

Iberian Wildlife Tours/Jeff Clarke Ecology

# ***Picos de Europa***

***12<sup>th</sup> May – 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2013***

## **Tour Review**



**Southern Chamois at the top of the Fuente De cable car © Dan Logen**

Note: All images used in this report were taken during the 2013 tour by the leaders and participants

**Jeff Clarke & Teresa Farino**

**Leaders: Teresa Farino & Jeff Clarke**

**Tour Participants:**

Amanda Calvert & Alan Harrison; Inverness, UK

Pat & Dan Logen; Washington State, USA

Judy & Lyall Bishop; Washington State, USA

Susie Wilson & Eric Hall; Washington State, USA

Chris & Alan Henney; Cheshire, UK

Anne Barbour & Chris Adams; Norwich, UK



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## Introduction

This review features the highlights of a spring tour covering one of the most biologically diverse regions of Northern Spain. Every trip to this part of Spain throws up something different and as ever the tour was blessed with some memorable up-close encounters with the native flora and fauna.

This tour had a very international cast of twelve participants, six from Washington State in the United States of America and six from various parts of Great Britain. As expected with such a big group the individual interests of the clients varied considerably; several of the party were very keen photographers and many of their fantastic images are displayed in this report and we would like to thank them for allowing the use of their photographs. The natural history interests within the group included birders, botanists, entomologists and herpetologists and this tour provided all of them with their fair share of the rewards. As usual not everyone was able to see all of the flora and fauna on offer, but most of the time all of the group were able to enjoy what was found. We were fortunate to have several veritable rock-rummagers on this tour which inevitably turned up some very interesting specimens and everyone in the group was generous with their knowledge and keen to help the others enjoy their finds.



**Alan Harrison displays a reptilian find for the others to photograph © Teresa Farino**

Spring 2013 was late and cold across a large swathe of the continental Europe, and Northern Spain was no exception. The winter snows still lay deep at higher elevations in the Picos de Europa and the temperatures were several degrees below the seasonal average for most of the tour. Having said that, by and large we were fortunate with the weather on this tour and once again Teresa's intimate knowledge of the weather systems in the Picos de Europa ensured that we were able to maximise our opportunities. This is one of the big benefits of working to a flexible itinerary.

## Review

### Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May

On this tour the clients had the option of joining Jeff on Brittany Ferries' Pont Aven from Plymouth, or rendezvousing in Santander where Teresa would join the party. In the end just three folks opted for the ferry and as usual they were able to see and enjoy some wildlife specific to the marine environment that the 'land-lubbers' would be denied.

As we steamed out of Plymouth we were immediately enjoying a good variety of seabirds, with Common Guillemots, Razorbills and Atlantic Puffins all well represented, though the



murky and choppy conditions didn't make it particularly easy for everyone to lock on to them and see the key features. Great Skuas and Manx Shearwaters were seen on a number of occasions and did eventually afford good views to the whole group. As usual the Gannets, with their near 6ft wingspan, were a little easier to spot, especially when they careened alongside the ship at eye level, affording spectacular views.

### Monday 13<sup>th</sup> May

We awoke the following morning to much-improved weather conditions and at times the southern Bay of Biscay was like a millpond. Without doubt the most unexpected and out of context sighting during the crossing was that of an, all be it distant, Asio owl species flopping over the waves totally out of view of any land. It was almost certainly a Long-eared Owl but the distance was too great to be 100% certain.

Seabirds were much less evident in the Southern Bay but that was more than compensated for by the cetaceans we encountered. Before very long dolphins began to show, initially just



**Short-beaked Common Dolphins © Jeff Clarke**

the odd distant splash in the water indicating their presence but soon we were treated to the spectacle of Short-beaked Common Dolphins making for the bow in a series of joyous power leaps. Several groups played in the bow wave for a time before appearing alongside and then in the wake. There is something very special about dolphins and they make people smile. Looking along the rail of the ship all the passengers gazing at this scene had big beaming grins on their faces. In addition to the dolphins we also had distant views of a pod of Long-finned Pilot Whales, several rorqual whale 'blows' and a brief, but close, view of a Cuvier's Beaked Whale. As we approached the southern shelf of the abyss we were treated to a tight pod of Striped Dolphins bounding close by on the starboard side of the ship.



**Striped Dolphins © Jeff Clarke**

On arrival in Santander we gathered the up majority of the group, picked up the minibuses and headed for our first stop - the scenically lovely Dunas de Liencres - where we met up with Alan and Amanda and enjoyed the first of many sumptuous picnic lunches, prepared by Teresa.



The dunes are home to several interesting creatures such as Dune Tiger beetles and Western Green Lizards, both of which were duly enjoyed by the party. Very few butterflies were on the wing due to the late spring but Common and Adonis Blues, together with Cleopatra and Brimstone, brought a splash of azure and gold to the dune landscape. The dunes themselves are decorated by many beautiful wild flowers and are a noted site for several members of the Orchidaceae. In flower during our visit were Pink Butterfly Orchid, Bee Orchid and Small-Flowered Serapias. Many other plants abound in this habitat, including species familiar to the British contingent in the party: Common and Long-headed Poppies studded the dunescape, together with Yellow-wort and Burnet Rose.

Spanish Yellow Wagtail © Teresa Farino



As it was mid-afternoon and relatively warm it was no surprise to find that the local birdlife, other than the local Yellow-legged Gulls, was taking a siesta. We did manage to prise out a few passerine sightings however, including several Stonechats, elusive Crested Larks and the delightful Iberian endemic form of the 'Yellow' Wagtail, commonly referred to as Spanish Yellow Wagtail.

Eventually it was time to make a quick diversion to Santander airport to collect Chris and Anne, our final couple, then head off to our destination in the Picos de Europa via the impressively sinuous La Hermida Gorge, which eventually opens out to reveal a stunning backdrop of spectacular peaks. A few miles further on we reached our base for the tour - the friendly family run Posada El Hoyal - in the tiny hamlet of Pesaguero.

