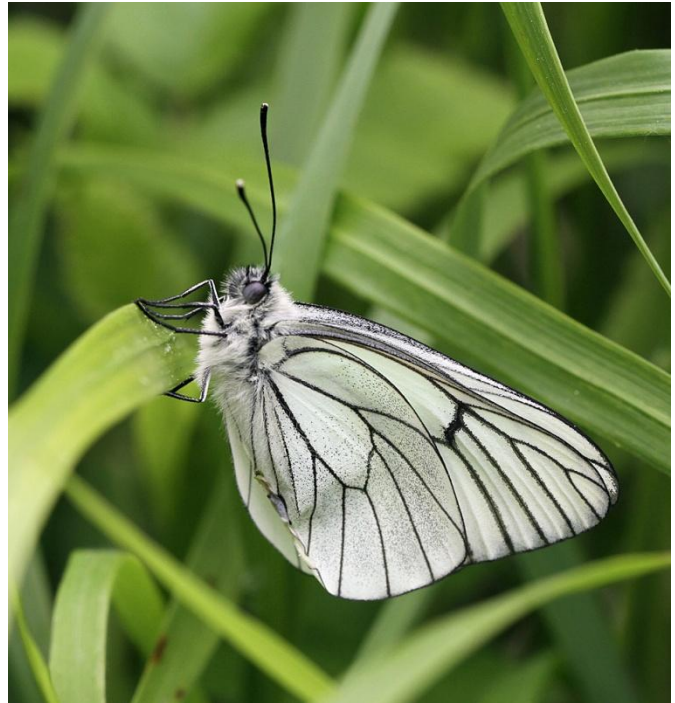
White-clawed Crayfish © Jeff Clarke

This is a reliable site for a number of butterflies and moths but the narrow road access and precipitous slopes don't lend themselves to easy observation. Nevertheless Hummingbird Hawkmoth, Yellow Shell, Small Blue and Wall Brown were quickly added to the list. The 'walls' also harboured a number of interesting plants, including Pyrenean Germander, Mountain Alyssum and Fairy Foxglove.

From here we drove to a small reservoir and adjacent meadows above Enterrías. The stream outlet is a known site for Atlantic White-clawed Crayfish and, within a few minutes of our arrival, Teresa located one under a boulder. Temperatures were fairly moderate so Lepidoptera and Odonata activity was slightly subdued. Even

so we enjoyed a rich array of species. Pete found a newly emerged Black-veined White, so fresh that it was still pumping its wings up. Everyone's camera shutters were whirring to capture that image for posterity. By this stage of the tour Pete had picked up the rock turning bug and also unearthed a 'resting' Midwife Toad.

An unusual feature of this tour was the super-abundance of Marsh Fritillaries; we found them in many locations and this site proved to be equally productive. The boggy patches of the meadows were also home to a number of lycaenids, including Turquoise Blue. The skippers were represented by Large and Oberthürs Grizzled, while the burnet moth *Zygaena nevadensis* was found resting on an



Black veined White © Jeff Clarke

unopened knapweed. This insect prompted a discussion about whose camera was reproducing colours most faithfully but the moth seemed indifferent to the debate.

After lunch we concentrated on photographing some of the waterside wildlife and Lisa had views of a large snake in the water. Given the habitat it was either Viperine, or Grass Snake. A good number of damselflies were drifting in and around the bank side vegetation, including several mating pairs. Apart from Common Winter Damsel there were several 'blue' damsels: we confirmed Azure Damselfly *Coenagrion puella*, Common Blue Damselfly *Enallagma cyathigerum* and Iberian Bluetail

Iscnhura graellsii. Of the dragonflies we had good views of a female Broad-bodied Chaser. A number of *Donacia* leaf beetles were clinging to the Typha leaves, which appeared to be *Donacia vulgaris*. Just prior to leaving the site, Jeff and Pete found a large queen wasp on a flower-head, which turned out to be a Tree Wasp *Dolichovespula sylvestris*.



Spanish Brown Argus © Jeff Clarke

We then set off to spend the afternoon in a set of sloping meadows west of Dobarganes. It perhaps wasn't as sunny as we would have liked but this habitat did give us plenty of photographic opportunities as many of the butterflies and moths were settled on the flower heads. Marsh Fritillaries were once again abundant in the flower rich meadows and pristine examples of Spanish Brown Argus begged to be photographed, as did the exquisitely

marked Glanville Fritillaries. A female Purple-shot Copper took a liking to Teresa's hand as it mopped up nutritious body salts but Sooty Coppers were far more abundant. Of the day-flying moths the tiny noctuid *Omia cymbalariae* constantly caught the eye as it darted across the meadow. Another of the burnets was found here, namely Slender Scotch Burnet *Zygaena loti*.

