



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT

PYRENEES & STEPPES
28TH FEBRUARY – 4TH MARCH 2016

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SUNDAY 28TH FEBRUARY – Sunny spells and 11C in Barcelona, -2.5C in mountains

Our long first day started at 0530 in Gatwick Airport North Terminal for the 0730 flight to Barcelona which departed bang on time, arriving just over 90 minutes later to sunshine and pleasant temperatures. We met with our local guide Carles and quickly collected our minibus, before proceeding straight to the Llobregat Delta on the outskirts of the airport where it is possible to kick start the trip list with a good variety of wetland species. The most noteworthy sighting as we made our way along the main canal towards the reserve entrance, were the large numbers of **Crag Martins** feeding over the water and adjacent reeds – there were probably hundreds on the area, mixed with a few Barn Swallows, Sand Martins and House Martins, and we enjoyed some superb views. Common Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Common Stonechat and **European Serin** were seen along the 1km walk towards the hides, and a drake **Red Crested Pochard** was roosting at the reed edge with Northern Shovelers. At the main hide, a spread of ducks included many Common Teal and Common Pochard, Gadwall and a couple of waders – Common Snipe and a **Little-ringed Plover**. Carles spotted a **Little Bittern**, the first of the spring, skulking at the reed edge and another or the same flew low past the hide. Our main target was Moustached Warbler, and we spent some time checking a favoured spot, but we didn't even hear one – time was not really on our side and we reluctantly had to move on. Three **Great White Egrets**, Marsh Harrier, Ring-necked Parakeet and for some, **European Hoopoe**, were seen on the walk back.

With lunch on the hoof, we headed off around Barcelona, heading north towards the town of Berga and eventually on to the village of Baga, about 90 minutes drive. The highlight on the way, for those on the left hand side of the bus, was a spectacular pair of displaying **Bonelli's Eagles** right by the motorway as we crossed a gorge – stonking views but unfortunately, no way of stopping without so much as a hard shoulder! A couple of Common Buzzards were also noted by the time we reached Baga, and took a minor road which wound for 20km up into the Pyrenees. The temperatures dropped about 0.5C per kilometre, and it was below freezing at the top, where many feet of snow lay all around and the wind was whipping the powder across the road, closing the top section of the mountain pass. A Fieldfare and a couple of Greenfinches were not what we expected to find at 1700m elevation, but thankfully the bird we had come here to see was also in residence – **Snow Finch**! This notoriously difficult to find mountain specialist is keen to head to the highest crags at the first sign of spring thaw, so we were lucky that yesterdays fresh snowfalls had kept them here – a spectacular flock of at least 71 were feeding by the road, and we spent some time scoping them much to everyone's delight! Eventually they took flight and landed much nearer to us – a great sight, aided somewhat by the jaw-dropping scenery in the background. From here we drove directly to our accommodation, three hours to the west, near the town of Huesca, where we arrived tired and ready for dinner at 2000.



Snow Finches, Baga

MONDAY 29TH FEBRUARY – *Sunny in strong winds, 10C*

We kicked off early this morning with a very chilly pre-breakfast walk in Arbanies, where we enjoyed spectacular views towards the Sierra de Guarra, snow-capped after the recent flurries and sporting several kettles of **Eurasian Griffon Vultures** even this early in the day, thermalling high above. The strange anvil-like call of a **Southern Grey Shrike** could be heard across the fields, and eventually we spotted the culprit before it flew off high to the west. As we walked back up the track, the sun was getting up and small birds were just starting to wake up – Common Linnet, Eurasian Siskin, Song Thrush and Corn Bunting all being noted, along with a Eurasian Sparrowhawk. **Spotless Starlings**, gathering on the rooftops of the village prior to their days activities, were a nice addition before breakfast.

