

**Trip report: Spain's Wild West Botany and Birds Tour Salamanca 2022**  
with Botanist Flemming Thorning Lund and Birding in Spain's Wild West.

**Wednesday 20th April 2022 - Arrival day**

We (Vega and Alfonso) set out to meet the travellers at the airport, only to discover on passing Avila that an unexpected snowstorm (still falling) had shut down the motorway to Madrid AND the national road, so we had no option but to wait and watch the snow fall. At one moment we were joined by a Wheatear which perched on the roadside barrier, and then flew under the car in front of us, no doubt looking for some shelter from the falling snow. After a one and a half hour wait we finally set off again and join a now cleared motorway, in a landscape of snow covered conifers more appropriate to Scandinavia than to Spain.



Meanwhile our Danish friends, notified of the situation, had landed safely and were having lunch at the airport, so, after joining them and collecting the hire vehicle (a high-tech automatic Mercedes Vito which put Alfonso's driving skills to the test) we finally set off towards the western edge of Salamanca province, to the village of San Felices de los Gallegos. Here thankfully the skies were much clearer and the temperature around 16 degrees, with only a chilly breeze to remind us that part of central Spain was under five centimetres of snow.

We settled into our accommodations, at Hotel Mesa del Conde and Casa Rural Corral de las Arribes, and after a glass of local Juan Garcia wine we all sat down to supper in Mesa del Conde.

**Thursday 21st April - San Felices**

After a visit to the castle grounds of San Felices, where there were carpets of Silvery whitlow wort *Paronychia argentea* and Sandy stonecrop *Sedum arenarium* on the ground, and spotting our first Swift of the year, we drove down towards the river Agueda. We explored an ancient enclosure for animals with some stone shepherds' huts and spent the next couple of hours looking at the plants along a path between dry-stone walls, with vistas over terraces of olive trees and rocky outcrops across the valley, where nesting Griffon vultures eventually began to lift off and circle above.



San Felices castle



*Paronychia argentea*



San Felices olive groves



Griffon vultures

Among many plants of interest were a tiny Cistus *Halimium umbellatum* (subsp. *Viscosum*?); a beautiful red Toadflax *Linaria aeruginea*?; Star of Bethlehem *Ornithogalum* possible subspecies *baeticus*? which was just beginning to flower and an endemic white Thrift *Armeria alliacea* subsp. *matritensis*?



*Halimium*



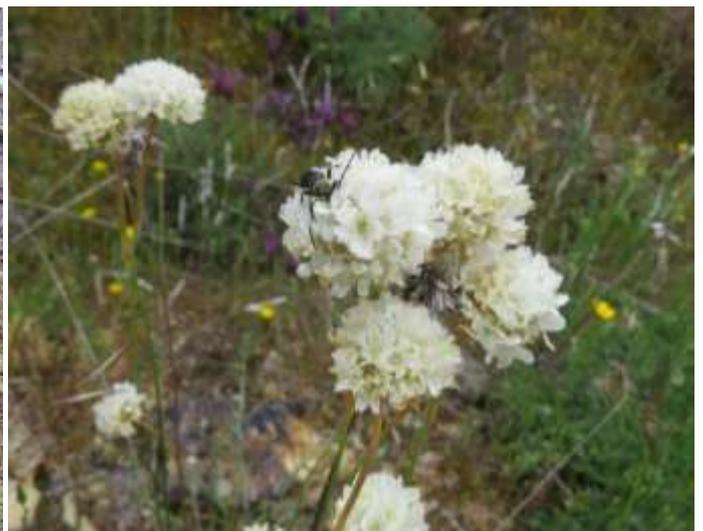
*Linaria*



*Ornithogalum*



*Armeria alliacea*



Trees of interest were the Terebinth or Turpentine tree *Pistacia terebinthus* (named "cornicabra" for its gall in the shape of a goat's horn); Portuguese oak *Quercus faginea* and the Hackberry *Celtis australis*, there was also wild Honeysuckle, *Lonicera arborea*.