The meadows were dotted with dozens of Burnt and Tongue Orchids. They also abounded with other invertebrates, including the Green Huntsman Spider *Micrommata virescens*, while another 'Owlfly' species was found, this time *Libelloides hispanicus*. The backdrop hum of bumblebees and trilling songs of Field Crickets were like ambient music.

Many of the bee ensembles were made up of carder bees,

notably the Moss Carder Bee. A sudden stifled yelp from Pete indicated that something was amiss and the source of the pain was traced to a bee sting on his arm.



Charles Russell in the Picos de Europa © Jeff Clarke



***Libelloides hispanicus* © Teresa Farino**

As we descended back down to the road, through the Pyrenean Oaks that lined the footpath, we had superb views of a Bonelli's Warbler, whose quick rattle song is so closely associated with the wooded areas of the Picos de Europa. A number of crab spiders were also noted, including the distinctively pretty *Misumena vatia*.

As soon as we reached the vehicle the sun came out strongly and the meadows were suddenly alive with butterflies so Charles and Jeff headed back up to the nearest meadow patches to photograph the Marsh Fritillaries, Sooty Coppers and Oberthür's Grizzled Skippers that had appeared in force. Meanwhile Teresa indulged her passion for rummaging around in dung heaps and soon found another *Emus hirtus* Staphylinid beetle.

After the regular evening meal and round-up, Charles, Pete and Jeff headed out to do a bit of batting. Pete

was having a prolonged reaction to the bee sting so we kept it short, only surveying long enough to confirm that most of the bats flying around the hotel were in fact Common Pipistrelles.

Friday 20th May

The cool overnight temperatures meant we had a break from the usual early start as there is little point putting a moth trap out in such conditions. Pete was still suffering from the after effects of his bee sting so we took things fairly steadily and post breakfast headed downhill to a meadow between Frama and Ojedo. Having passed many roadside Lizard Orchids, Charles was delighted to have a proper period of time to photograph these exotic looking plants, along with the equally attractive Bee Orchid. The meadow was full of interest both botanically and invertebrate-wise. A brush against the aptly named Bitumen Pea produced the unmistakable scent of



Lizard Orchid © Jeff Clarke



Great Green Bush Cricket © Jeff Clarke

freshly laid tarmac. However, a brush with the *Silybum marianum* 'Milk' Thistle was less recommended: certainly not one to sit on! The flowering *Pallenis spinosa* was characteristic of this dryer, more Mediterranean patch of grassland.

The vegetation seemed to jump at every stride. Most of the culprits turned out to be Great Green Bush Crickets, including a very pallid specimen that we spent time photographing. A number of *Stenopterus rufus* longhorn beetles were noted on the heads of daisies, and *Synaema globosum* crab-spiders were also in evidence. Feathered Footman moths were readily disturbed as we moved through the meadows, and a number of fritillaries bounced around, including Spotted, Knapweed and yet more Marsh Fritillaries.

Small Skippers darted around the tall grasses, and the ubiquitous Sooty Coppers were abundant. Unfortunately, however, the Blackcap singing in the dense shrubbery stubbornly remained hidden, as did the strongly singing Firecrest.

Onward towards Beges. We stopped briefly for 'elevenses' at the mirador overlooking La Hermida, where Griffon Vultures were perched on adjacent crags, and those flying were keeping below the slowly descending cloud base. A quick bout of rock turning revealed a sizeable Common Toad but no reptiles. The most noteworthy plant here was the *Petrocoptis pyrenaica* spp. *glaucifolia*, located by Teresa. Higher up the route we stopped on a bend in the road to examine the interesting array of plants. Common Spotted Orchid and Woodcock Ophrys were fairly obvious but the less showy Fly Orchids required a more discerning eye to pick them out.



Fly Orchid © Jeff Clarke

As we travelled higher up the hill the weather looked decidedly 'iffy'. Looking down on the village, an assortment of birds showed, including Stonechat, Red-billed Chough and a Dunnock, while a Provence Orchid was added to our ever growing list of flowers. We pressed on a little further until we stopped for lunch at a water trough. This proved to be a productive and instructive spot. Delving into the depths we quickly picked out the beautifully marked Alpine Newts, together with their Palmate cousins. Many newly limbed Common Frog tadpoles were leaving the trough but inside it



Alpine Newt © Jeff Clarke

gigantic tadpoles proved to be those of the Midwife Toad. One in particular was so bloated that we were half convinced for some time that it was a candidate for Western Spadefoot Toad. Also in the trough was a Hawker dragonfly nymph; based on photographic evidence this appears to be a Southern Hawker *Aeshna cyanea* nymph. Just prior to leaving this location we had good views of Marsh Tits, which gave away their presence with

their loud 'pitchou' calls. We then dropped back down to escape the impending poor weather and brief roadside stops gave us excellent views of Iberian Chiffchaff and some rocks just begging to be lifted produced a pair of Slow Worms.