Teresa & Jeff check the trap © Dan Logen



Lobster moth © Eric Hall

### Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> May

Teresa's terrace is one of the best moth-trapping sites in Europe and the previous night's mild temperatures definitely made putting the moth light out worthwhile. The downside of this, if there is one, is that it requires a pre-



breakfast start for the lepidoptera enthusiasts. Nevertheless, as expected on this first morning we had an excellent turnout of both participants and moths. On show were many examples of the 'prominent' family (Notodontidae), including Great, Tawny, Sallow and Three-humped Prominents As well as Lobster Moth and

Lesser Puss Moth, with other eye-catching species including, Fox Moth, Peach Blossom and Nut-tree Tussock.

After breakfast we reconvened in the hotel car park and - after due consultation of the day's weather forecast - we planned our itinerary. Following a quick check of the birdlife surrounding the hotel we climbed aboard the minibuses and headed for Potes to pick up fresh bread, en-route spotting bonus raptors in the form of Egyptian Vulture and Black Kite. The biggest surprise was a Black Stork circling over Potes before continuing its migration. This was a fascinating prelude to our prime, Narcissi riddled, destination; the slopes of the Puerto de San Glorio mountain pass. The climb would take us through the low cloud hopefully to the blue skies of the higher elevations and so it proved. Very soon we were



enjoying a colourwash of daffodils emblazoned across the verdant backdrop, contrasting dramatically with the snow-capped peaks.

Spain is very much at the epicentre of Narcissi speciation and here we found not just *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* of the subspecies *nobilis*, but also Angel's-tears (*Narcissus triandrus*), *Narcissus minor* and Hoop-petticoat Daffodil (*Narcissus bulbocodium*).



Scattered amongst the daffodils could be found many of the other flowering plants that typify the region. Everywhere we looked Spring Gentians shone like blue stars and Dog's-tooth-violets, with their recurved petals, studded the damper meadows. The deep pink form of Elder-flowered Orchid was found, as were pink-suffused Wood Anemones and the impressive Pyrenean Snakeshead fritillary.

We then successfully searched the streamside area a little lower down the valley for the impressive and seriously colourful Schreiber's Green Lizard and we also found our first Viviparous Lizard of the tour. Looming clouds presaged the onset of heavy showers

and so we made the decision to head for a more sheltered lunch spot. We settled on Llánaves de la Reina where we enjoyed close views of 'Black-bellied' Dippers and Grey Wagtails foraging along the river while we munched our delicious picnic and dodged the showers as best we could.

A further deterioration in the fickle spring weather required a re-think of the schedule, resulting in the birders and photographers heading for the Dobres Tunnels. This is a noted haunt of cliff loving birds, though our viewing was somewhat limited by the low cloud base partly obscuring the towering ramparts of the peaks above the tunnels.



Undaunted we scrutinised the various slopes and cliff walls. As ever Black Redstarts and Rock Buntings were in the vicinity, but on this occasion not close. Red Billed Choughs put in periodic appearances and our American contingent was delighted with the Goldfinches that sang from the adjacent tree canopy. We passed through the tunnel and were able to secure excellent close views of Griffon Vultures perched at their nest sites. Despite our best efforts we couldn't find any Blue Rock Thrushes but a Peregrine Falcon that perched at eye level and was duly scoped by all, was fine compensation.



The reptile and flower enthusiasts, by contrast, headed further west to another locality for Schreiber's Green Lizard, where we spotted at least four resplendent males and a large brown-blotched female, all of which were duly photographed. Basking male and female Common Wall Lizards were also encountered in drier habitats here, while Yellowhammers and Rock Buntings serenaded us from the streamside scrub.

The cool showery conditions of the day were not great for locating invertebrates; just a handful of butterflies making it on to the day list, including Holly Blue and Small Tortoiseshell, we did also spot the occasional Common Heath and Crowned Moth, and a single Short-necked Oil-beetle (*Meloe brevicollis*) also gave itself up to scrutiny in the car park at San Glorio.

### Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> May

We were relieved to awake to clear skies for once, so after breakfast we drove up to the delightful woodlands and meadows around the village of Bejes. We parked up close to village and on arrival we could hear Dunnocks singing, something you rarely hear at lower elevations in northern Spain, and we also had great views of a male Common Redstart, below our eye line, hawking from wires. We soon began a looped walk which would take in some of the most floristically diverse meadows of the week. We had not even left the village before spotting a grassy bank decorated with a clump of strapping Giant Orchids and several pristine specimens of Man Orchid.



Our regular stop at a productive water trough did not disappoint. Here we found the over-sized tadpoles of Midwife Toads, colourful Alpine Newts and rather less flamboyant Palmate Newts.

It is a meandering climb uphill and we took a couple of opportunities to stop, take in the views and find some interesting animals and plants. Raptors soared around the peaks and precipitous valley sides, including Booted Eagles and Common

Kestrels, together with the ever-present Griffon Vultures, but on this occasion most kept their distance and we soon moved on.

Notable flowers of the limestone rock-gardens flanking our walk included the northern Spanish endemic anemone *Anemone pavoniana*, the cushion-forming saxifrage *Saxifraga canaliculata*, blousy Pyrenean Trumpet Gentians, Fairy Foxglove, clumps of Leafless-stemmed Globularia, Spring Squill and a few Early Purple Orchids.

The Bejes area also holds some very interesting passerines and in time we enjoyed super close views of Nuthatch, Red-backed Shrike, Bonelli's Warbler and Pied Flycatcher, the latter

two playing cat and mouse in the canopy of the Pyrenean Oaks as we attempted to photograph them.

Once on the plateau above the village, the cool showery conditions reduced our butterfly potential so we concentrated on the floristic riches of the area instead, with the almost-black pasque-flowers (*Pulsatilla rubra*) providing the day's highlight, although the very late spring meant that just a few specimens were in flower. In a typical season this area is a blaze of colour at this time, but spring 2013 was anything but typical. As we trundled over an area of limestone



*Palmate Newt* © Teresa Farino



*Black Pasque Flower at Bejes* © Eric Hall

outcropping we encountered some fresh specimens of Dull Ophrys. It took determination to get a decent view as it was something of a scramble.

