

In the absence of John Cortes, this trip was coordinated by Jill Yeoman and led jointly by her and Keith Bensusan. Theresa Leverton wrote this report and took the photographs that are included.

This is one of, if not the most popular trip included in the GONHS annual calendar and the turnout of 19 members would have been even greater had the date not coincided with World Environment Day which necessarily confined others to Gibraltar. To avoid too many delays it had been arranged that some of us would meet up at the *venta* that is on the San Pedro-Ronda road, just a short way past the entrance to the Parque Natural Sierra de las Nieves whilst others were making their way to the car parking area within the Parque to join up with us for the walk. This outing took place about two weeks earlier than usual and those of us that have been before were amazed and entranced by the variety and quantity of flowers that lined



the roadsides inside the Parque. The generous rains of the winter and early spring have helped to produce a bountiful crop of beautiful blossoms that surely outshines any man-made garden. There were pink-purple Echiums and tall spikes of primrose yellow Giant Verbascum, but most unexpected were the beautiful pink peonies which we just had to stop and look at. Whilst I was taking photographs of them I was called to hurry over to join a group that were watching a pair of Woodlarks. They clearly had a nest nearby as one of them was waiting on a rock surrounded by a sea of grass and flowers, with its beak stuffed full with caterpillars, anxiously watching us and almost tangibly willing us to go away.





We continued to drive slowly along the incredibly scenic track, stopping several times to admire a view or a plant and invariably finding more to look at once out of the car. Finally we reached the car park and meeting point,



greeted those that had got there before us and were patiently waiting, parked the cars under trees hoping to preserve our picnic lunches from the effects of the ever-warming sun then set off on our way.

For a short way we retraced on foot the track we had driven down, then turned left onto a path that eventually reaches the 1250m summit of the mountain. Before getting that far though a singing bird was spotted that was eventually agreed to be a Melodious Warbler. A few moments later a small party of Chough flew overhead that caused us all to look upwards where 4 distinct aircraft vapour trails were the only blemishes in an otherwise perfectly blue sky.

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We were a mixed group in terms of age, physical ability, expectations and interests, which is not unusual on our outings, and it didn't take long to separate the purposeful element from those who were more content to take it slower and observe and absorb this wonderful environment at a more leisurely pace. But before separating everyone expressed accord in their approval of the newly-installed sign prohibiting the taking of flowers.



The group of us that brought up the rear of the party walked on up the gradually

rising track, stopping frequently to admire the stunning views, a plant or a butterfly that was new to someone or that simply looked particularly beautiful. Fritillaries, Spanish Festoons, Black-veined White and Marbled White butterflies were amongst those seen along the way. As we climbed higher and the terrain became drier and rockier, the plants, whilst still abundant, gradually changed to those specialised to cope with the harsher conditions they are exposed to; it was like walking through a landscaped alpine garden and the gorse, heavily laden with golden blossoms releasing their heady, tropical 'coconut' fragrance into the air

added yet another dimension. We watched two male Black Redstarts pursuing one another at speed around, over and between some high craggy rocks, demonstrating great agility as the pursuer replicated the pursued one's movements as precisely as though they had rehearsed the performance innumerable times before. We suspect the display had something to do with a female we spotted close by.



We spotted the advance party several times as they appeared high above us and seemingly miles in front and as the track began to become a little steeper we lost a few members of our party that decided to head back down for flatter ground.



As we climbed higher there were frequent sightings of small birds flitting about between the rocks, some we identified as Rock Buntings and Redstarts, others were harder to be sure of, but we had several close and prolonged views of Northern Wheatears and Stonechats were spotted on the gorse-strewn rocky slopes below us.



Along a section of the track that is bordered by some large, ancient-looking pines we heard, then spotted a Great Spotted Woodpecker that was so intent on hammering away on a branch it took a good while for it to realise we were there.



We decided against walking on up to the summit and where the track bends sharply right to continue upwards, we turned off to our left onto a narrow track that would take us down a scree slope to join up with the main path that leads back down the mountain through the woodland. We scrambled our way down the flower-strewn track, none too



elegantly at times and finally reached the cool, aromatic shade of the pine forest. Despite the lack of light there were plenty of flowers here too, including pretty Spanish Bluebells growing at the bases of the huge old trees. We had glimpses of birds busily flitting about amongst the trees and watched Blue Tits, Coal Tits,



another busy Gt. Spotted Woodpecker and a beautiful male Redstart proclaiming his territory from the end of a tree branch.

