

A23 which connects Huesca with Sabiñánigo. Towards the west there is only the road that connects Ayerbe with Jaca (via, with a small diversion, the village of Riglos). East of Huesca the next option to cross the *Sierras Exteriores* is near Alquézar at the far eastern end of the Sierra de Guara. East of Barbastro, the *Sierras Exteriores* disintegrate into a series of smaller mountain ranges, pierced by larger rivers that run down from the Pyrenees, like the Cinca, Esera, Isábena and Ribagorzana. Beside these rivers, north-south traffic is much easier.

On page 140 we provide a detailed account of this area as an introduction to the routes.

### Depresión and High Pyrenees

The third region lies north of the *Sierras Exteriores* and stretches out to the French border. Routes 12 to 21 cover this region. It is a large area with hills and smaller mountains, intersected with broad valleys separating the main Pyrenean chain and the *Sierras Exteriores*. This is known as *Las Depresiones*. Most of the Pyrenean towns, such as Jaca, Sabiñánigo, Fiscal, Ainsa and Campo, are here.

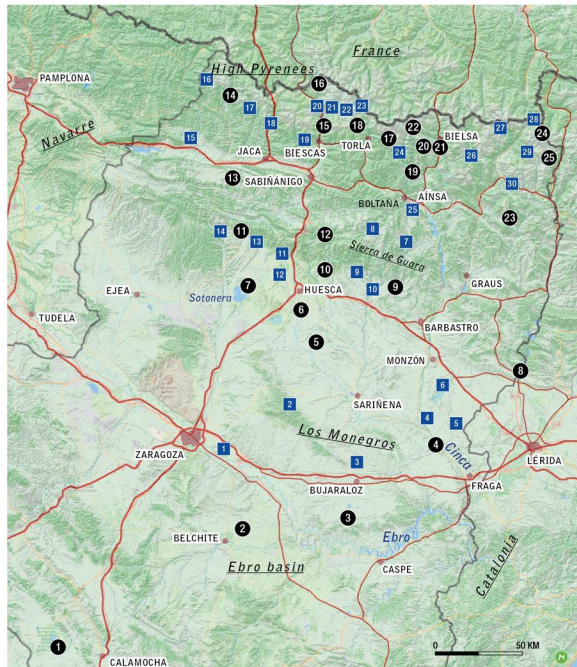
Broad shallow rivers, small areas of agriculture and vast areas of rocky hillsides covered in scrub and Portuguese Oak woodlands dominate the landscape. Only locally are there larger mountains of which the isolated twin mountains of San Juan de la Peña and Oroel (route 12) are the most noteworthy.

The High Pyrenees themselves rise up north of a line drawn between Jaca, Ainsa and Campo. Alternating valleys and mountains, orientated north-south, connect with the central Pyrenean 'spine' that runs all along the border with France. This is the highest part of the Pyrenees (see page 16).

Due to this topography, a visit to the High Pyrenees always takes one of these north-south valleys. Each has its special character and they are, therefore, separately described in this book. In general the western valleys (Ansó, Hecho, Canfranc) are the most 'Atlantic' (meaning that they are relatively green and moist). The eastern valleys (Plan, Benasque and Barrabés) are more 'Mediterranean', thus drier and sunnier (although not necessarily warmer). In the centre lie the great massifs of the National Park Ordesa and Monte Perdido, both of which, being limestone, have a more dramatic character of massive gorges and impressive cliffs.

On page 162 we provide a further account of the Depresión and High Pyrenees as an introduction to the routes in this area.

Opposite page:  
Overview of the area  
covered by this guide  
book.





The Griffon Vulture is the most numerous of the three vultures of Huesca.

The inaccessibility also favours birds. Mammalian egg thieves (including humans) can't reach birds' nests. Soaring birds like raptors take advantage of the rising air. Cliff ledges are the vulture's equivalent of an apartment with elevator: the air warms on the vertical surface and rises. The bird only needs to spread its wings to be effortlessly wafted upwards.

This is also a reason why south-facing cliffs, quickly warmed by the sun, are more in demand than north-facing ones. Wallcreepers too prefer south-facing cliffs where their favourite prey, insects, are more abundant. Butterflies and reptiles which need the warmth of the sun to become active, are often found on south slopes too.