After a late lunch, some people expressed a desire to buy postcards and see the human aspects of the Picos de Europa, so we headed for the cultural delights of Potes, the 'urban' nucleus of the region.

### Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> May.



Lizard Orchid © Jeff Clarke

Overnight temperatures of just 2°C were undoubtedly responsible for the presence of just two species of moths in the trap this morning: three male Muslin Moths and two Great Prominents. It seemed that we were still playing roulette with the weather gods, but the morning promised to be fine. We made a brief stop at a dry meadow in Frama, where some enormous Giant and Lizard Orchids overshadowed smaller fare such as Pink Butterfly, Common Tongue and Bee Orchids. Here too we found our first Tassel Hyacinths, growing together with Annual Scorpion-vetch, Pale Flax, Wild Clary and Viper's-bugloss. A few invertebrates also put in an appearance,

including a fine female Field Cricket, Great Green Bush-cricket nymphs, Nursery-web Spiders, the 'chafers' *Tropinota squalida* and *Oxythyrea funesta* and chunky green Sword-grass caterpillars.

We then headed up the valley towards the charming village of Tudes, stopping at several locations en route. We hadn't proceeded far up the hill when we encountered a pair of Crested Larks. We expect this bird on the coastal dunes, but it's a distinct rarity in the Picos de Europa. Further up a few raptors were soaring and together with the ubiquitous Common Buzzard, we had superb close views of both colour phases of the Booted Eagle.



Field Cricket © Jeff Clarke



**Pink Butterfly Orchid © Teresa Farino**



**Booted Eagle © Dan Logen**

Many of the most species-diverse meadows on the ascent lie close to the roadside, and at this time of year they are literally teeming with blousy and vivacious Pink Butterfly Orchids.

A longer stop at some dry grasslands around an evergreen oak copse just before the village turned up characteristically

fragrant Mediterranean shrubs such as Sage-leaved Cistus, French Lavender and Round-



**Western Three-toed Skink © Dan Logen**



**Midwife Toad © Teresa Farino**

headed Thyme, interspersed with Spotted Rock-roses, Southern Daisies and a couple of new orchids, namely Green-winged and the pale yellow *Dactylorhiza sulphurea*. The lovely Provence Orange-tip and Meadow Fritillary were probably the pick of the butterflies, flying together with Black-eyed and Small Blues and Small Heath, while notable on the herptile front were a Western Three-toed Skink and a couple of very obliging Common Midwife Toads.

We eventually reached the village where we enjoyed a splendid picnic in the shade of the Walnut trees. This is always a good spot to enjoy the local birdlife and the periodic sallies of Spotted Flycatchers betrayed their presence as they snapped another insect from the air. Rather frustratingly we could hear the calls of the local Middle Spotted Woodpeckers but they declined to show themselves, and we had to be content with Nuthatch, Black Redstart, Serin and Long-tailed Tit. Later on in the walk we would enjoy sterling views of Rock Bunting and Red-backed Shrike.

After lunch we delved into the depths of a local water trough, or at least Jeff did,



Small Heath on *Dactylorhiza sulphurea* © Teresa Farino



Jeff 'newt tickling' © Dan Logen

plunging in up to the shoulder to pull out a gem of an amphibian in the shape of a glorious Marbled Newt; both males and female were later seen to be lurking in the depths. Definitely worth getting muddy for! The same water trough also held Palmate Newts and Common Midwife Toad tadpoles.

From here we began a long and relaxed descent to the village of Valmeo. It took us through a wide variety of grassland and forest habitats and we stopped periodically to search rocky walls for reptiles or the numerous flower-filled meadows to find more sumptuous orchids.

One meadow was particularly memorable for the swathes of orchids liberally dotted across its verdant carpet. Here we would add several species to our tour list, including the Burnt-tip Orchid and Sword-leaved Helleborine, as well



Marbled Newts © Dan Logen

as 'lesser mortals' such as the white-flowered 'sun-rose' *Halimium umbellatum*, fragrant Bastard Toadflax and the yellow-flowered avens *Geum sylvaticum*. Paying attention to the tracks and signs revealed that Wild Boar had also found this field to their liking, probably because of the considerable amount of Pignut present.



Burnt-tip Orchids © Jeff Clarke

As so often on this walk, the reptiles and amphibians provided many highlights.. Alan Harrison made the most of his herp-hunting expertise to tease out Slow-Worm and Iberian Wall Lizard before the weather began to close in on our descent. By the time Teresa and Jeff had recovered the vehicles heavy rain had set in, but as usual Teresa had read the weather runes correctly and we had chosen our location well to ensure a rewarding day in the field.

#### Friday 17<sup>th</sup> May

After picking up fresh bread for lunch we headed for the delightful 'Old Gorge' track. This location enjoys

a micro-climate that is more Mediterranean in nature and as a consequence is often excellent for reptiles as well as for cliff nesting birds and invertebrates. The weather was set fair and we began our gentle ascent full of hope. We were not to be disappointed.



**Old Gorge' Track © Eric Hall**



**Iberian Wall Lizard © Teresa Farino**



**Rosy Garlic © Eric Hall**

It was a cool start to the day and butterflies were still thin on the ground but we managed to find a few Small and Holly Blues, Speckled Woods and Wall Browns. This track is always rewarding for plants and pretty quickly we added a couple of new orchids in the form of Violet Limodore and Dense-flowered Orchid, with other notables including Sand Catchfly, Grass-leaved Buttercup, Sad Stock, St Dabeoc's Heath, Daisy-leaved Toadflax, Southern Red Bartsia and Rosy Garlic.

The reptile hunting would be very productive and pretty soon the first of many Iberian Wall Lizards was spotted. Not long after, a beaming Alan emerged from the undergrowth with a star prize. We gathered the group together to enjoy the sight of an obligingly tranquil Southern Smooth Snake. As anticipated, myriad camera shutter drives soon whirred into action to capture this gem for posterity. Within the hour we had added several more reptiles to our day list, with Ocellated Lizard, Slow-worm and Large Psammodromus all putting in an appearance.