Large Psammodromus © Jeff Clarke

The weather-enforced switch in our itinerary found us pitched up at the 'old gorge road', this proved to be a very productive move. We found many new butterflies for the trip, including our first Black-eyed Blue, Blue-spot Hairstreak, Large Wall Brown and Weaver's Fritillary, as well as Mallow Skipper, Brimstone and Cleopatra. They all proved incredibly difficult to photograph, unfortunately, thanks to a combination of warmth and wind. A close fly-by Peregrine Falcon brought some avian excitement; while high over the peaks many Griffons and the occasional Egyptian Vultures could be seen. Distant streaking dots proved to be Alpine Swifts but they were to be seen much more clearly later on in the trip.

When you turn over a rock you never quite know what you will find, though someone had clearly been doing the same prior to our arrival and, annoyingly, had made little effort to replace the rocks in their original position. We lifted one to find a Glow worm eating a snail, its head buried deep into the shell of its mollusc prey. Every so often a Three-toed Skink would skip in front of our bootlaces and Common Wall Lizards were abundant, but the real reptilian highlight was the Large Psammodromus found by Teresa. It eventually showed well, and proved to be a male in breeding dress. We also photographed a very attractive Pyralid moth *Cynaeda dentalis*, whose markings are a dead ringer for a dried grass flower head.



***Cynaeda dentalis* © Jeff Clarke**

As expected, this locality produced a number of interesting plants, including Cone Knapweed, Daisy-leaved Toadflax, Prickly Juniper, Swallow-wort, Sad Stock, *Ruta angustifolia*, and *Rosa rubiginosa*. We also found a helleborine which, after close examination, turned out to be *Epipactis kleinii*: a species not previously recorded in the Picos de Europa.

Saturday 21st May

The day began with the morning round of moth determinations from the previous nights trapping. The catch was as varied as ever, containing a variety of prominents, Ringed Carpet, Sharp Angled Peacock and a distinctive little micro moth called *Chrysocrambus craterellus*.

After breakfast we headed off in the direction of the Puerto de San Glorio but hadn't gone far when we were stopped in the road by an oncoming herd of 'transhumant' *tudanca* cattle: one of the traditional breeds of the region. These tall, but slender cows are highly adapted to the poor grazing in the high mountain pastures during the summer months and here we were witnessing the moment when the cattle are transferred from the lowland meadows, thus freeing them up for the production of hay to feed these self-same animals during the winter. It is this age-old cycle that is, in large part, responsible for the supreme botanical and invertebrate diversity of the Picos de Europa.



Mazarine Blue © Jeff Clarke

Presently we arrived at a small sloping meadow full of spring flushes, some distance short of the high point of the pass. Here we found the red form of the Elder-flowered Orchid, as well as Large-flowered Butterwort, Horned Pansy, Spignel, Whorled Lousewort and its congener *Pedicularis mixta* and the vanilla orchid *Nigritella gabasiana*. Butterflies and moths bounced around the meadow but were never easy to catch up with on the boggy slope. We did manage to add a few new species though, including Mazarine Blue, Small Argent & Sable and Lead Belle.

We spent the majority of the rest of our time here around the pine plantation at the top of the pass, where the forest floor was dotted with Pyramidal Bugle and Wood Anemone. Our target here was Citril Finch, although we were momentarily diverted by a female Roe Deer, which crossed our path and gazed briefly into our eyes, before moving smartly away. Every avian movement was examined, although most proved to be Chaffinches, Serins, Coal Tits, or Goldcrests but eventually

Charles had a good view of a pair of Citril Finches. Unfortunately Pete had to be content with a few fly-over views, as the birds chimed their metallic calls.

Over lunch we pondered the identity of a largish longhorn beetle and concluded that it was *Rhagium bifasciata*. The towering clouds to the south-west suggested a significant change in the weather and by the time we had taken our last mouthfuls big drops of rain were beginning to spot around us.

