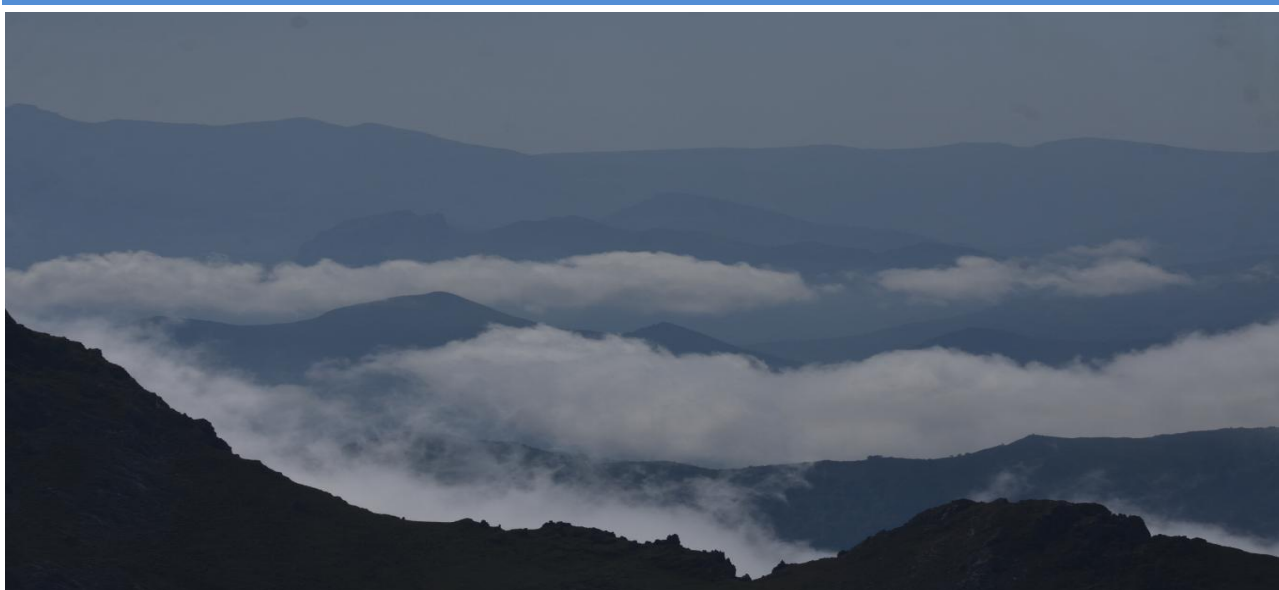


Picos de Europa: July 21-23rd 2020

Ed.O'Hara/Comghal McQuillan in association with



BIRDING TREKKING & NATURE: Madrid



Twilight view from our hotel in the Picos

Foreword:

Covid-19

This trip had been planned long before anyone had heard of the Corona virus. Comghal and I were after two lifers found only in high altitude areas, Alpine Accentor and White-winged Snowfinch. BirdingTrekking and Nature [BTN] of Madrid, a company I have used over the years when birding in central Spain, ran a trip to the Picos de Europa, so we booked their trip on the 17th of July in January 2020.

Then along came the Corona virus Covid-19, and everything changed.

We were not sure from one week to the next, if the trip was on or off. Right up to the beginning of June nothing was certain and then we received notification from Ryanair that our flight on the 14th of July was cancelled, followed shortly afterwards by our hotel in Madrid cancelling our booking as well. So we contacted BTN to tell them we would not be able to make the trip.

This all changed again in early July when Ryanair began flying again to Madrid and HM Government gave the 'green' light to fly to Spain. We talked to Luis Sitges of BTN and he said he could do a bespoke trip to the Picos on the 21st of July for three days, targeting the two species we were after. It was on again!

Although we knew a lot about the impact the virus was having in Europe, it wasn't until we reached Barajas airport in Madrid that we perceived the impact it was having in Spain, Terminal 1 where we had arrived was almost empty. It was indeed eerie, all the cafes and bars were closed along with all the ancillary business at the airport.

Of course the sting in the tail was almost at the end of our visit HM Government withdrew the 'green' light from Spain and we had to go into quarantine on our return!