*Pistacia terebinthus*



"Goat horn" galls



*Quercus faginea*

We also saw Small copper *Lycaena phlaeas* and Wall brown *Lasiomatta megera* butterflies, Iberian magpie, Iberian chiffchaff, Barn swallow and House martin.



*Lycaena phlaeas*



*Lasiomatta megera*

After a short walk in some meadows between Holm oaks *Quercus ilex rotundifolius* we returned to the hotel for lunch. Later we set off towards the Castro at Yecla, a hill fort constructed by the Veton people, the pre-Roman denizens also responsible for carving large granite boars and defending their hill forts with an external area of up-ended stones. We stopped on the way to see a field full of Champagne orchids *Orchis morio champagneuxii*, and to watch an Egyptian vulture flying over the fields, and en route saw Iberian shrike and Stonechat.



Field botanists



*Orchis morio champagneuxii*

At the castro there were some late *Narcissus bulbocodium*, and more champagne orchids.



Veton Yecla la Vieja Castro with detail of deer carving.

### Friday 22nd April Arribes Natural Park

A rainy morning as we headed to our first stop above the confluence of the Huebra and Camaces rivers where, had it not been raining we had hoped to see Griffon and Egyptian vulture, Bonelli's eagle and Blue Rockthrush. We headed down to the bridge and the rain eased enough to search for plants at the base of the cliffs.



Botanists in the rain.

Here were some good examples of the Iberian endemic *Anarrhinum duriminium*, several splendid Slender broomrapes *Orobanche gracilis?*, a Brown bluebell *Dipcadi serotinum*, the pale yellow *Andryala integrifolia*, Spiny starwort *Pallenis spinose*, *Tuberaria guttata* and the White-leaved rockrose *Cistus albidus*.



*Anarrhinum duriminium*



*Cistus albidus*



*Dipcadi serotinum*



*Pallenis spinose*



*Tuberaria guttata*



*Orobanche gracilis*



The rain put paid to the planned picnic, so had coffee at Vilvestre and returned for lunch at the hotel, having decided to visit the Olive oil press museum 'El Lagar del mudo' after lunch. After an excellent guided visit by Dani to this wonderful museum, the weather seemed to improve, so we drove down to see the Duero river at Vega Terron, and found a few more *Anarrhinum duriminium* plants at the base of the cliff here.



Lagar del mudo Olive oil museum



Supper at Mesa del Conde

### Saturday 23rd April - Sierra de Francia and Batuecas Natural Park

We set off towards the Sierra de Francia with still more rain, good for the earth and the plants but not so conducive to being outdoors. So, after coffee in el Cabaco we drove to La Alberca and had a look at the exhibitions in the Casa del Parque information centre, including my own oak-carved sculptures on show there. A walk in the rain down to the historic centre of La Alberca and back to Porta Coeli for lunch. In the afternoon the weather improved so first we looked at the plants around the hotel, finding some *Aristolochia paucinervis*, in the undergrowth, and a small cistus, possibly *Helianthemum violaceum* growing out of the rocks .



*Aristolochia paucinervis*



*Helianthemum* in the rain



in the sun

After lunch we drove to Las Batuecas, stopping at the Puerto del Portillo at 1250m to see the *Halimium lasianthum*, which was just beginning to flower there. We then drove down to the very verdant Batuecas river valley, at 580m. The boardwalk runs parallel to the Batuecas river through a mixture of Strawberry tree, *Arbutus unedo*; Mastic tree, *Pistacia lentiscus*; False olive *Phillyrea angustifolia*; Holly, *Ilex aquifolium*; Holm and Cork oak, *Quercus ilex* and *suber*. The forest floor was carpeted with a mix of mosses, ferns, and flowers such as *Arenaria montana*.