Southern Smooth Snake © Dan Logen

Looking upwards, however, was just as productive, as a succession of raptors and other birds were observed cresting along the adjacent cliffs and ridges. Scimitar-winged shapes proved to be Alpine and Common Swifts, swooping alongside Crag Martins and Alpine and Red-billed Choughs. Raptors too were seen in good numbers. Aside from the anticipated Griffon Vultures and Common Buzzards, the occasional Egyptian Vulture hove into view, providing a good comparison with a pale-phase Booted Eagle. Black Kite and Peregrine were welcome additions but the raptor highlight was arguably a Golden Eagle.

Although the precipitous slopes above and below us along this route don't make for easy observation of passerines, most folks did eventually



Ocellated Lizard © Dan Logen

get good views of the Bonelli's Warblers that regaled us from bushes all around; conversely just a few lucky people managed to connect visually with the Firecrests we could hear.

Amid all the excitement generated by the snakes, lizards and birds, our encounter with a certain gastropod mollusc should not be overlooked. During our searches we turned up a species of Cheese Snail, reminiscent of the familiar aquatic Ram's Horn. It was photographed by a number of people in the party, and later research by Teresa revealed its identity as *Elona quimperiana*, a rare Annex II species, found only in Northern Spain and Brittany.

In the afternoon we travelled further down the gorge to the village of La Hermida itself, where we completed a circular walk taking in both sides of the river Deva. From the bridge in the village we enjoyed watching Crag Martins, House Martins and Barn Swallows swooping up and down the river after flies. Dipper and Grey Wagtail were also observed along the river here, but the big prize came for Judy as she watched a male Golden Oriole feeding in the willows just below us.



During our circular walk we decided to go off-piste and explore an area of vegetated river shingles. As hoped this brought us a few new finds, including our first Common Toad and our second snake of the day. This time it was a Viperine Snake, nestled under a rock in typical riparian habitat. Shortly before completing the loop back we once again found several Slow-worms, to complete a superb reptile day.

On the loop back it was possible to get a view of the skyline and – as hoped – this brought us a final reward on the raptor front: fine views of both Booted and Short-toed Eagles gliding above the forested slopes of the gorge.

### **Saturday 18th May**

Overnight temperatures were again low, with fresh snow lying on the beech- and oak-clad slopes above the hotel. A check on the weather prospects suggested another wet day in the Picos de Europa, so Jeff and Teresa decided that it was time to head over the Puerto de Piedrasluengas and onto the high plateaux of Castilla y León.

As we ascended through the forest-lined road to the pass of Piedrasluengas, we were surprised to find the very freshly dead corpse of an Iberian Mole lying totally undamaged in the middle of the road; thankfully it would not be the last mammal we would see that day. Eventually we reached the pass and took a break in the frigid air and freshly-laid, but rapidly melting, snow. A scan of the skyline revealed a distant Southern Chamois, which we examined with the aid of Jeff's 'scope.



Heading down the valley to the south, one eye on some soaring raptors and White Storks, we paused once again just past the village of Camasobres, where some high pitched calls alerted us to the presence of Rock Buntings, just audible above the muffled 'shushing' noise of snow falling from the vegetation. Thankfully Dan's big lens managed to capture the moment when the bunting took flight. Here too we managed close views of singing Yellowhammers and Dunnocks and a circling Egyptian Vulture, while the distinctive calls of Red-legged Partridges echoed around the crags.



Our first major stop was in the village of Vanes, adjacent to the Embalse de Requejada. Alighting from the minibuses our ears were assailed by liquid fluty notes of Nightingales. It took an age for most people to get a view of this inveterate skulker but we managed some half-descent sightings eventually. There were many other



Stonechat © Dan Logen

birds here too, including a low flying Red Kite, nesting White Storks on the village buildings and poplars, and Woodlarks, Stonechats, Garden Warblers, Blackcaps and Bonelli's Warblers in the scrub. Out on the water were Great crested Grebe, Common Coot and Mallard, with Grey Heron and displaying Little Ringed Plovers along the shoreline. A perched Black Kite was also observed in a dead poplar, and Pat spotted a smart Northern Wheatear perched on a rocky outcrop.

This location is also excellent floristically, with the hemi-parasitic Lousewort *Pedicularis schizocalyx* a



*Pedicularis schizocalyx* © Teresa Farino



Green-winged Orchid (white form) © Jeff Clarke

very nice find, growing in the lower lying damp grasslands together with a single clump of Barton's Orchids and numerous spikes of Green-winged Orchids. This orchid can be quite variable but one spike caught particular attention as it completely lacked the usual purple suffusion. A nearby limestone spur jutting out into the reservoir was a veritable rock-garden, studded with cushions of the glandular-sticky,

cushion-forming stork's-bill *Erodium glandulosum* and white-flowered *Saxifraga canaliculata*, while slightly deeper soils harboured colourful drifts of Grass-leaved Buttercups, pink Valeriana tuberosa and hundreds of two-inch tall Grape-hyacinths.

The loud calls of Iberian Water Frogs pulled the herpetologists to the water's edge, where scouting around also produced good views of Common Wall Lizards despite the cool conditions. A tiny rise in temperature just before we moved on tempted out the first butterflies of the day with Southern Grizzled Skipper and Duke of Burgundy Fritillary being noted.

Lunch in a fisherman's 'refuge' on the banks of the Rio Pisuerga coincided with the warmest part of the day and we even saw a few invertebrates such as Bee flies, but it was probably the bird song that received most of our attention. The staccato rhythm of Iberian Chiffchaffs was periodically joined by loud blasts from Cetti's Warblers. Other birds also put in brief appearances including blackcap and Melodious Warbler. This stop also produced our only member of the Odonata to be seen all week: a single Large Red Damselfly alongside the river. Proof – if it were needed – of the exceptionally late spring of 2013.



Bee Fly sp. (*Bombylus caesescens*?) © Jeff Clarke



Parsley Frog © Teresa Farino

Later we moved to a regular Bee-eater nesting area. Unsurprisingly, the birds had not yet settled to nest but we did see a number foraging in the area, betrayed by their distinctive 'kroop' calls.