Tuesday 21st July: Madrid - Picos de Europa: Weather Hot and Sunny 28°C

Our guide Luis Sitges of BTN Madrid, picked us up sharp at 08:00 and we set off on our long journey north to the mountains. Birding as we went along from the comfort of the air-conditioned van, several species were noted; **Corn Bunting, Red-backed Shrike, Short-toed Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Egyptian Goose, Little Egret, Cattle**

Picos de Europa: July 21-23rd 2020

Ed.O'Hara/Comghal McQuillan in association with  BIRDING TREKKING & NATURE: Madrid

Egret, Iberian Grey Shrike and Woodchat Shrike.

As we approached the mountains the weather started to get a bit misty, which was quite normal as the weather is very changeable the higher up you go, hot and sunny one moment, raining the next.

We stopped at a viewpoint called [Piedrasluengas](#) 1355m up, to get good view of the Picos but unfortunately the weather had closed in and it was quite misty, so there was very little to see. However we did get two birds we were not expecting **Yellowhammer** and **Marsh Tit** at the roadside near the carpark.



Marsh Tit

We headed on towards the Picos and luckily the weather started to get better and it wasn't long before we were in bright sunshine again.

Eventually we arrived at [Fuente De](#), an extraordinary beautiful area, which serves as the gateway to the Picos de Europa NP. It is here you find the [Fuente De Cable Car](#) which gives you quick and easy access to the heart of the Picos and also most importantly our hotel for two nights.



Cable Car

The line covers a 753-metre (2470 ft) vertical drop. It's bottom station is located at 1090 metres and the top at 1850 metres. Fuente De cable car is the longest and steepest single cable line in Europe.

Eventually we arrived at the top terminus at 15:30 and immediately spotted **Alpine Chough** circling around the café at the terminus.

Circling above our heads were several **Griffon Vultures**, **Ravens** and **Common Kestrel**.

The afternoon weather was glorious, 25°C with a very cooling breeze, much welcomed after the searing heat of Madrid.

We left our bags in the café for collection by the Hotel Aliva, who do a 'pick-up' service using their four-wheel drive vehicle. The hotel is 4km from the café so we started out on a pleasant afternoon stroll to the hotel, birding as we went. Luis headed towards a track where he had seen one of our target birds when he was up here a few days ago with another group. It wasn't long before we found the bird, **Wallcreeper**. A fantastic bird limited to a very few areas in Europe where it can be regularly seen.



Wallcreeper

Picos de Europa: July 21-23rd 2020

Ed.O'Hara/Comghal McQuillan in association with  BIRDING TREKKING & NATURE: Madrid

A superb start to our visit to the Picos, the bird gave excellent views for about five minutes before flying off into some boulders 20m distant where it remained very elusive, at one point it came within two metres. Time was getting on so we decided to head towards the hotel, always birding of course, as the sky was full of birds swirling around the high peaks. As we descended down the track towards the hotel, Luis spotted the first of my two lifers for the trip, a superb **White-winged Snowfinch**, foraging for insects on a grassy slope near the track. We waited for about ten minutes as it worked its way towards us, eventually only a few metres distant.



White-winged Snowfinch

Walking down the track towards the hotel, the weather started to change again and in the distance we could see some dark clouds coming our way. However we picked up another four species that were very common in the valley before the hotel, **Black Redstart**, **Common Linnet**, **Northern Wheatear** and **Water Pipit**



Juv Black Redstart



Northern Wheatear



Juvenile Water Pipit

Picos de Europa: July 21-23rd 2020

Ed. O'Hara/Comghal McQuillan in association with  BIRDING TREKKING & NATURE: Madrid

We arrived at the Hotel just as the rain started, tired but happy with a superb days birding behind us. A quick shower and we walked over to the café annex for much awaited evening meal, followed by a good nights sleep.



Hotel Aliva: 1700m altitude Picos de Europa, where we stayed for two nights

Wednesday 22nd July: Picos de Europa: Weather Cloudy and Sunny 25°C

The following day we woke to find the rain had cleared to reveal a beautiful sunny morning and after breakfast we set out to find my second lifer of the trip. It wasn't long before we found our first of several at exactly the same spot we found the Snowfinches the previous evening. We were looking once more at the Snowfinches when Luis suddenly spotted two birds flying away in the distance, which he thought were our target species for the morning and indeed they were, **Alpine Accentors**, initially wary we were getting close when an approaching party of hill walkers spooked them and much to our dismay they flew off and landed 200m away.