*Halimium lasianthum*



*Arenaria montana*



Ferns and mosses



River Batuecas from boardwalk

Growing from the valley sides above were Cade juniper, *Juniperus oxycedrus*; White tree heather, *Erica arborea*; Rock roses *Cistus ladanifer* and *Cistus populifolius*, and *Genista tridentata*, the last two just beginning to flower.



*Erica arborea*



*Genista tridentata*



*Cistus populifolius*



*Cistus ladanifer*



*Cistus salvifolius*

On the way back to the hotel we stopped to look at *Cistus salvifolius* and a *Cistus ladanifer* with no purple spots.

### Sunday 24th April – Sierra de Francia San Martin and San Esteban

At breakfast Hans said he had seen a Golden Oriole, I too went out and heard it call. The first one this year for us. The morning was spent exploring the village of San Martin del Castañar, with medieval half-timbered houses and cobbled streets and plenty of house martins, barn swallows and newly arrived swifts livening up the square. Flemming found a dandelion which could be *Taraxacum hispanicum*, and we discovered two Iberian endemics: *Antirrhinum graniticum* and *Linaria spartea* growing from the walls.



Square at San Martin del Castañar



*Taraxacum hispanicum?*



*Linaria spartea*





*Antirrhinum graniticum*

We then had a brief stroll along a path between granite boulders and various brooms, only to find that a levelling machine had destroyed the verges and there was little left: some *Arenaria montana* and Shepherd's cress *Teesdalia nudicaulis*. More interesting, on the roadside were: *Halimium umbellatum*, Lupin *Lupinus hispanicus* and the minute *Ornithopus compressus*. We tried another path lower down, and found some *Leucanthemopsis Pulverulenta*, endemic to the central Iberian Peninsula, and *Orchis mascula*.



*Arenaria montana*



*Teesdalia nudicaulis*



*Halimium umbellatum*



*Lupinus hispanicus*



*Ornithopus compressus*





*Leucanthemopsis Pulverulenta*



*Orchis mascula*

We returned to Porta Coeli for a light lunch and a rest, and drove over to San Esteban de la Sierra to walk down by the river. On approaching the 'Roman bridge' (mainly Romanic but built over the remains of Roman), I spotted a pair of Hawfinch flying off across the orchards, and Flemming immediately found another *Aristolachia pausinervis*. There was Spanish Valerian *Centranthus calcitrapae*, and an assortment of tiny ferns growing from the mossy stone walls.



"Light lunch" at Porta Coeli



At the roman bridge at San Esteban de la Sierra



*Centranthus calcitrapae*



*Ceterach officinarum*



*Asplenium trichomanes*



*Polypodium*



Unidentified fern

On the bridge were some Tassel Hyacinth *Muscari comosum*. We walked along by the river listening to a nightingale in full song, and looking at meadow flowers along the path. Here were Narrow-leaved lupin *Lupinus angustifolia*, two plants of the Borage family: *Ancusa undulata* and Green alkanet *Pentaglottis sempervirens* and Red vetchling *Lathyrus cicero*.



*Muscari comosum*



*Lupinus angustifolia*



*Ancusa undulata*



*Pentaglottis sempervirens*



*Lathyrus cicero*

We then walked downstream on an uphill and drier path, crossing a stream and on between Olives, Turpentine tree and Holm oaks. Here were, amongst others Honesty *Lunaria annua*, Amethyst toadflax *Linaria amethystea subsp. amethystea* and *Salvia verbenica*. On our return we had a short walk along a small Strawberry tree *Arbutus unedo* woodland, where we came across some scented Solomon's seal, *Polygonatum odoratum*.



*Lunaria annua*



*Linaria amethystea subsp. amethystea*



*Salvia verbenica*



*Polygonatum odoratum*

### Monday 25th April – Sierra de Francia and Sierra de Bejar

We started the day visiting Miranda del Castañar, a hilltop medieval walled town with long narrow streets where the balconies almost touch each other. We had coffee and a good look around here.



