

Discovering Menorca - Christine Wiley

This is the official title of the wildlife holiday I went on in April 2008. There were 14 in the group plus our two leaders, a married couple comprising a bird specialist and a plant specialist. The holiday lasted a week; our hotel was a picturesque converted farmhouse surrounded by fields of wild flowers and some shrubby woodland. The fields were divided by dry stone walls with beautiful olive-wood gates characteristic of the island.

Menorca is the second largest and most north-eastern of the Balearic Islands. It covers 701 square kilometres of quite varied terrain, including coast, salt marsh, high points, grassland and cultivated land. There is some coniferous woodland and scrubland, but few deciduous trees. Nevertheless, there is in spring a wealth of woodland birds, including many migrants passing through; there are many waders and other water birds on the coast and in the marshlands, and there are raptors everywhere.

During the week we recorded sightings of 82 bird species as well as other wildlife, and about 350 different forms of plant life. Each day we set off in our two minibuses to explore different parts of the island and its wildlife reserves, some of which are not generally open to the public. We aimed to cover all the different habitats; with so many pairs of eyes and considerable expertise among group members there was always something interesting to look at.

Each morning, after being serenaded at dawn by the Nightingales, some of us took a pre-breakfast walk through the fields surrounding the hotel. We were enthusiastically greeted by the owner's two donkeys and small flock of sheep while spotting Thekla Lark, Corn Bunting, Linnet, Pied Flycatcher, Turtle Dove and Hoopoe as well as the more familiar Greenfinch, Goldfinch, Swift, Martins and Swallows. Musical entertainment was provided by Sardinian and Cetti's Warbler, as well as the Nightingale, the Turtle Doves and the occasional onomatopoeic call of Hoopoe.

We combined general sightseeing to places of historical and general interest with our wildlife field trips. While visiting impressive prehistoric settlements and monuments we saw Booted Eagles, Red and Black Kites, Thekla Larks, Woodchat Shrikes – my favourites –, Egyptian Vultures and Spotted Flycatchers.

On our journeys across Menorca there was nearly always something interesting to see from the minibus windows or to stop and take a look at. These sightings included Red-Legged Partridge, Turtle Dove, Swallow, Swift, Hoopoe, Cetti's and Sardinian Warbler, Woodchat Shrike, Booted Eagle in both phases, Marsh Harrier, Black and Red Kite, Kestrel, Cattle Egret and Stonechat. We also saw a small flock of Bee-eaters just arrived from Africa.

Our visits to the rocky coasts gave us sightings of Yellow-Legged Gull, Audouin's Gull, Blue Rock Thrush, Balearic Shearwater and Shags, as well as one of Richard Branson's holiday homes. One of the most exciting finds of the week, which was a neat reminder of bird watching in Bingley, was a Firecrest in a patch of woodland.

In the salt marsh areas we explored we saw Purple Heron, Marsh Harrier, Little Egret, Common and Green Sandpiper, Black-winged Stilt and Little Ringed Plovers. Purple Gallinules breed here, but we were not lucky enough to see one. On our final day we visited a private reserve of great beauty and wildlife interest: Montgofre Nou, in the northeast of the island. At one point it was possible to get a Black-winged Stilt, Ruff, Dunlin, Wood Sandpiper, a couple of Little Ringed Plovers, a Temminck's Stint, a Common Sandpiper and two Ringed Plovers in the binoculars at the same time!

Apart from the birdlife we also found several Hermann's tortoises, a few lizards, a couple of Egyptian locusts and many different kinds of butterflies and other insects. Much time and effort was also spent in finding and identifying the 300 different plants we recorded, many of which were equally fascinating to the birders in the group, but that's another story!

The company which organises these holidays is firmly committed to preserving the ecology of Menorca; it both supports and works closely with the regional group: GOB: Grup Balear d'Ornitologia i Defensa de la Naturalesa. The careful records made and checked each evening by the group leaders form a valuable evidence base for the plants and wildlife present on the island during that week in April. Thus we not only had a fabulous holiday in good company in a beautiful place, but

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we also felt we were making a useful contribution to the database and management of the local ecosystem.