Several parties of hill walkers appeared, having arrived by the first cable car of the day, we waited until they passed and eventually we got within a few metres of the bird. The second lifer of the trip for Comghal and I following the Snowfinch



Adult Alpine Accentor

Picos de Europa: July 21-23rd 2020

Ed. O'Hara/Comghal McQuillan in association with  BIRDING TREKKING & NATURE: Madrid

Having achieved two lifers, Comghal had two more in his sights, one possible, Lammergeier, since Luis's party the previous week had seen a juvenile in the area, but unfortunately we dipped on this one; and Rock Thrush, a long shot as Luis had never seen one in this area and indeed it proved so. However we did see several other birds, some at very close range. Once again **Alpine Choughs** were everywhere and the more people that arrived the more frequently they circled close to the people, waiting for any scraps left behind. More wary were the **Common Choughs** who seemed to shun people and kept at a safe distance away from visitors to the park.

A relevant topic of the moment, social distancing doesn't seem to be a problem for Alpine Choughs; some birds would almost sit at your feet waiting for some morsel or other to eat. Whilst watching the birds several butterflies were noted as they passed up and down the valley: notably the Apollo, a



Apollo *Parnassius Apollo*



Alpine Chough

species that is getting rarer each year according to our guide, probably due climate and environmental changes.



As the morning progressed we walked towards Pena Vieja (2617m), the highest peak in the Cantabrian mountains.

In the sunlit sky around the peak were lots of **Griffon Vultures**, **Crag Martins**, **Alpine** and **Common Choughs**, a single **Peregrine Falcon** and quite a few **Ravens**.

As we admired the panoramic view Luis noticed an **Egyptian Vulture** quite far away but luckily flying towards us; eventually it flew within a few hundred metres of us, giving some superb views



Hikers



Egyptian Vulture

Picos de Europa: July 21-23rd 2020

Ed. O'Hara/Comghal McQuillan in association with  BIRDING TREKKING & NATURE: Madrid

As the morning wore on, more and more hikers were appearing: this area is extremely popular especially with easy access by the cable car. So we decided to have some lunch and head off towards the Wallcreeper site where we were yesterday and see if we could improve on our photos from yesterday. Comghal and I are keen photographers. Indeed we were rewarded after waiting an hour, with some excellent views of this iconic bird.



Wallcreeper



Juv Alpine Accentor

It was getting on so after another successful day, we headed back on the 5km walk back to the hotel, stopping several times to re-acquaint ourselves with birds we had seen earlier, concentrating on taking some photos.

Thursday 23rd July: Picos de Europa: Weather Hot and Sunny 27°C

Final morning and once again we re-traced our steps from yesterday, except we would leave via the cable car at lunch. Having achieved our two target birds we spent more time photographing the flora and fauna that could be seen along the track, especially the **Chamois** that came very close. Comghal stopped several times to photograph the various species of plants and butterflies that were adjacent to the track and we also diverted up a steep hill to get some further shots of Snowfinch and Alpine Accentor. By now it was getting hot as we approached the café at the upper terminus of the cable car. The 4wd had just arrived with our luggage and we went for a much appreciated coffee on the outside terrace with it's wonderful views.



Chamois



Having coffee on the café terrace at the cable car terminus

Picos de Europa: July 21-23rd 2020

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Comghal and I on the café terrace with the clouds below us. (PS I'm the thin one on the left)

Conclusion:

A short but wonderful trip to this spectacular region of jagged limestone peaks, wonderful scenery everywhere you look and it certainly lived up to its billing on the tourist brochures. The Flora and Fauna is also spectacular and it delivered on two lifers for us Alpine Accentor and White-winged Snowfinch.

The Hotel Aliva was comfortable and the food excellent, along with the helpful staff, it enhanced the trip even more.

Our thanks to Luis Sitges of BTN Madrid for his excellent guiding and background knowledge of this area where he grew up, relating so many stories of the culture of the area.



Comghal (left) and Luis photographing Snowfinch

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