We heard the whistling call of a Green Woodpecker very close to us and had very brief views of one flying some distance away below us. We had been looking out for Crested Tits and eventually heard and located some and were able to watch them very briefly before they moved on. A Booted Eagle flew low overhead across our path, a Chaffinch serenaded from a tree, but it was a Bonelli's Warbler that stole our attention as he very obligingly posed on tree branches almost immediately above our heads, giving us great views of his very clean off-white coloured under-parts and the perfect

opportunity to study him in some detail. As we moved on a Flycatcher burst out from a treetop, snatched at a flying insect and resumed his perch all in a second or two, we assumed it to be a Spotted Flycatcher. At the bottom of the track where the ground flattens and the trees begin to thin out, our attention was taken by more flowers and visiting moths and butterflies. There was Giant Squill and wild pink Gladiolus to name but two amongst the gorgeous array of blooms, but the most striking display was provided by the display and sheer numbers of beautiful dark blue Iris. Butterflies included Painted Lady, Cleopatra and Clouded Yellow and the daytime-flying Six-Spotted Burnet Moth.





Hunger pangs finally reminded us of the time and led us back to where we had set off from to rejoin a number of our party who had already eaten and were now relaxing and chatting around one of the picnic tables that are set out under the trees alongside the car park.



Eventually Keith's party joined us; they had taken the longer route to the summit, where they had actually seen an elusive Ibex. Their bird sightings had been similar to our own with a few additions including Dartford and Subalpine Warblers, Skylark, Rock Sparrow and Long-tailed Tits. Those who had returned earlier also added a pair of Short-toed Eagles, Short-toed Treecreeper, Nuthatch and Mistle Thrush to the day's sightings list. Jays frequent the trees surrounding the car park and we had several sightings of them whilst we remained in that area. There were more butterflies here too, lots of little blue ones (I don't know what species), Wall



Browns, Clouded Yellows, Cleopatras, Fritillaries, Spanish Festoons, one Scarce Swallowtail and lots of pretty little moths. Where the track crosses the small stream there is a small pool of slower-moving water and here a pair of Dragonflies was seen mating. Unfortunately I only saw the beautiful blue male, but apparently the female was yellow. There was a moment of drama when Phil suddenly ran off at speed in the direction of a pile of logs, leapt in amongst them, searching for something no-one else had seen, but returning a few minutes later with a beautiful, large golden-bronze beetle for us to admire. (Sorry the pic is out of focus, but you get the general idea.)





After eating people began to depart homewards, but our little party decided to have a quick look at a site by the river that we were shown the last time we were here that was good for butterflies. To reach it we returned almost to the entrance to the Parque then made a 'U' turn onto another track that then runs alongside the river. Despite all the recent rains, the river was completely dry. The bed of it is very sandy and it looks as though the water may only be shallow even during the rainy season, so perhaps all the water soaks through and runs underground. There were a few butterflies about, including a Green Hairstreak that we hadn't seen already, but Catherine's keen younger eyes found a fascinating small Praying Mantis that was perfectly camouflaged against the red-tinted grass heads it was stalking amongst. As we were about to leave I almost trod on a handsome Spiny-toed Lizard that darted rapidly



away to hide under a shrub, thinking himself to be equally well camouflaged against the sand and the vegetation, but I could still see him.

We returned to the car to begin the journey home at about 4pm; on our way to the Parque exit we had close-up sightings of Jays as they crashed out of the trees and flew in front of us; then were taken completely by surprise when a large dark-coloured fox loped across the track just in front of the car. As he got to the other side he stopped for a moment and turned to look at us quizzically before making off into the trees, clearly equally as surprised to see us.

The journey home along the road between Ronda and San Pedro that winds steeply down and through the mountains is always spectacular, although it can be a little uncomfortable if you don't travel well. Fortunately there were a few distractions as our bird sightings continued as we drove; a lone Griffon Vulture drifted amongst the mountain tops, we saw Bee-eaters and Linnets and Goldfinches flew over the trees alongside the road. A pair of Kestrels flew across the road in front of us, apparently to their nest site on a road-side cliff.

It had been a long but thoroughly enjoyable day, as always it was lovely to meet up and spend time with fellow members, some of whom we hadn't seen for a while and some who hadn't met one another before. Apart from providing interesting company, group outings also offer the opportunity to see and to learn so much more about a place and jointly today we had seen a great deal, amazing scenery, beautiful trees and flowers, a lot of birds, some of which were first sightings for some of us, reptiles and insects. All our outings are enjoyable, but we sympathise with those of you that had to miss this one; it was a wonderful day.

BIRD SIGHTINGS : GONHS OUTING TO SIERRA DE LAS NIEVES: 2 JUNE 2007

Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	
Booted Eagle (pale phase)	<i>Aquila pennatus</i>		Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	
Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba oenas</i>		Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		Chough	<i>Pyrrhcorax pyrrhcorax</i>	
Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	
Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>	
Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>				
Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>				

ADDITIONAL LIST OF BIRDS SEEN IN THIS LOCATION IN JUNE OF PREVIOUS YEARS:

Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	
Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>		Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	
Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>		Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				