

**Return visit to Casa Siempre, Spain 2008**  
**by Les Harrison 13<sup>th</sup> April 2008**

We landed at Barcelona Reus airport on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> of April at around 5:00pm Spanish time, being welcomed by warm sunshine, having left behind the threat of rain and a cool wind. The luggage collected, we left the airport to be welcomed by Ian and Lyn. (See Casa Siempre, Spain. September 2007)

Instead of heading back to the farm, Ian and Lyn wanted to visit a feria, (a small market, the first for the year) in El'Perellio. After taking in the feria we headed back to the farm arriving at around 8:30, Lyn immediately prepared some refreshments, while Sandra and myself got ourselves settled into the Casita.

It was a cool start to Monday morning, the sun rises later here, but when it does rise, it comes up quickly and soon warms the air.

The **Serin's** are in the orchards in good numbers and in good voice, as they display to potential partners, and the resident **Hoopoe's** (known locally as Putt Putt's) were making their constant calls. **Spotless Starlings** were on their usual song posts with **Nightingales** proclaiming their spot with good numbers of **Cetti's Warblers** along the banks of the nearby river Ebro.



After a mug of tea I headed down to the banks of the river, this is how I like to start my mornings. **Little Egrets** as always with the **Common Sandpipers** at regular intervals with **Yellow-legged Gulls** cruising up and down, large numbers of Hirundines were hawking the insects as were the Swifts. The **Sardinian Warbler's** were calling but always seem to keep well out of sight in this area. I was expecting to see the Kingfisher, but it was absent for now and the bank it was nesting in last year has been degraded by high flood waters since our last visit. It was time for breakfast so headed back to the house to be pampered.

Because it's a working farm there's always some thing that has to done, I like to get involved but always carry my binoculars with me and my new camera was never very far away. At around 10:00am a **Spotted Eagle** suddenly appeared from the east over a line of tall conifers, drifting slowly by on a westerly breeze. The rest of the day was spent relaxing, enjoying the

sun and scenery with the heavy scent of orange blossom filling the air, but with bins and camera at my side ready for action!

Late afternoon - we have to meet Ian and Lyn's daughter Alice, in their village Tiveny's where the school bus arrives to drop the children off. We usually wait in Bar Rossi until the bus arrives, while there, I was told by some of the locals that there had been good numbers of raptors on migration at the end of April but things had gone quite now. I have been here in late March when there has been good numbers pushing through.

Tuesday found me down by the river again. Overnight there had been a small fall of warblers. **Chiffchaff, Willow Warblers, Blackcap** were in good numbers with a **Grasshopper Warbler** calling nearby. Three **Wrynecks** were making their presence heard but were difficult to get good views. A **Green Woodpecker** also made an appearance, these are a bit scarce in this area. I was expecting to see the Bee Eaters again as they nested nearby last year but were absent for now. Many of the birds seen and heard on Monday were still in the area so there was always something to keep me interested.

The next few hours were spent helping Ian clean, dress and hang some original ploughs that were used on the land in years past which were left in and around the property when it was first purchased. After a bite to eat at lunch time, I went with Ian to a neighbour's property to wait for a telecom engineer to sort out an internet connection. We waited outside while he worked. While waiting, a raptor suddenly appeared from nowhere, it came straight towards us and at a fairly low level - even with the naked eye you could see detail in the plumage. It was the **Spotted Eagle** again, but alas I didn't have my camera with me, damn.

On Wednesday we decided to go to a coastal town called Imelia, its somewhere that none of us had been to before. It was quite a small town and with a rugged coastline. It appeared to be an area that appealed more to the Spanish tourist; it had a large well positioned camp site at the northern end of town and a harbour with a small fishing fleet. We like to treat Ian and Lyn to a meal while we are visiting, to repay them for their hospitality. There were around four restaurants but only two were open because it was out of season, even so the one we chose had a good menu which was written in several languages and the staff were very polite and helpful. We all ate far too much but that's what being on holiday is all about, surely!

I was looking forward to today, Thursday, as Ian had arranged for a friend of his to take me out in his boat on the Ebro River. His friend, Dave, with a colleague Paul, run a company called Millennium Fishing, they specialize in specimen fishing especially large catfish up to 200 pounds, (that's heavy man!).