We made a decision to head back down the valley to the Urdón Gorge, which proved to be a good choice. We hadn't walked far when a 'Black Bellied' Dipper showed well. A little further along the track, a Firecrest finally gave itself up to close examination and Grey Wagtails bounced up and down the river. Butterflies were abundant in the sunshine, with Blue-spot Hairstreak, Pearly Heath, Piedmont Ringlet and Common Swallowtail all readily observed. The limestone cliffs alongside the track harboured numerous distinctive plants, including Sticky Flax, Bastard Balm, Mexican Fleabane, Hart's-tongue Fern, Kidney Saxifrage and the wonderfully fragrant Clove-scented Broomrape.

Another Slow-Worm was uncovered here but the probable highlight was a creature with eight legs rather than none. Under the rock overhangs we found many specimens of that spectacularly large Harvest-spider *Gyas titanus*. Its disproportionately long legs make it nearly impossible to do it justice in a photograph, but it was a fitting species to mark the limit of our walk along the gorge before heading back to the hotel for our evening meal. But before we departed a pair of Common Wall Lizards posed for photographs near the entrance to the gorge.



Common Wall Lizards © Jeff Clarke

Sunday 22nd May

As ever we were keeping a close eye on the weather prospects and today we decided to ring the changes and head out of the Picos and into the adjacent plains in northern Palencia. Our first stop brought us to the river Pisuerga north of Olleros. The 'kroop' calls of Bee-eaters signalled our arrival at one of the region's colonies and we watched them for some time as they swooped and climbed on 'flickery' wings in their distinctive graceful style; without a doubt, this is one of Europe's most eye-catching birds.

Whilst stopped here we were also over flown by a male Montague's Harrier carrying a snake, which proved to be just the first of several sightings during the day. The same locality produced other goodies such as Linnet, Corn Bunting and Stonechat. Then, scything through the sky across a nearby ridge, were numbers of swifts; most turned out to be Common Swifts, but we also had good views of several Alpine Swifts with their contrasting white bellies.



Western Demoiselle © Jeff Clarke

We could hear Golden Orioles in the nearby Poplars but the river was between us and them so we opted to double back and find a route to observe the area from the other side. We found a suitable track and parked close to the poplars. The slightly ethereal sound of the orioles echoed around the woodlands. We stopped briefly to photograph a Western Demoiselle and a mating pair of Black-veined Whites before heading into the woods. The poplars were pretty lively with birds, with Iberian Chiffchaffs singing constantly, Great Spotted Woodpeckers issuing loud "keck" calls and then suddenly the orioles were there in full view. Not too far away both a male and a female showed and for once this bird proved co-operative; so often they remain stubbornly hidden in the dappled canopy but our luck was in. As we returned to the vehicle, the day was warming up and butterflies were becoming more active, including a Knapweed Fritillary.

We proceeded on a little further towards the village of Valoria de Aguilar where another stop along a set of tracks produced many new sightings. Rock Sparrows gave themselves away with their wheezy 'zweeu' call, and Teresa could hear a distant Ortolan, but it never showed, so we turned our attention to the mass of roadside plants and butterflies. Here we added Green-underside Blue

to our ever growing list. Adonis Blues were also abundant, with every female attracting a number of 'frustrated' attendant males. Teresa was pleased to find another *Iberodorcadion* longhorn beetle, this time the all-black, shiny *I. spinolae*. Among the plants the highlights included Dragon's-teeth, Blue Aphyllanthes and Woodcock and Early Spider Ophrys.

'Iberian' Yellow Wagtails flew over cereal fields as we approached Villaescusa de la Torres. We explored the marshy margins of the river close to the village and found a number of Odonata, with Four-spotted Chasers, Azure Damselfly and Large Red Damselfly being positively identified. A snake on an

area of vegetated gravel close to the river slipped into cover before it could be named, but the Sand Martins darting over the river provided more than enough compensation.

As we drove through the village, a couple of large green lizards literally stopped us in our tracks. A few metres in front of the car stood a large male Ocellated Lizard, which took exception to a male Schreibers Green Lizard and they had a scuffle underneath the vehicle before disappearing into the verge. Flowers around the village included Coris, White and Beautiful Flaxes, Mountain Blue Lettuce, Wild Mignonette, Burnet Rose and Biting Stonecrop.



Adonis Blues Trio © Jeff Clarke



Beautiful Flax © Jeff Clarke

Out beyond the village we found an area for lunch overlooking an arable landscape, from which we could observe Montague's Harrier, Red-backed Shrike and Melodious Warbler. From here we explored the nearby pines and limestone bluffs along the margins of a small stream. In the heat of the day the butterflies were very lively and we encountered Safflower Skipper, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Wood White, Moroccan Orange-tip and Cardinal, as well as enjoying seeing a female Osiris Blue laying her eggs on *Onobrychis vicifolia*.

We also discovered our only Beautiful Demoiselle of the trip, together with a 'short-horned' longhorn beetle, which turned out to be *Rhagium inquisitor*.