Plant life is also sensitive to exposure to the sun's rays, but this time, many species prefer the shadier, moister north face, where the microclimate is generally less extreme. Ramonda or Bear's-ear (page 63) is an obvious shade-lover, as are many ferns, like Maidenhair Fern, Maidenhair Spleenwort, Hart's-tongue and Smooth Spleenwort. On the sunny side of the rock, drought-resistant Snapdragon, Long-leaved (page 63) and Live-long Saxifrages and Sarcocapnos are typical (page 70).

The lowland rock slopes have their own distinctive set of species. Among the birds, Blue Rock Thrush and Black Wheatear are typical of lowland cliffs. The steep slopes of the table mountains are a refuge for steppe flora, because the flatter surfaces are mostly converted to agricultural use.

## Forests and scrubland

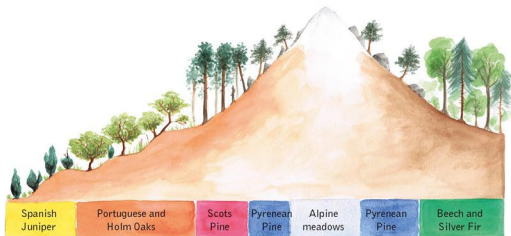
Mediterranean oak woodlands are a prominent feature on routes 6, 9, 11, 12, 20 and sites A, C and F on pages 161-163. The special dry Aleppo pine and Spanish Juniper woodlands are part of route 5 and site A on page 137. Well-established mountain pine forests are to be found on routes 11, 12, 14, 16, 20 and site D on page 203. Beech and beech-fir forests of the moist areas of the Pyrenees feature on routes 13, 15 and 18 and site E on page 182, whereas subalpine open pine heathlands are present on routes 14, 15, 19 and site D on page 203. Route 17 is all about canyon forests.

Different types of scrubland and forest are found at different altitudes. Spanish Juniper forest covers the driest soils (see site A on page 137). Oak woodlands cover much of the *Somontano* and *Depresión* (e.g. routes 9 and 12). Scots Pine forests dominate the sunny areas of the mountains (e.g. routes 11 and 12), while Pyrenean Pine is found on the high slopes (e.g. route 15). In shady areas, mixed Beech-Fir forests are frequent (e.g. routes 13 and 15).

Before the arrival of humans, the larger part of Huesca was forested. Only the saline and gypsum soils, areas where rocks surface, and the regions above the treeline are naturally forest-free.

In comparison to many other regions in Spain, Huesca has retained a fair chunk of its forests. With the exodus of people from the mountains (see history section), forest cover has increased over vast areas. Woodland occurs in inaccessible places and often isn't managed nor serves any particular purpose. In fact, apart from the odd hunter or rambler, no one sets foot in many of these areas. Large parts of the forest have developed into a natural state.

The large range of climates in the region gives rise to many different forest types, ranging from subalpine, open pine forests, mountain woodlands of Beech and Fir, Scots and Austrian pine forests, Mediterranean oak forests and drought-resistant stands of Aleppo Pine and Spanish Juniper.

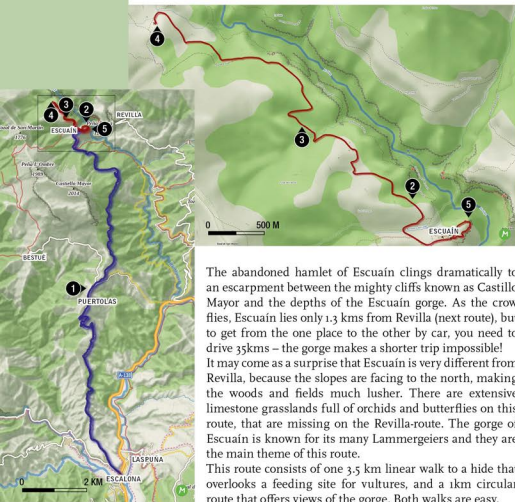


**ROUTE 20: ESCUAÍN**

16 KM CAR ONE WAY AND 10.1 KM WALK, 5 HOURS, EASY



Superb views of Griffon Vultures and Lammergeier

**Habitats:** limestone cliffs, limestone grassland, Downy Oak and Pine forest**Selected species:** Lammergeier, Griffon Vulture, Egyptian Vulture, Black-eyed Blue, Yellow-fringed Fly Orchid (*Ophrys subinsectifera*), Lesser Butterfly Orchid