Miranda del Castañar



We then headed southwest to the interesting woodland near the village of Cepeda which, apart from Sweet chestnut *Castanea sativa* and Oak *Quercus pirenaicus*, contains relic population of *Quercus robur*, survivor of the ice age due to its low altitude (630m). There was more *Arenaria montana*, and a most interesting discovery for me was made by Helle, who found a Kerry lily *Simethis mattiazzii*, a dainty plant I'd never seen before with purple-budding white flowers and hairy white filaments. Narrow-leaved helleborine orchid *Cephalanthera longifolia* was found, just coming in flower, then in an orchard above wall level there was a host of Purple orchids, *Orchis mascula*, with one in particular looking very anthropomorphic. There was also another member of the Borage family with tiny blue flowers - *Omphalodes nitida* native to the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, and a very attractive vetchling, *Lathyrus*.



*Simethis mattiazzii*



*Orchis mascula*





*Omphalodes nitida*



*Lathyrus*



*Cephalanthera longifolia*

From here we headed to a pine forest on the shores of the River Alagon where we were to eat our picnic. On entering the forest, we were greeted by a large group of *Cephalanthera longifolia* orchid in various stages of flowering.



*Cephalanthera longifolia*



We had our lunch on a granite table with benches, and no sooner had we finished, Bente found another orchid, the tiny Dense-flowered orchid *Neotinea maculata*. A bit later Yan found a small cluster of Tongue orchid *Serapias lingua* in a meadow by the river. There was also another Borage to add to our list: *Glandora prostrata*.



*Neotinea maculata*



*Glandora prostrata*



*Serapias Lingua*



We went on after lunch to the banks of the river Sangusin. The higher altitude and recent cold combined with the presence of sheep grazing meant that there was limited flora here, Lesser celandine *Ficaria verna* in the damp areas, and Asphodel *Asphodelus albus* and Foxglove *Digitalis thapsi* just coming into flower. However, the highlight was the fauna: we observed Spanish and European pond turtle from the bridge; amongst the rocks Algerian sand lizard *Psammodromus algirus*; three Black stork appeared circling above us, we also saw Golden eagle, Booted eagle, Cuckoo, Hoopoe, and Bee-eaters.



*Ficaria verna*



*Ciconia nigra*



*Psammodromus agirus*



*Emys orbicularis*



Last night at Hotel Porta Coeli



View from our room

### Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> April - Sierra Quilama and Salvatierra de Tormes

In the morning from the hotel room we saw our first Red-rumped swallow of the year - they have been nesting under the hotel terrace roof for some years - so it was a joy to welcome them back. Leaving Hotel Porta Coeli we headed north and east towards the village of Linares de Riofrio in the Sierra Quilama, and the woodland of Honfria below the mountain of Pico Cervero. We stopped by a patch of open woodland where we found more *Orchis Mascula*, *Neotinea maculata*, Heath violet *Viola canina*, *Primula acaulis*, *Polygonatum odoratum* and Wild Peony *Paeonia officinalis*.



*Orchis mascula*



Ove our most veteran botanist



*Neotinea maculata*



*Viola canina*



*Paeonia officinalis*



We continued up the mountain where Flemming showed us some very tiny flowering grasses *Nardus stricta* and *Carex humilis*? and a lovely bright yellow *Geum sylvaticum*. There was also a group of *Valeriana* sps. and more Rock rose (Hallimium?). Three Roe deer were grazing on the hillside but spotted us and ran quickly over the brow of the ridge.



*Nardus stricta*



*Carex*



*Geum sylvaticum*



Roe deer



*Valeriana* sps.



*Cistus* sps.

We drove back down to the village and had a coffee, before visiting a wet granite meadow nearby. It had been grazed by cattle so was a little disappointing, but Susanne found some *Orchis morio champagneuxii*.