Dave worked on a couple of bird reserves in his teenage years but like many of us, money made him go into the building game. But, tiring of this, he

made the decision to move to Spain. He still has a good knowledge of birds, and it was the tales of what he had seen while taking out fishing parties that made Ian arrange for this boat trip.

We arranged for Dave to take me out at 10:00, the boat was moored at Ian's, so it was just a matter of carrying the fuel down to the mooring, plus food and plenty to drink, we set off down river.

Dave has been fishing the Ebro for eleven years, so it goes without saying that he knows the river like the back of his hand and, bearing in mind that the depth of the river can vary from a few inches to sixty feet, it's nice to know that you're in safe hands.

Dave had told me where he planned to take me and what birds he thought we should see. The first bird on the menu was **Squacco Heron**, it was sitting on a thick bed of floating weed, Dave shut off the engine and steered the boat so that I could get a better view. The Squacco stayed put long enough for me to get off some shots, it took off as we got near but only flew a short distance up river, that's one down now onto the next bird.



Heading down river, we were studying each reed bed that we passed, as any of these, of which there are many along the banks of the Ebro, can hold something special. After a short distance a stunning **Purple Heron** was sunning itself at the front of one of these reed beds, freezing long enough to photograph it, flying off down river to another reed bed, where we were to see it again later.



Dave was getting a little frustrated as he thought we should have had some male **Night Herons** by now as these are numerous. **Black-winged Stilts** were the next birds to gain our interest. They were relaxing on the edge of a small Island that had formed in a shallow part of the river. We slipped past them, turned around and made our way slowly back up to the birds, it was time to get the camera warmed up again, with half a dozen shots stored on the memory card, we left them in peace.



**Common Sandpipers** are very common here. They were perched everywhere, on branches, rocks, mud banks, floating weed beds, in fact anything that would take their weight, what stunning little birds close up.



**Kingfishers** are also common, flying off in front of us at regular intervals but you never tire of seeing them.

Dave had decided to take me to a small Island on the river, it was well named as Bull Island as there were bulls placed there to graze, keeping the vegetation under control. His aim was to show me **Black Kites** breeding there, but could not hide his disappointment when, after eleven successive years, the nest was no longer.

As we travelled further down river I started to pick up **Pied Flycatchers** along the banks, standing out in their black and white spring plumage, as I had not seen Pied fly's in their Spring attire before, these were very welcome.



We set off again enjoying the river and everything it had to offer when all of a sudden a large bird of prey took off of one of the higher trees, it was a **Black Kite**, flying off across the river where it started to soar, gaining height quickly.

A little further down river we came across **Whiskered Terns** feeding over a shallow area of water, dipping down to the water surface picking up insects, being quite mobile I found it difficult to get a good picture.



We had been on the river couple of hours now and had covered a few miles plus, so it was time to head for home. Heading up river we were determined to locate that elusive **Night Heron** that we should have seen by now, they often perch openly so we can't understand why we had not ticked them off our list. On our way back we were seeing many of the species we had seen on the way down, doubling my enjoyment, can't be bad. As we were nearing the mooring near Case Siempre, Dave asked me if I would mind us stopping off to visit a friend of his while we were passing his property. It had its own jetty so landing was going to be ok. As we approached I caught sight of a **Night Heron** sitting on a branch right next to where we were going to land. It took off because we had got a bit too close, landed just the other side of the river so we decided to take a second look. As we approached we noticed it had landed next to a second bird. Camera at the ready we very slowly edged closer to the pair, they appeared to be fairly relaxed so it was just a matter of raising the camera and firing off half a dozen shots, brilliant.



After Dave had seen and introduced me to his friend, we headed back arriving at Ian and Lyn's within a few minutes. I have to say this was a very relaxing way see some great birds and was one of the best days birding I had had in a long time, I shan't forget it.

After landing, Ian and Lyn gave us some refreshments, eager to hear how we had got on and what birds we had seen, they were as pleased as me that the trip had gone well.