Our final significant stop of the day was at Barrio de Santa Maria. It was here that we uncovered two interesting amphibians in the form of Parsley Frog and Natterjack Toad, which brought our total number of amphibians seen to eight species.



The local church and village was a focal point for breeding Spotless Starlings, as they ferried food to and fro from nearby fields. A scan of the hedgerows also gave us sightings of Red-backed Shrike and Common Cuckoo. The real avian focal point of this locality however was the impressive 'Stork City'. The villagers have erected a number of poles with platforms here, which the White Storks have taken to with relish, with many other nests decorating the buildings throughout the village, especially the 12<sup>th</sup>-century chapel. A raised mound, complete with interpretation boards, looks down on the main colony, giving superb eye-level view of one particularly close nest.

This same mound was also the location where we added a particularly striking member of *Ophrys* to our ever-growing orchid list. Liberally sprinkled across the mound were Yellow

Bee Orchids, so many in fact that it was a challenge not to tread on them in some places. It wasn't the only orchid in the village as here too we found a single Lady Orchid, looking like a giant Burnt-tip Orchid, but with added the whistles and bells.



Yellow Bee Orchid © Teresa Farino



Lady Orchid © Jeff Clarke

It was time to return to our hotel and as we retraced our steps over the Puerto de Piedrasluengas and descended in the gathering dusk we added two more mammals to the tour list in the form of Red Fox and Red Deer.

### Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May

The slightly warmer overnight temperatures had encouraged us to put the moth trap out again, so pre-breakfast we gathered to scrutinise our haul. Sadly, the contents were once again limited, mostly dominated by prominents, including a pristine specimen of Tawny Prominent, but new species for the trip included a male Pale Tussock, a pleated-winged Angle Shades and a handsome Ringed Carpet. Thankfully, however, this was a precursor to a rather warmer day, and at last we would see a reasonable selection of butterflies.



Tawny Prominent © Jeff Clarke

Our destination today was the village of Lebeña and its surrounding hillsides, clad predominantly in Mediterranean evergreen forest and *maquis*. We collected our supply of fresh bread and were shortly parked up just above the pre-Romanesque church of Santa María, to which we paid brief homage.



We soon became aware that raptors were beginning to take advantage of the thermals and so we spent some time observing the activity. Very quickly we were enjoying superb views of Honey Buzzards as they circled low overhead in search of an escalator bubble of air. Within seconds they had ridden up many hundreds of feet and soon topped out and disappeared. This was not the end of the activity, however, as a little while later a larger, big headed raptor appeared, clearly carrying a snake in its beak: a majestic Short-toed Eagle, which was soon joined by its mate.

Around the church area we also enjoyed views of Spotted Flycatchers and Common Redstarts, while the wooded valley trail resounded to the trills of

Bonelli's Warblers and Blackcaps, though few afforded close views amongst the dense foliage. Even close at hand, there was enough warmth in the day to tempt out the invertebrates, and on the trail we came across a sparkling 'jewel' beetle *Anthaxia hungarica*.

The Lebeña valley is noted for its drier more Mediterranean climate and this means some invertebrates, particularly butterflies, appear rather earlier here than in the Picos proper (it even has its own colony of Spanish Festoon, but you'd need to come in the first week of April to see those!). Today was no



exception: sunshine-warmed glades positively bounced with Orange-tips, Wood Whites and Clouded Yellows. Brimstone, Red Admiral and Scarce Swallowtail were all admired, and some even posed long enough to be photographed. One tiny iridescent-green butterfly twirled around before sitting beautifully for the camera – the lovely Green Hairstreak – and



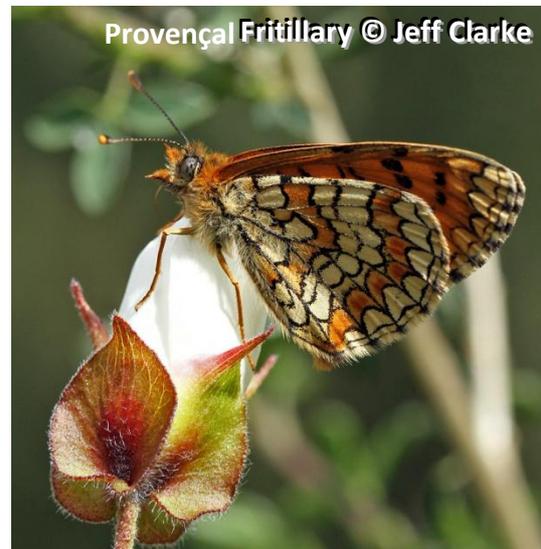
Orange-tip © Chris Henney



Green-underside Blue © Jeff Clarke



Green Hairstreak © Dan Logen



Provençal Fritillary © Jeff Clarke

we also spotted with its much rarer cousin, the Green-underside Blue. We also found fritillaries. Almost all of those properly seen proved to be Provençal Fritillary, an early flying relative of the Heath Fritillary. In some of the rockier sections we found basking Large Wall Browns.

We added a few other interesting invertebrates as we continued our walk, including the red and black striped shield-bug *Graphosoma italicum*, a striking longhorn beetle *Agapanthia cardui* and an Owlfly, which looks like a cross between a dragonfly and an Ant-lion. In this case it was the Sulphur Owlfly (*Libelloides coccajus*). Some members of the group became fascinated by the apparently endless variety of hoverflies nectaring in the sheltered, bowl-shaped flowers of the Sage-leaved Cistus along the way, including *Eristalis similis*, black-and-

yellow-striped *Chrysotoxum* spp. and bristly *Tachina* spp. A final highlight – located by Jeff – was the shiny red and orange Woodlouse Spider (*Dysdera crocata*).

As usual this walk produced a splendid variety of wildflowers including the wonderfully named St Dabeoc's Heath, another 'insect-imitating orchid' in the form of Woodcock Ophrys, plus our only Red Helleborines of the tour. Other gems of note were Proliferous and Fringed Pinks, the tiny pink 'snapdragons' of Weasel's-snout and more Violet Limodores and Sword-leaved Helleborines.