The abandoned hamlet of Escuaín clings dramatically to an escarpment between the mighty cliffs known as Castillo Mayor and the depths of the Escuaín gorge. As the crow flies, Escuaín lies only 1.3 kms from Revilla (next route), but to get from the one place to the other by car, you need to drive 35kms – the gorge makes a shorter trip impossible! It may come as a surprise that Escuaín is very different from Revilla, because the slopes are facing to the north, making the woods and fields much lusher. There are extensive limestone grasslands full of orchids and butterflies on this route, that are missing on the Revilla-route. The gorge of Escuaín is known for its many Lammergeiers and they are the main theme of this route.

This route consists of one 3.5 km linear walk to a hide that overlooks a feeding site for vultures, and a 1km circular route that offers views of the gorge. Both walks are easy.



Lammergeier are almost guaranteed at Escuaín.

Note that the hide overlooks a site where carcasses are laid out for vultures (see page 233). This happens at regular times (at time of writing – Tuesdays and Fridays at 10.30 AM) and is an ideal moment to see the birds. However, there are nearly always vultures here that ‘hang around’ or fly low over the fields, so a visit at other times is worthwhile too.

**Starting point:** Aínsa.

Drive north in the direction of Bielsa / France and after 10km turn left to Puyarruego. Directly thereafter turn right to Belsierre and Garganta de Escuaín (going straight on this turn would bring you to the Añislo gorge; route 19). At the next junction, go left to Puertolas.

**1** You drive up through fine Holm Oak woodlands and fields to the village of Puertolas. Here are a few things of interest (either here or on your way back).

First is the little village of Puertolas itself – isolated in a stark mountain landscape but still inhabited. More importantly, the fields are still grazed and the hay is still cut. Egyptian Vultures frequently circle around the village and come down to feed amongst the cows. Just beyond Puertolas lies a junction where you can park. This area is often good for birds, including Red-backed Shrike and Cirl Bunting. We’ve even encountered Tawny Pipit here. The landscape is beautiful, with to the west the village of Bestué with jagged cliffs of los Sestrales, which form the edge of the Añislo Gorge. Ahead lies the mighty limestone chunk of Castillo Mayor, behind which Escuaín lies, to the southwest is the conspicuous peak of La Peña Montañesa – all of them are limestone peaks and their odd appearances the result of millions of years of erosion.



**2** After 300 m you arrive at the prime site for Cranes (in February-March). The track left leads to the watchpoint (observatorio) 600 m ahead, which is good for photographers. The track right goes to La Mezquita where the largest numbers are present. Proceed 500 m along the main track where you can see Cranes crossing low over the track in the early morning. They rise up spectacularly, with their far-carrying, trumpeting calls, to ascend high into the thermals. However, if high-altitude winds are unfavourable, they may descend again and try the next day.

**3** At the next junction, turn left where, after 250 m, another track leads you to farm buildings called Corral de Antonié. This point allows good views over the northern

part of the lake, especially in the afternoon when the sun is at your back. Natural patches of vegetation with Holm Oak, Juniper and Mediterranean shrub are interesting for Woodchat Shrike, Dartford and Subalpine Warblers. Rush-leaved Jonquils are common here in early spring, as in many other scrublands of the Somontano.

Go back the same way to the main track, turn left and after 1.5 km you reach a paved road. Turn left in the direction Tormos / Almuédvar. After 12 km you reach the junction with the A1207, where you go left for Esquedas.

**4** Just 800 m from the junction you will find the eastern end of the 3 km long Sotonera dam. You can park 50 m further on the left. The dam gives the best overview of the lake and is especially rewarding in winter when up to 5000 ducks and other waterbirds may be present. On summer evenings this is a superb place for watching bats. There are colonies of Lesser Horseshoe, Natterer's and Daubenton's Bats and Kuhl's Pipistrelles, while the tiny Soprano's Pipistrelle and the large European Free-tailed Bat hunt nearby.

Continue towards Esquedas where, at the Montmesa junction, your walk is completed.