Dave's partner, Emily, had driven down to meet him. On the way home they wanted to pick up some plants. They asked me to join them as Dave had caught a glimpse of a bird but wasn't sure of it's ID, and as we would be in the area, perhaps there was a chance that it might still be around. The area was rugged and mountainous, nearby was a disused cement works. I had been here before with Ian the year before and had seen **Crag Martins** nesting in the cement works. Dave led me up and behind the old works where it opened out. In front of us was a sheer cliff face with Crag Martins hawking insects as well as prospecting for nest sites. Dave pointed up to the right explaining where he had seen his unidentified bird, the location and brief description, led me to believe that it was probably a **Blue Rock Thrush**, but there was no sign of it now.

I was invited back to their home up in the mountains, to see a **Woodchat Shrike** that he kept seeing on a regular basis. As we were driving away from the old works, something caught my eye, it was some distance away. Dave stopped the car so that we could get a better look, I took some shots on my long lens but the bird was only a dot on the side of the mountain but on zooming up on camera you could just make out it was a **Blue rock Thrush**. We carried on up the mountain to try and catch sight of the Woodchat Shrike. As we neared their property we got Emily to drop us off so that we could walk the rest of the way on foot, thinking that we had a better chance of seeing the Shrike. We arrived back at the property without a sighting, it was getting late and the light had started to drop so we had to accept that the bird had gone to roost.

Emily was making tea while Dave was showing me some of his unusual tame pigeons - I have to say some were a bit odd! Dave released the birds so they could have some exercise, while they were flying around Dave pointed to two **Ravens** flying by, a nice end to the day.



Friday had come all too soon; we had made no plans for the morning so I took my usual exercise. The El's port mountain range were being bathed in a deep red morning sunlight, this is a stunning sight but doesn't last long as the sun rises quickly. The river Ebro was looking good too; the water level was higher than yesterday, but still running clear. The local birds still in good voice were actively feeding.

I spent a couple of hours helping Ian dig a few holes so he could put in some posts for a car port before a bite to eat.

After food and liquid refreshment we were going to see a property of an English couple who had stayed in the Casita. They had been looking for a project to turn into a holiday home, and that morning had purchased a property high in the mountains above Tortosa. After some miles along some very unsociable roads we finally arrived at their purchase, it was in better condition than many you see.

These buildings are used as temporary accommodation during harvest time by the local farmers, as the area they have to cover can be extensive, when you consider that virtually the whole mountain is made up of terraces planted with Carob, and fruit trees, with Olive trees being the predominant crop.

The buildings came with an acre of land, a strip, the width of the property, stretching up the mountain. We decided to walk the area. Almost immediately I picked up a Peregrine Falcon soaring to our left which drifted off out of sight. Next came a **Kestrel**, unfortunately I couldn't be sure whether it was a Common or Lesser Kestrel. Quite a few **Sardinian Warblers** were skulking in the scrub while **Serins** were feeding and calling all around. We carried on up, following a narrow and steep path, finally we reached the boundary mark where we turned to look at the surrounding area, the view was breathtaking. While taking in the scenery, a flight of four **Black**

**Kites** drifted by enjoying the thermals, although they were some way off I fired off a few frames in the hope I could get enough detail to confirm their ID.



We clambered back down to the buildings that we had come to see, where our new property owners were waiting to celebrate their purchase with champagne! Celebrations over, we drove back down the mountain to Casa Siempre for some very welcome food.

The Friday evening was spent packing for our trip home the following morning. It was an early flight so Sandra and my self decided to have an early night to make sure we were up on time. Ian was once again to be our chauffeur for the airport run, which he is always willing to do, mind you I don't think he would say no to his big sister!

If anyone is interested, Dave, who took me out on his boat, has said he would be very willing to do the same for any birdwatchers wanting to experience the Ebro from a different perspective. I cannot recommend this trip enough. Dave has said he is willing to arrange a trip around the needs of individuals or small groups within the capabilities of his boat.

For more information you can contact Dave at Millennium Fishing on 00 34 663270685/617661836 or alternatively email him at [millenniumfishing@hotmail.com](mailto:millenniumfishing@hotmail.com)

Regards, Les and Sandra Harrison.