Our first destination for the morning was Los Mallos de Riglos, the spectacular sandstone peaks in the pre-Pyrenees so well photographed and of course popular with climbers and birdwatchers alike. Thankfully there were no climbers at all today, and we had the place to ourselves – apart from all the **Griffon Vultures** of course! These birds were well into their breeding cycle, gathering nest material and swooping in above us to their chosen ledges where we could get superb views of them through a scope. A big surprise came in the form of six **Black Storks** drifting north, struggling into the strong winds on the final leg of their spring migration – the first time we have recorded this species on the tour. In the village gardens, Blackcap was the commonest bird, and we also saw a few Sardinian Warblers before we reached the rocky path behind the chapel. Two **Alpine Accentors** called, and flew off the cliffs, dropping away below us towards the back of the houses. A male **Blue Rock Thrush** popped up on a shed roof, and this proved to be the first of at least three seen around the site. The sun was on the cliffs and it looked set up nicely for our target bird, the ever elusive Wallcreeper, but try as we might, we couldn't find one. We scoured every rock face and crevice, but it just wasn't happening, so we continued on along the cliffs hoping for better views of **Alpine Accentor**. One popped up right in front of us, and proved incredibly confiding, and in the end we took so many photos we just had to walk off and leave it! The track back along the lower edge took us back to the chapel, and from here four of us decided to walk up the valley a short way in the other direction to scan the cliffs again. A **Dartford Warbler** scolded and flitted around the low scrub, and several Redwings exploded out of the Juniper bushes on the slope. Again, the cliffs were cast in sun and looked a good bet, but our patient scanning was not producing anything....until Carles calmly pronounced that he had a **Wallcreeper**! Frustratingly, it was almost immediately lost to view – how could it just disappear on an open rock face? We dug in and scanned harder, and eventually it was picked up again and this time we were able to watch it with a scope for ten minutes or more – a stunning bird!



Alpine Accentor, Mallos de Riglos

Heading further north along the valley, we stopped for lunch overlooking the river where many more **Griffon Vultures** were cruising overhead [including one which landed right next to the road!] but we didn't note anything more than a few **Crag Martins**. So after a welcome coffee stop at the next town, Puente la Reina de Jaca, we headed on up the beautiful Hecho Valley. Our journey along this road came to an abrupt halt with the appearance of a large raptor over the low hillside to our right – a **Lammergeier**. Pulling off the road, we were able to enjoy just amazing views of the bird as it circled low over our heads – it appeared to be in its third calendar year and was sporting a set of wing tags. To put the tin lid well and truly on the sighting, a subadult **Golden Eagle** stooped down from the clouds and grappled with the **Lammergeier**, right before our eyes – jaw-dropping stuff! A **Peregrine** which cruised along the ridge was our ninth raptor species of the day, which soon became ten as a little further on, a **Black Kite** was low over the road – the first of half a dozen or so heading north during the afternoon. As we passed the village of Siresa, and on towards the start of the road to Gabardito, a party of about twenty **Red-billed Choughs** were feeding right beside the road – a fantastic sight, and sound! Wind became a real problem along this road though, it was funnelling through the valley and gusting so strongly that it was difficult to get out and bird. Nevertheless, exploring the start of the Gabardito road produced a party of about seven **Hawfinch**, including a female which settled in a bare tree right next to our vehicle affording everyone great views. The journey back down the valley produced a **Dipper**, just south of Hecho, and one or two more **Black Kites**, but then it was a straight drive back towards Huesca, which took around 1.5hrs, and our final stop of the day at Embalse de Sotonera.

This site is primarily known for its gatherings of Common Cranes, often numbering many thousands, staging here before they cross the Pyrenees. Arriving at the village of Montmesa, it was another flock of birds that caused an impromptu stop though – one hundred **Rock Sparrows** on a set of telegraph wires!!! What a sight, and in beautiful evening light too – set off nicely by a ringtail **Hen Harrier** cruising across the field behind them. A second Hen Harrier, a male this time, drifted in across the fields, presumably going to roost in the reedbeds, but there was no sign of any cranes – where were they all? We decided to take another track around the edge of the village and out across the agricultural fields, picking up a **Black Redstart** along the way, and here we found many thousands of **Common Cranes**, silently sheltering from the wind along the leeward edge of the bushes by the lake shore – a great sight and nice way to end a productive day in Aragon!