Sulphur Owlfly © Dan Logen



Woodcock Ophrys @ Jeff Clarke



Red Helleborine © Eric Hall

As ever the herpetologically inclined had a good rummage around in search of amphibian and reptilian treasures and managed to locate more Midwife and Common Toads as well as numerous Iberian Wall Lizards and several Slow-worms.

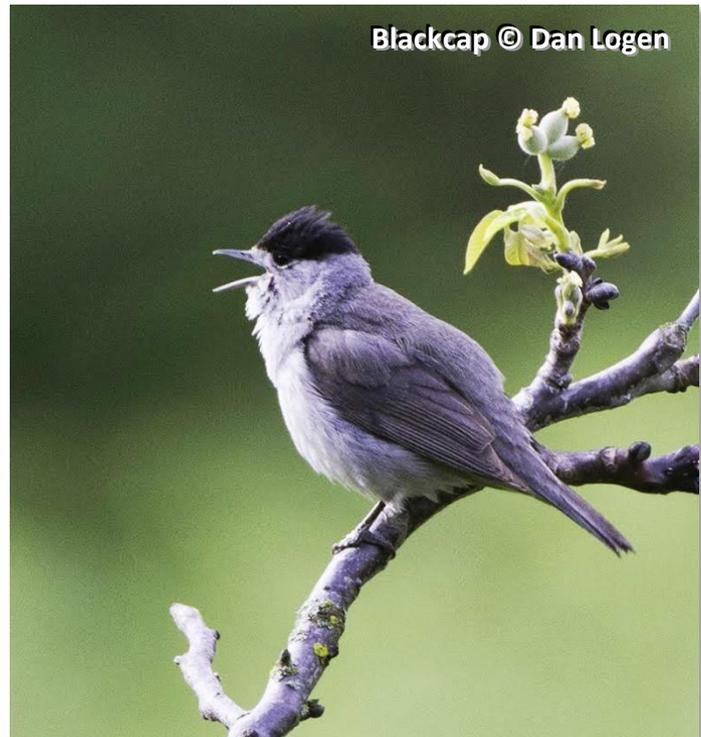
After our evening meal the warmer temperatures allowed us to seek out some bat activity and by using the detectors and red lamps we observed a number of Common Pipistrelles; we were also able to hear Tawny Owls hooting. Then a shrieking noise alerted us to the presence of a Barn Owl which was duly lamped whilst it hunted in the meadows behind the hotel.

## Monday 20<sup>th</sup> May

This day began with a pre-breakfast walk in the valley opposite the hotel. Though the birds were singing strongly, including the local variant of Blackcap song, most kept a low profile, although a Song Thrush in full flow was beautifully spotlighted on a treetop in the early morning sun. One highlight occurred just before we returned for breakfast, when two Honey Buzzards crossed the valley at eye level and passed us at close quarters. The other highlight was mammalian, in the form of a charismatic Red Squirrel.

The major part of our day would be taken up with a pleasant walk between the villages of Brez and Lon. Thankfully the weather was reasonable for the most part and the start of the walk was particularly productive for birds. We had excellent views of Red-backed Shrikes and in particular Rock Buntings. We could hear a Hoopoe calling on several occasions but it remained unseen, as was also the case with a Wryneck or two. Spotted Flycatcher had been a feature bird of the week and one of them performed beautifully around the village gardens, with everyone getting excellent views. A little further into the walk a bit of judicious 'pishing' pulled out a selection of woodland birds including Jays and Bonelli's Warblers.

The best meadows were all fenced off in preparation for harvesting so rather frustratingly we had to peer at the numerous orchids and other botanical highlights from something of a distance. The same frustration also applied with the butterflies to some extent. We had several tantalising glimpses of fritillaries, including Marsh Fritillary among the Provençals. Thankfully some butterfly



species proved to be more accommodating, including Orange-tip, Red Admiral, Wood White and myriad Speckled Woods of the Iberian form. Day-flying moths here included Burnet Companion and Latticed Heath.

We lunched in Lon before heading out to the village of Tama from where we would explore a couple of tracks, including one that would take us through to Ojedo via the Rio Quiviesa. This walk also produced one of more surreal moments of the week with the



Speckled Wood © Alan Harrison



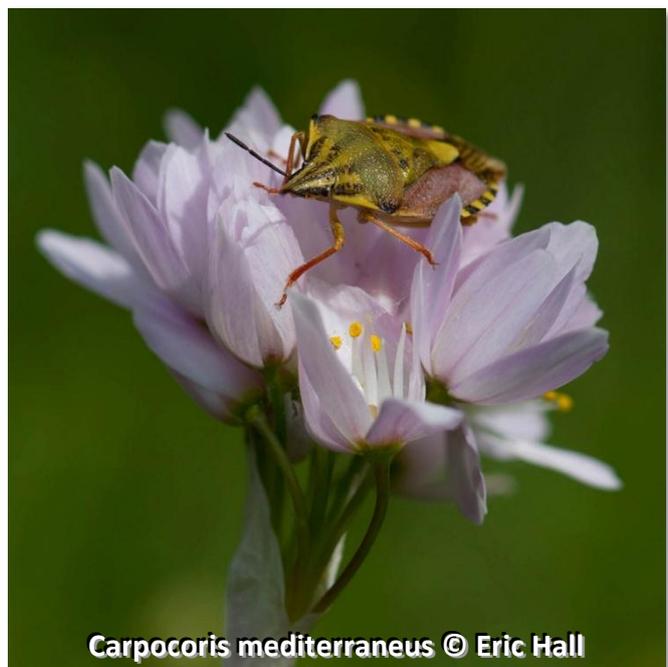
Tawny Owl chicks © Teresa Farino

reveal of two orphaned Tawny Owl chicks, courtesy of a journalist and her mother to whom the group got talking.

As on any walk Teresa was able to point out a selection of fascinating plants –including Hound’s-tongue, Musk Mallow, Grass Vetchling and Rosy Garlic – some of which were hosting eye-catching invertebrates, including the shield-bug *Carpocoris*

*mediterraneus* . Fabulous *Synaema globosum* crab-spiders – in both red and yellow colour forms – also decorated many a flower head whilst lying in wait for an unwary victim. Few butterflies were on show, however, with the most notable species seen being Black-eyed, Common and Holly Blues.