It was now time to head for the high point of the day at Las Tuerces, where we explored at length the limestone 'sculpture city'. On arrival we spotted what we thought was a female Orange-tip but Teresa's good eyes noted something different about it and, with closer examination, it turned out to be our first Western Dappled White of the trip. Swallowtails were exceptionally abundant here and seemed to be nectaring every few metres along the tracks, and we also found a new lycaenid for the trip, in the form of Amanda's Blue.

The whole of the open limestone plateau was decorated with a superb range of flora, including Dropwort, *Centaurea triumfetti* and a number of orchids including 'new for the tour' species such as Bug Orchid, Fragrant Orchid and Yellow Ophrys. These were backed up by Green-winged and Barton's Orchids, as well as Sawfly Ophrys.

In the heat of the day, most birds had gone quiet but the Woodlark 'dweedling' its song out across the plateaux seemed not to have read the script and we eventually found its favourite perch and enjoyed a decent view. As we crossed the limestone pavement we found a few individuals of a species of 'bagworm'. These are moth larvae that build themselves a portable camouflaged tent utilising fragments of plant material.

On our slow return to the vehicle, the group became slightly separated. At this point Jeff stumbled upon something. At first he wasn't quite sure what he was looking at, as it just seemed to be a mass of coils, but it then resolved itself into two snakes - one eating the other! The curious thing was that they were both Smooth Snakes. He managed to grab Charles' attention but Teresa and Pete were some distance away. Charles and Jeff managed to grab a couple of quick photos, unfortunately the larger snake took fright and sped off, leaving its victim behind.



Smooth Snake eating another Smooth Snake
© Jeff Clarke

On the return journey we took time out with a roadside stop to photograph Lady Orchid and also spent a few minutes enjoying the 'Stork City' at Barrio de Santa María. We arrived back at the hotel for a rather late dinner but our long day in the field had produced some memorable sightings.

Monday 23rd May

Back in the Picos de Europa, we opted to head for the more Mediterranean vegetation above Lebeña. As we plodded slowly upwards through the Western Holm Oak forest, the difference in the flora community was very noticeable, with highlights including Red and Broad-leaved Helleborines, Violet Limodore, Etruscan Honeysuckle, Perennial Yellow Woundwort, French Figwort and the spectacular Bath Asparagus.



Male 'Jewel' beetle *Anthaxia hungarica*
© Teresa Farino

The flower heads were decorated with a real smorgasbord of invertebrates, including many colourful longhorn beetles but despite multiple variations of black on yellow, all those closely observed seemed to be Spotted Longhorn *Rutpela maculata*. Alongside them were iridescent green Buprestid (Jewel) beetles: the males of the species *Anthaxia hungarica*.

Butterflies and day flying moths were a real feature of this section of the walk. Once again Marsh Fritillaries were abundant but new species for the trip included False Ilex Hairstreak and the appropriately named Camberwell Beauty, which skimmed over our heads before disappearing into

the Holm Oaks. Red Admirals were less evasive and the Duke of Burgundy also put in an appearance. At a junction in the track, feeding on a thistle, we found a White-collared Burnet *Zygaena lavandulae*, and a little higher up we discovered another burnet moth, this time the six-spotted *Zygaena transalpina*.

We then crossed a stream to reach a small 'Terram'-lined reservoir. The slippery, sheer, sides of this quarter-hectare tank were something of a death trap to larger fauna and it contained a recently drowned Griffon Vulture as testament to its potential lethality to wildlife. The water itself brimmed with life, including Palmate Newts and Midwife Toad tadpoles, while above the surface a number of dragonflies patrolled, including Emperor, Broad-bodied Chaser and Black tailed skimmer. Many damselflies were also present, although Common Blue Damselfly was the only species we were able to confirm. Shortly before leaving the tank we looked under a few rocks, and almost immediately Pete spotted a young Grass Snake attempting to swallow a Midwife Toad about four times larger than its head!



Grass Snake eating Midwife Toad
© Jeff Clarke

It was really hotting up now, and by the time we reached the lovely village of Tudes it had turned into a real 'dog-day' afternoon. After lunch, a short walk confirmed our suspicions that most birds had headed for cover, although Pete managed a quick view of a departing Green Woodpecker. A Cirl Bunting eventually gave itself up but the hoped for Red-backed Shrikes and Middle-spotted Woodpeckers remained resolutely unspotted!