## Additional sites in the Ebro valley

### 1 – The Ebro river and Galacho de la Alfranca



Just east of Zaragoza are a series of oxbow lakes (*galachos* in Aragones). The most important is a 140 ha reserve, Galacho de la Alfranca. Water, reedbeds and woodlands are an oasis in the dry landscape. It is a place where Night Heron breeds, alongside Little Egret, Purple Heron, Kingfisher and Penduline Tit.

The Galachos lie just beyond the village of Pastriz, but are best reached by taking the NII from Zaragoza to Lerida and after about 10 km, in la Puebla de Alfindén, turn right at the roundabout, indicated *c/ Cortés de Aragón*. At the next roundabout, turn right again and you drive straight towards it.

If you are with children, it is worth considering a boat raft on the (gentle!) Ebro river. There are boat trips centred around birdwatching for beginners. Visit [ebronautas.net](http://ebronautas.net) or call +34 654898400 for more information.

### 2 – The Sierra de Alcubierre and more Monegros



The minor road from Osera to Monegrillo to Lanaja forms an excellent extra trip to explore the Monegros. The first part, to and just beyond Monegrillo, runs through large areas of original steppe, where most steppe birds occur and which is interesting for steppe plants. The section to Lanaja is excellent, because it crosses the arid Sierra de Alcubierre – an important ecological corridor that is otherwise difficult to access. The Sierra is clad in scrub and arid, open woodland of Aleppo Pine and Spanish Juniper. This is a good stretch for finding Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Woodchat Shrikes and the Mediterranean warblers. Many of the unique wildflowers of the Ebro basin occur in the scrub, as do the reptiles. You can stop at any place to explore.

Turning left at Lanaja you cross the Sierra again between Alcubierre village and Leciñena where there is a viewpoint at the top of the range. British author, George Orwell, best known for 1948 and *Animal Farm*, fought here in the Spanish Civil War (see box on page 48).

For locations of these sites, see map on page 108.

A boat trip on the Galacho de la Alfranca (site 1)





## BIRD LIST

The numbers between the brackets (...) refer to the routes from page 115 onwards.

**Geese and ducks** Mostly in winter and up to early spring, there are Mallard, Shoveler, Gadwall, Teal, Tufted Duck, Pochard and Pintail (1, 3, 5, 6). A few ducks breed, including Mallard, Shelduck (3) and Red-crested Pochard (1, 3, 6).

**Partridges and Grouse** Red-legged Partridge is common throughout the lowlands and the mountain valleys. An endemic subspecies of Grey Partridge breeds in tall-grassed alpine meadows (13, 14, 16). Quail is a scarce breeding bird in areas with cereal plots (1, 3, 4, 5, 11) and again more frequently in alpine meadows (13, 14, 16). There is a relict population of Capercaillie in the general Benasque area, which is highly threatened. For Ptarmigan, one needs to go on the highest areas of the Pyrenees. Your best chance is when climbing up from Llauset (21).

**Grebes** Great Crested is common but Little Grebe fairly rare on reservoirs with vegetated shores (1, 3, 5, 6). Black-necked Grebe frequents Candanosos lake (3).

**Cormorants, herons and egrets** Great Cormorant is frequent on large reservoirs in winter. Grey Heron is the most common heron and is widespread in the area. Little Egret breeds in colonies along the Ebro (B on page 137). Great White Egret does not (yet) breed, but is fairly widespread in the lowlands in winter (1, 3, 5, 6). Little Bittern has become rare with only a handful of observations in summer. Sarriñena (5) is the stronghold of Great Bittern. Purple Heron is common at the Ebro (B on page 137) and occurs at Sarriñena (3), Sotenera (6) and El Pas (C on page 138). Night Heron breeds in the Galachos del Ebro – site B on page 137. Cattle Egret occurs locally around herds (e.g. south of Huesca – 5 and El Pas, page 138).

**Storks** White Stork breeds in good numbers in several towns and villages along rivers in the Monegros (4) and in the *Somontano*. Villages and towns with many White Storks are Monzón, Alcolea de Cinca, Sena and Lanaja. Black Stork migrates in low numbers.