On this occasion it was pretty slim pickings for the herp-hunters but we did unearth a few prizes including a nice cluster of Slow-worms and a good sized male Large Psammodromus in the middle of the track, showing off his breeding colours.



*Carpocoris mediterraneus* © Eric Hall



After our evening meal we decided to try our luck at finding nocturnal mammals. We drove through the inky black of the surrounding valleys to a few possible locations and apart from a few Red and Roe Deer we did manage to see several cats. Most were feral but we were delighted to find at least one unequivocal Wildcat.



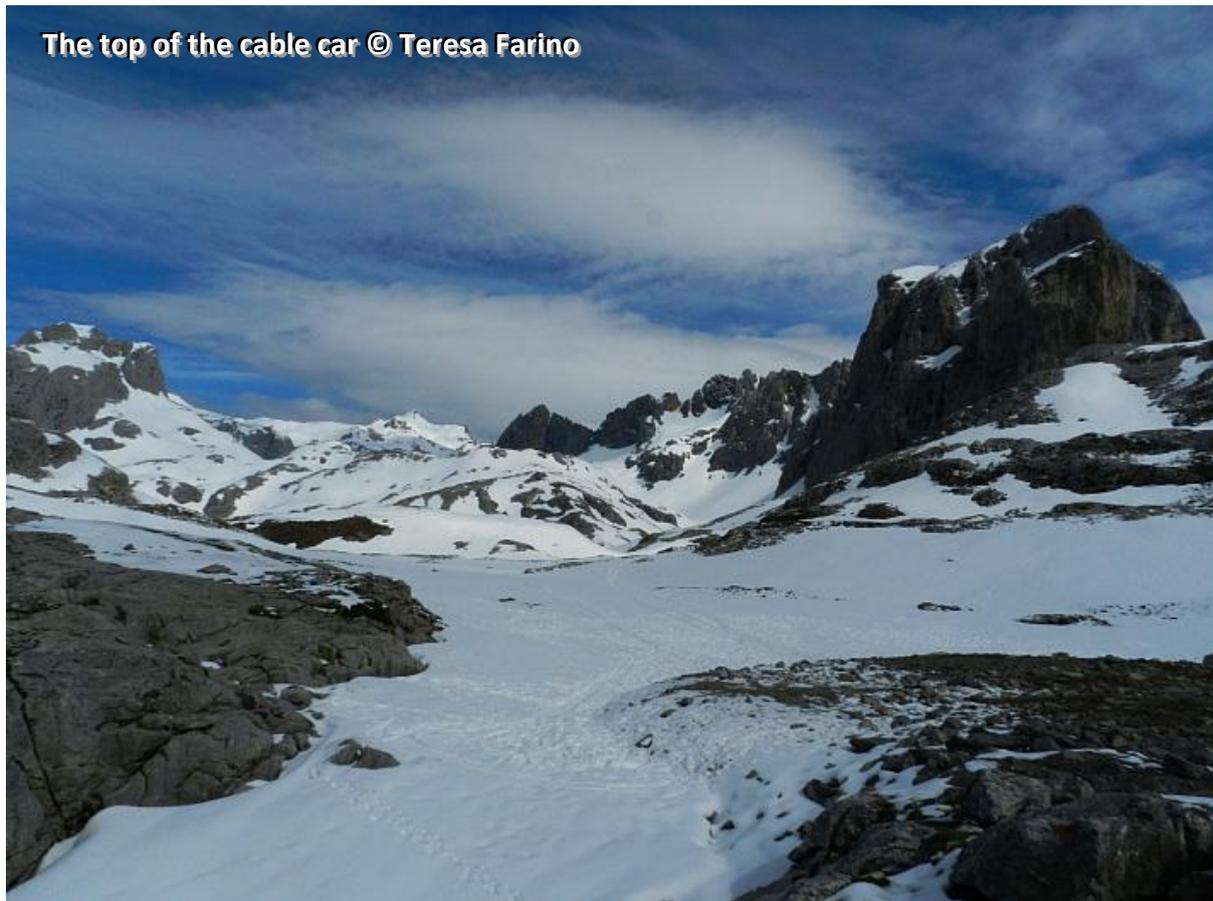
### Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> May



The pre-breakfast moth trap brought a few more treasures, including Cork-oak Lappet (*Phyllodesma suberifolia*), doing a wonderful impression of a dried and shrivelled leaf, Burnished Brass, Treble Lines and Canted Rivulet (*Perizoma hydrata*).

Having spent so much of the week dodging inclement weather we had our fingers crossed today as we headed towards Fuente Dé and its famously vertiginous cable car. As anticipated

many other people had been waiting for this moment and there was quite a queue at the lower cable car station, the upside being that it gave us the chance to see Firecrests and the resident Red Squirrels in the adjacent conifers.



Being carried aloft in Europe's longest single-span cable car is always a high point, especially when you sweep up through a layer of cloud and emerge into an alpine snow field. At the upper cable car station the weather was reasonable, so too was visibility, though the cloud



base looked as if it might soon engulf us. What was apparent was the amount of new snow and it was clear we were not going to get too far down the tracks.

Seeing some of the unique wildlife of this subalpine region didn't require too much effort, however. The chirruping calls of Alpine Choughs announced their periodic fly-pasts and just

a short distance away we found several Isard, also known as Southern Chamois, one remarkably close individual providing superb views as it bounced down a snow drift.

In certain conditions mountain wildlife can be incredibly tolerant of the presence of humans and a few minutes later we had evidence of this as an Alpine Accentor searched for food, on the frosted turf, almost at our feet.

You certainly didn't require

any specialist camera equipment to get a passable image of it. Several other birds also showed reasonably well including Northern Wheatear, Black Redstart and Water Pipit.

After about an hour, some of the group decided to return to lower levels with Teresa to join Chris and Anne – who hadn't made it to the top – in search of wildlife in the beech forest, grasslands and scree below the cable car. The remainder stayed with Jeff in an effort to follow a trail across the snow to try to reach some of the other montane birds. They hadn't been going very long when they were engulfed in dense cloud, and with no prospect of it lifting it wasn't long before this group also headed down to join the others at the foot of the cable car.