We decided to delve into the depths of a blanket-weed filled trough. It took a considerable amount of searching through but we did eventually secure our prize: a dramatically marked male Marbled Newt. It was a lively fellow and finding the best way to photograph it took up a fair amount of time. Leaving the others to their photographic labours, Jeff wandered a little way up the hill and eventually located a pair of Common Redstarts; despite their



Marbled Newt © Jeff Clarke

name, this is an exceedingly rare breeding bird in Spain. Everyone was able to get superb views of both male and female as they shivered their tails in the dappled sunlight.

After the evening meal, Charles and Pete joined Jeff on another nocturnal hunt. We headed off towards the river in Pesaguero and very soon, with the aid of the bat detector and a red-filtered lamp, we were enjoying views of hunting Daubenton's Bats together with Common and Soprano Pipistrelles. At least one horseshoe bat was picked up on the detectors but it was too quick to pin down to species (there are four in the Picos). Roe Deer barked from the adjacent woodland and, using the light, we spotted a few of them crossing the meadows behind the hotel.

Tuesday 24th May

The day began with another sift through the moth trap, which produced Lesser and Spanish Puss Moths and a number of other notodontids, including Three-humped Prominent. After breakfast we stopped briefly in Potes to meet up with Lisa and get some supplies for lunch. As usual, many swifts careened above the town and Serins twittered incessantly. The low cloud hung around the valley and our decision to head for the cable car at Fuente De may have seemed to some a folly. We arrived at the cable car station and very few visitors had gathered. As we waited in the short queue, we watched a Red Squirrel in the pines, and then boarded the cable car to begin our vertiginous ascent into the clouds.

As we approached the upper cable car station we topped out of the cloud into blazing sunshine and were treated to one of the most fantastic sights of the Picos de Europa: skyscraper peaks jutted out of the pillow-like blanket of cloud, making for a true spectacle and the feeling that you really were 'on top of the world'.



Cloud inversion at Fuente De © Jeff Clarke

We had a number of targets for our day in the high peaks and began to traverse our way across the plateaux away from the main crowds. Crowned Moths skittered across the terrain and even a few butterflies, including Queen of Spain Fritillaries, were busy seeking nectar bearing plants.

The rock-garden and pasture plants at this altitude are something special. A far from complete list included such gems as Spring Gentian, *Gentiana angustifolia* ssp. *corbariensis*, *Valeriana tuberosa*, *Anemone pavoniana*, Grass-leaved and Amplexicaule Buttercups, *Androsace villosa*, *Matthiola perennis*, Chamois-cress, Cone Saxifrage, the Picos endemic *Saxifraga felineri*, Yellow Wood and Teesdale Violets, Holly Fern, Moss Champion, Spring Squill and a strange yellow form of Pyrenean Snakeshead, represented by a single plant.

As is usual at this altitude, birds were a bit thin on the ground but their far carrying calls led to many minutes of anticipatory searching. Here we soon found our first Snow Finches. These are large birds that appear vaguely lark-like in flight, though the white wing patches render them fairly unmistakable. Snow fields in the distance contained a number of dark blobs, which closer examination through optics revealed to be many Southern Chamois 'snow-bathing': clearly attempting to keep cool in their thick winter coats on this hot spring day.



Spring Gentians © Jeff Clarke

We approached one of the high-altitude ponds, which turned up Alpine Newts and juvenile Common Toads. A couple of darters zipped periodically across the surface and after some time we tracked down their favoured perches; closer examination found them to be male Red-veined Darters.

After elevenses, Jeff wandered across a rocky area in an attempt to find Rock Thrushes. Having singularly failed, he returned to the group and set up his scope to give Charles and Pete a good view of an Alpine Accentor. It was at this point he realised his telescope eyepiece had fallen off. Unfortunately, despite an extensive search it was nowhere to be found.

We then moved to our principle goal and 'set up camp' so to speak, at La Vueltona as we endeavoured to locate one of the true stars of the high mountains. Astonishingly we didn't have to wait for long, though we were royally entertained by a singing Snow Finch and Alpine Accentor during the brief hiatus. A high pitched descending call announced its arrival as our principle quarry fluttered, butterfly-like, across the rock face. Ask any European birdwatcher to name ten bird species on their most-wanted list and almost all of them will have this bird highly placed on it. Here it was, the simply stupendous and sublime Wallcreeper: a full summer-plumaged male no less.

Over the next couple of hours we enjoyed several sightings of this bird, some at fairly close range, and we calculated that at least three males and two different females were involved. We even observed one pair flying into a distant hole in the rock face. Shortly after we started heading back towards the cable-car station, Jeff observed a distinctive movement out of the corner of his eye.