**Vultures** Vultures are the most conspicuous birds of the region. The Griffon Vulture is the most frequent bird and there are excellent viewpoints on routes 9, 10 and 12. Egyptian Vultures, unlike Griffons, are not colonial but are frequent, though declining, throughout the Ebro valley (routes 4, 9, 10). Lammergeier is more difficult to find, but nevertheless fairly common in the Guara and high Pyrenees. The best routes are 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18 and the viewpoint at Santa Cilia (D on page 162) is very good as is Revilla (C on page 162). The best way to see and photograph vultures from up close is by witnessing a vulture feeding (D on page 162). Since Black Vulture is introduced in Catalonia, it is sometimes seen in the *Sierras Exteriores* and High Pyrenees.

**Eagles** Golden Eagle is the most common eagle, frequenting (though never common) the whole region. Best areas are the Monegros (3, 8, 9, 15, 16) and Sierra de Alcubierre (A on page 137) and the Ordesa area (15-18). Short-toed Eagle is widespread, but never numerous, in the lowlands and Guara (1-11), particularly

in the *Somontano* (A on page 161). It also occurs in the high mountains (e.g. 15, 17). Booted Eagle is less common, but on the increase. It breeds in the Sierras of Alcubierre and Guara (A on page 137 and A on page 161) and there is a population in La Canal de Berdún near Jaca (12, 13). Bonelli's Eagle has become very rare, but routes 3 and particularly 7 offer a good chance of success.

**Other birds of prey** The Osprey is frequent on migration (5, 6 and D on page 138). Marsh Harrier is frequent on 1, 3, 5, with a large winter roost near Huesca (5) and at Sarriñena lake (5). Montagu's Harrier is an uncommon breeding bird of arid fields (best 4). Red Kite is a common breeding bird in the Depresión, especially around Jaca (12, 13) and fairly common in the *Somontano*, especially in the west (e.g. 5, 6, 10 and D on page 138). There are big winter roosts in the gallery forests (e.g. Flámen river – 5). Black Kite is very common in spring and summer, particularly south of the Guara (1-11). Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Goshawk and Honey Buzzard are present in their preferred habitat, mostly in the mountains.

**Falcons and kestrels** Lesser Kestrel is a local breeding bird of the steppes (3, 4). After breeding, it visits Sotenera (6). Common Kestrel is a widespread, uncommon breeding bird of the lowlands and cliffs in the mountains. Peregrine is widespread and occurs in good numbers, especially in the Guara and in lesser numbers in the high Pyrenees (7, 8, 9, 10, 11). Hobby is a rare breeding bird of riverine forests (5).

**Rails, crakes and gallinules** Water Rail breeds at Sarriñena (5), as Purple Gallinule has done. Coot and Moorhen are present in wetlands (1, 3, 5, 6).

**Common Cranes and Bustards** The best sites for Common Crane are Laguna de Galocanta (1 – all winter, with peaks in November and February) and Sotenera (6 – low winter numbers, peak February-March). Several thousands winter in the rice paddies in the south of Huesca province. Both Little and Great Bustard are rare, but with some luck, both may be seen on route 3. Little Bustard also occurs on 1, 2 and 4, but is rare.

**Waders, Stone Curlew and Collared Pratincole** Little Ringed Plover is a common breeding bird on gravel banks in the large rivers and also occurs near channels in the steppes. Kentish Plover breeds in Galocanta – 1 and La Playa – 3). Black-winged Stilt breeds in saline areas (1) and, uncommon, in rice paddies in the Monegros (e.g. 5). Dotterel is a rare bird on passage – best chances on 2 and 3. Stone Curlew is widespread but generally uncommon throughout the lowlands (best 1, 2, 3, 4). Other waders may be seen on passage, most likely in wetlands (best 1, also 4, 6).

**Gulls and terns** Yellow-legged Gull is an uncommon breeding bird along the Ebro and a frequent winter visitor. Black-headed Gull breeds at Galocanta, sometimes near Sarriñena and in the Cinca region and is a more abundant winter visitor. Gull-billed Tern breeds at Galocanta 1. Black and Whiskered Tern is seen on wetlands during migration (e.g. 3).

**Sandgrouse** The Monegros are one of the best places to find sandgrouse in Europe. Both Black-bellied and Pin-tailed Sandgrouse breed in good numbers at 2, 3 and 4, but you need to be out in the field early to find them (see page 225).