Alpine Toadflax © Teresa Farino



Alpine Accentor © Jeff Clarke

The habitats around Fuente Dé certainly held their fair share of botanical riches and while Jeff and Alan ferreted around among the rocky areas in search of reptiles, Teresa teased out the floral gems, locating Green Hellebore, Wood Anemones and Pyrenean Squill in the beechwoods, and Grass-leaved Buttercup, Spring Cinquefoil, Spring Squill and dozens of spikes of Early Purple and

Sombre-bee Orchids in the pastures. The screes were perhaps the most rewarding of the habitats examined here, however, hosting the rock-jasmine *Androsace villosa*, Chamois-cress, Alpine Rock-cress, the candytuft *Iberis carnosa*, Rue-leaved Saxifrage, Pyrenean Vetch and Alpine Toadflax (of the northern Spanish endemic subspecies *filicaulis*).



From here we moved on to the florally outstanding meadows around Espinama and Pido. Here we added the extravagant Sawfly Ophrys to our list, as well as Barton's and Elder-flowered Orchids, Bluebells and towering White Asphodels. A yomp across a boggy field provided us with Early Marsh Orchid and its look-alike the parasitic mimic Whorled Lousewort (*Pedicularis verticillata*). Other showy plants we would enjoy included Globeflowers, Marsh Marigolds, Greater Cuckoo-flower, Spotted Dead-Nettle, Greater Yellow Rattle, and the suggestively titled Lords and Ladies.

Reptile-wise it was not a particularly remarkable day, Common Wall Lizards





Lyall photographing Early Purple Orchid © Eric Hall

featured at times but the major finding was another Ocellated Lizard. Similarly birds were proving a little shy in the meadows and woods, partly because we were now in the doldrums of the day. However a little judicious pishing did produce close views of Coal Tits and Firecrests. Despite the sunshine it

was not a warm day and the various Lepidoptera were keeping a low profile, with few species seen and only Green-veined White and Berger's Clouded Yellow among the butterflies, and a Small Yellow Underwing day-flying moth were added to the tour list. Perhaps our most exciting invertebrate find of the day was another glow-worm larva.



Glow-worm larva © Dan Logen

This area is so stunningly lovely that it is always a wrench to leave it but we still wanted to explore some nearby woods in Cosgaya so eventually we boarded the minibuses and headed back in the direction of Potes. We entered the woodlands and plodded slowly uphill, listening intently. After

a time with limited success a bout of loud pishing from Jeff brought out some birds to see what all the fuss was about, Jay's, Blackcaps and Bonelli's Warblers all joined the chorus, but we were soon out of time and headed back to the El Hoyal for our last evening meal together.

### Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> May

Our final day as a group in the Picos de Europa. As so often in the week it began with a quick perusal of the overnight moth catch, turning up some of the best beasties of the week: Netted Pug, Seraphim, Rivulet and Jersey Mocha among the geometrids, plus Poplar Grey and a fabulous Small Elephant Hawkmoth.

All too soon for many, the minibuses were loaded and we headed out to our final Picos de Europa destination, the Urdón Gorge. Thankfully the weather decided to be fine and we were able to enjoy a very pleasant stroll along the gently inclining path of this picturesque setting.

Dippers are always a feature of the rushing Río Urdón, as it cascades towards the hydroelectric station at the base of the gorge. Here too we would see our final Grey Wagtails of the tour. The noise of the water can make it difficult to hear birds in this area



but even so we did see and hear the sibilant Firecrest and for those that missed this little sprite then the enormous Griffon Vultures did their best to compensate.

A few interesting invertebrates made a last gasp effort to enter our species tour list and the most unusual came close to the limit of our walk in the eight legged form of a giant harvestman (spider) called *Gyas titanus*, which sounds like a Roman general

from a Shakespearean play. So how appropriate it should be that on our downhill return, we should meet Cleopatra, or at least her butterfly equivalent. Other Lepidoptera were also active, with both male and female Sooty Coppers among the most pleasing, plus our first de Prunner's Ringlets of the tour.

We had almost completed our return, having had little other than Common Wall Lizards to report on the reptile front, when Teresa found another Ocellated Lizard, this time an adult, but sadly only a few people caught glimpses of the animal.



That final morning just flew by and before we knew it we were on the road towards Santander Airport, where we just had time to enjoy some of the orchids flowering in the damp grassland adjacent to the terminal. Here we added Heart-flowered Serapias and Robust Marsh Orchid to our list, giving us a trip total of 26 orchid species. This was a very respectable haul given the late spring.

From here people would largely go their separate ways and so as a group we said our final goodbyes. Despite the exceptionally late and cold European spring in 2013 we had found and enjoyed the usual fabulous array of flora and fauna in this very special place. As normal we missed some things we had hoped to find but conversely we gained unexpected bonuses. When you match this abundance of flora and fauna with the incomparable scenery of the Picos de Europa it guarantees some lasting memories.

**...and finally**



**May 2013 Picos de Europa tour group © Dan Logen**

Teresa and Jeff would like to thank everyone in the group for their friendliness and cooperation. All were keen to ensure that others got to see their finds and this is something we always appreciate as it makes for a successful tour. Furthermore it will be remembered as a trip with lots of laughter and very interesting and stimulating discussions around the dinner table, especially about cheese!

## Photographic Acknowledgements

A final thank you must go to the photographers who have contributed their superb images to this report and without which it would be markedly inferior. In addition, Dan and Eric have both provided links to their FLIKR and Picassa sites with blogs about the tour (see below).

## Contributing Photographers

Alan Harrison

Eric Hall <http://ehallphoto.com/spain-and-portugal/>

Christine Henney

Dan Logen <https://picasaweb.google.com/logenp/PicosDeEuropa>

**If you have enjoyed the words and images in this tour review why not see it for yourself? Join us on future tours to the incomparable Picos de Europa.**



Jeff at the top of the cable car Picos de Europa - May 2013 © Dan Logen

**Compiled by Jeff Clarke & Teresa Farino, 2014**

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>