Alpine Accentor © Jeff Clarke

Suddenly a female Wallcreeper was a matter of metres from the group, searching for insects among the boulder field at the side of our path, amid a whirr of shutters and murmurs of delighted appreciation. You could spend a lifetime hoping for such a close view of this miraculous bird. All despondency over the lost eyepiece had clearly evaporated from Jeff's mood as he contentedly whistled and sang his way back in the direction of the cable car.



Wallcreeper © Jeff Clarke

We had a few minutes to spare and Jeff was persuaded to try and find his telescope eyepiece again. Clearly influenced by the Karma-like state induced by the god-like bird of the mountains, he followed his instinct straight to a tiny patch of green within a mass of rocks and there it lay, entirely undamaged. I guess that when the luck is with you it makes sense to ride that pony with equanimity.



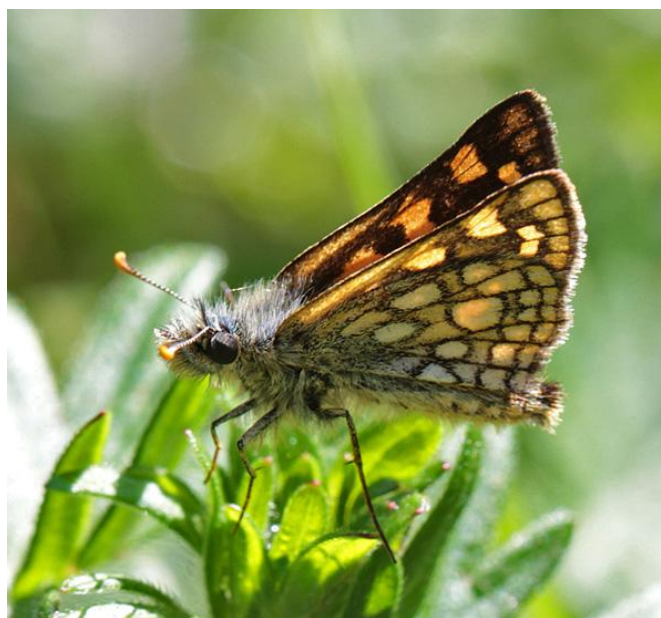
Snow Finches © Charles Russell

While Jeff was otherwise engaged, the rest of the group was enjoying superb close-up views of Snow Finches and, not to be outdone, a male Alpine Accentor was singing his heart out on a path-side rock: the Red-billed and Alpine Choughs definitely played second fiddle on this particular visit to the mountain tops. As we approached the final bend in the path before the cable car we had another good view of a Southern Chamois: a truly fitting end to a brilliant day in the high mountains of the Picos de Europa.

Wednesday 25th May



***Phyllodesma kermesifolia* © Jeff Clarke**



Chequered Skipper © Jeff Clarke

Our final day. The pre-breakfast moth trap round was as productive as ever. Dozens of different species included Clouded Buff and a Goat Moth and a well marked example of *Phyllodesma kermesifolia*, a type of Lappet moth.

Before heading for Santander we spent a fantastic morning in the woodlands and meadows of the Sierra de Beges, on the way up we stopped briefly at the water trough again for a final peak at the

Alpine Newts. We then commenced a loop walk that was to be a fitting finale to our time in this majestic mountain range. As a group we slowly worked our way along the tracks and encountered a succession of fabulous plants and animals. Teresa, whose visual acuity for plants is extraordinary, found a seemingly invisible Frog Orchid, while the pick of the butterflies was Chequered Skipper, although we also added Short-tailed Blue, Dark Green Fritillary and Peacock, to our list.



Queen of Spain Fritillary © Jeff Clarke

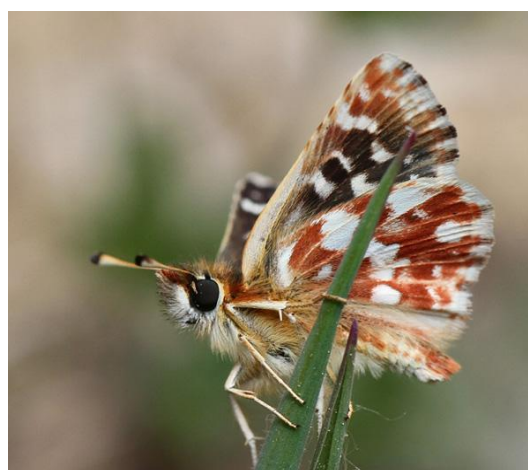
As we entered the area of Sessile Oak forest we concentrated on the birdlife, as we still had a couple of glaring gaps on our bird list that needed filling. The Picos de Europa is a special place for Middle-spotted Woodpecker and after a short period of determined effort we managed to locate a pair diligently searching the boughs for grubs. Here too we spent some time observing Nuthatches and Marsh Tits before the call from a Black Woodpecker had all of us on high alert. Pete saw a movement out of the corner of his eye, but all we glimpsed was a large black shape disappearing through a tangle of trunks. It never ceases to amaze us how something as large as a Black Woodpecker can so easily evaporate before your eyes, but they seem to be

past masters in the art. The next sector of forest gave us another new woodland bird for the tour, this time in the shape of Short-toed Treecreeper.