From here we drove straight to Salvatierra, settled into the Hotel and after a light but delicious lunch we had a walk around the village to see the local birds. The first bird we heard at a distance and were privileged to see it singing on a cable about ten metres away: Nightingale. We stopped and heard its concert for a good few minutes. Later some of the group went back to rest and the rest of us continued birding around the village. We saw 8 different raptors: Black and Red kite; Griffon vulture, Marsh harrier, Golden eagle, Booted eagle, Buzzard and Kestrel, as well as Serin, Cirl bunting, Black redstart, Spotless starling, Barn swallow, House sparrow, Corn bunting, White stork, Thekla lark, Raven and a Whinchat, a passage migrant here.



View from Hotel Salvatierra Rural



Nightingale concert

**Wednesday 27th April - Granite meadow, Monleon and Bejar pine forest**

Our first port of call was another granite meadow, this time with more success. *Serapias lingua*, *Tuberaria guttata*, *Linum bienne*, some yellow composites, possibly *Reichardia picroides* and Broomrape *Orobanche* were the main species of interest, but the beautiful moss and stonecrop covered granite pavements, with white broom *Retama monosperma* and Spanish lavender *Lavandula pedunculata* made for a very lovely landscape. A field nearby provided dozens of Champagne orchids *Orchis morio champagneuxii* and *Saxifraga* sps. There were plenty of birds here too, including Blackcap, Whitethroat, Sardinian warbler, Cuckoo and Raven.



Granite meadow



*Serapias lingua*



*Tuberaria guttata*



*Linum bienne*



*Unidentified composite*



*Orobanche*



*Moss and stonecrop*



*Saxifraga*



Amongst the orchids

A coffee break at the local village of Valdelacasa, where a Golden Oriole flew by, and a visit to the medieval walled village of Monleon came next. This village is sited above the confluence of two rivers and was most probably the site of a Vetton hill fort, before becoming the lovely gem it is today, strangely under visited despite being very attractive. Here we saw Black and Griffon vulture, Booted eagle, Spotless starling and Rock sparrow.



Castle at Monleon



Rock sparrow

Lunch back at the hotel and after a brief rest we headed south to the textile town of Bejar and a pine forest just above it. Just as we arrived the rain stopped and the sun came out. This was good for orchids: *Orchis morio champaneuxii*, *Orchis mascula*, *Cephalanthera longifolia* and *Neotinea maculata*, plus *Arenaria*, and a some more Rock rose *Halimium*.



*Cephalanthera longifolia*



Ove and Alfonso



*Orchis mascula*



#### Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> April - Puente del Congosto

We spent the morning looking at the Mediterranean plants along sandy granite paths near the River Tormes at Puente de Congosto. Just along the path we saw two different *Ornithogalum*: *concinnum* a species endemic to the Central System and parts of Portugal and the much more widespread *Ornithogalum umbellatum*. Here was *Astragalus incanus*, found only in both Castillas and Morrocco, and close by the tiny star-shaped *Filago carpetana*. Turid pointed out some very wilted looking *Matthiola fruticulosa*, a wild night-scented stock. Flemming discovered a brassica, *Brassica oxyrrhina*, endemic to sandy areas in western Iberia.



*Ornithogalum concinnum*





*Astrogalus incanus*



*Filago carpetana*



*Ornithogalum umbellatum*



*Matthiola fruticulosa*



*Brassica oxyrrhina*



Flemming commented that this was one of the most interesting areas in the entire trip for him, having some species which we hadn't seen anywhere else before.

Along the way we saw many butterflies: a very worn Queen of Spain fritillary *Issoria lathonia* and a Small copper *Lycaena phlaes* were the only ones I was able to photograph.



*Issoria lathonia*



*Lycaena phlaes*

We had a quick look around the bridge overlooking the Tormes river, from which we saw Crag martins, swifts and swallows, the Blue rockthrush guarding its castle and a pair of Short-toed eagle, one of which hung long enough in the sky for everybody to see in the telescope.



Puente del Congosto



Blue Rockthrush

Time and a threatening storm eventually made us make our way back to the van from where we headed off for coffee in the neighbouring village of Santibañez. Then back to the hotel for a late lunch and the afternoon off to rest and pack bags for the following morning's early journey back to the airport.