We moved on through an area with grazing cattle; times are slowly changing in the area and larger breeds of cattle, incapable of 'making do' in the high pastures, are beginning to appear in greater numbers at low and middle altitudes, thus converting hay-meadows to pastures, and clearly threatening grassland biodiversity in the Picos de Europa.

Leaving the cattle behind, we crossed a series of meadows with a simply stupendous flora and invertebrate fauna diversity. The floristic stars of the show were the magnificent 'black' pasque-flowers *Pulsatilla rubra* ssp. *hispanica*. Sadly, so advanced was the season in 2011 that many had already set seed, although we did find a few still-perfect blooms.

As the day warmed, these meadows were at full throttle. Everywhere you turned, dozens of butterflies flitted between the multitudes of flower-heads, while a Bee-hawkmoth sp. darted from one Vipers Bugloss flower to the next. Crickets and grasshoppers set up an almost deafening backdrop of stridulation and bumblebees were everywhere. This moment, this place, epitomised the true value of the Picos de Europa, here it was in vibrant Technicolor and high fidelity sound. We could have stayed there



Red-underwing Skipper © Jeff Clarke

much longer, but all good things come to an end and it was time say goodbye to the Picos de Europa and head back towards the coast.

Our first stop after the Picos was a return to the Liencres Dunes area where we recorded a white form of Woodcock Ophrys, many Lesser Butterfly Orchids and a large number of non-flowering *Epipactis* spp., though we did positively identify Green-flowered Helleborine *Epipactis phyllanthes*; Liencres is the only Spanish locality for this orchid. A large thunderstorm rumbled around us so we pressed on towards the freshwater marshes and lagoon of Las Marismas Blancas, near Santander, where we added a number of waterbirds to our list, including Mute Swan (a rare bird in Spain), Common Pochard and Little Grebe. From the reed beds we teased out superlative views of a family party of Cetti's Warblers, as well as a family group of Reed Warblers. Then we passed under the road bridge to the Las Marismas Negras, a tidal area that contained nesting Common Tern, a Little Egret tackling some sort of eel, and a female Red-veined Darter, which became our last dragonfly sighting of the trip.

All too soon it was time to head for the port and to say our goodbyes. Though we were a small group we had worked well together and enjoyed each other's company.

We had definitely benefitted by being able to access locations that would have presented significant logistical difficulties for larger groups and, as a consequence, we did see a quite staggering array of plants and animals, including many sightings that will live long in the memory.

And Finally...

It is simply impossible to pick out all the memorable occasions and species from such a wildlife packed tour. If you are reading this report as someone who is thinking of visiting the area then we hope that it has given you a sense of what a special place the Picos de Europa truly is.

I'd like to give very special thanks to my co-leader Teresa Farino, a fantastic naturalist, whose knowledge of the Picos de Europa and surrounding areas is unrivalled. Teresa works very hard and with dedication on the groundwork and logistics of all her tours. Not only that but Teresa also prepares terrific picnic lunches and works tirelessly to ensure that everything runs smoothly. The vigour and enthusiasm of the participants to explore and discover things for themselves undoubtedly helped to enrich the tour and many things were found and photographed that may otherwise have been missed. Thanks as always go to those who have contributed their images to



Woodcock Ophrys © Jeff Clarke

this report. Finally, it goes without saying that the real stars of the show were the natural wonders of the Picos de Europa and surrounding areas. For those with a statistical bent we recorded 108 species of birds, 16 species of reptiles and amphibians, 65 species of butterflies, 13 species of dragonflies and damselflies and 36 species of orchids. Not forgetting all the moths, beetles, mammals, other vascular plants, etc., etc....

We trust and hope that you enjoyed your time with Iberian Wildlife Tours and Jeff Clarke Ecology, and we look forward to seeing you all again sometime, hopefully soon. Please do let others know what you thought about your experience.



Charles, Pete and the Picos de Europa © Jeff Clarke

For information about future tours please visit our websites:

Jeff Clarke: <http://www.jeffclarkeecology.co.uk/>

Teresa Farino: <http://www.iberianwildlife.com/teresa-farino.htm#Teresa-Farino-Trips>

Jeff Clarke & Teresa Farino 2011