TUESDAY 1ST MARCH – *Sunshine and light winds, 13C*

Our birding day today was centred around the town of Huesca, where we enjoyed a great selection of birds from the mountains to wetlands of this varied terrain. First up was the rocky gorge at Vadiello, where we hoped to get some closer views of **Wallcreeper** at one of its favoured wintering locations. We pulled up at the first quarry, which was beautifully cast in morning sun, and there flicking its crimson wings on the rock face was our target! It couldn't be easier! We spent a wonderful half hour photographing and observing this awesome bird at point blank range in the base of the quarry, frequently extracting large grubs from the thin soil between the rocks, and making long twisting sallies down to the rocks just in front of us. A **Golden Eagle** drifting low overhead struggled to divert our attention! Eurasian Griffon Vultures were plentiful along the valley, and it was about one kilometre further along the road that we achieved our next target for the day – a magnificent full adult **Lammergeier**. The bird floated along the ridge and landed on a rock in the sun – we were able to watch it through the scope for ten minutes or more, before its mate drifted in and we watched them both head off low along the top of the hill. A **Firecrest** was belting out its song from the hillside bushes behind us, and soon we were watching this stunning little gem flitting around in a dead tree right in front of us. It was turning into quite a morning! We drove as far as the dam, where we added a nice **Short-toed Treecreeper**, a **Red Squirrel** and a couple of Great-spotted Woodpeckers, as well as more views of the same pair of **Lammergeiers**. Another **Wallcreeper** flew right across the valley and onto the cliffs at the far side – we were doing well for them!



Wallcreeper, Vadiello

Next stop was near Quicena, and it was surprisingly calm and warm up at the ruined Castillo of Montearagon, a stunning spot with spectacular views of the snow-capped Sierra de Guarra to the north. Our main target bird here was the localised **Black Wheatear**, found only on south facing slopes of the Pyrenees and becoming scarcer with every year that passes. Thankfully this site is still reliable, and sure enough we found two or three birds easily enough among the rocks on the sunny slope east of the castle. A **Blue Rock Thrush** was also seen, and a pair of **Dartford Warblers** were rooting around among the scrubby bushes on the slope below. By the parking area, a pair of **Thekla Larks** were feeding and we had some informative views of them, their black-streaked chests looking particularly obvious, apart from the giveaway of the terrain of course. Coffee was the next important stop of the day, and gave us a renewed impetus to crack on south to our next location.

Sarinena Lake is a large freshwater wetland fringed by reeds, which offers the chance to see one or two species typical of these habitats such as **Penduline Tit**, four of which showed extremely well just as we started down the track, in bushes right beside our van. Many Marsh Harriers were over the reedbed, including several birds in full display, and we also managed a few glimpses of **Zitting Cisticola**. From the hide, a **Cetti's Warbler** showed well and a fantastic male **Bearded Tit** popped up right in front, while out on the water a couple of Northern Pintails were added. Other than a few **White Storks** and a couple of **Cattle Egrets** in the general area, there was not much else to be found, so we headed back up to Huesca and the small reserve at Alberca de Loreta. **Water Pipit** was extremely common here, and there were many **Common Stonechats**, **Crested Larks**, **Song Thrushes** and **European Serins** around. A **Green Sandpiper** was picking along the shore, and over the fields behind, three large flocks of **Common Cranes** passed by, bugling as they went – no doubt heading towards Emblase de Sotonera.

Our final stop of the day was near Loporzano, where we had good views of a nice flock of **Red-billed Choughs** feeding in arable fields by the roadside, and a **Peregrine** drifted low overhead. We tried a site for **Eagle Owl** without any luck, but scanning the rocks was a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack anyway! We headed back to Arbanies for an earlier finish around 1730 – the past couple of days had caught up with everyone this afternoon!

WEDNESDAY 2ND MARCH – *Sunny spells and showers, 10C*

A windy day today as we headed north to the town of Jaca and on to the ski station at Astun, just on the border with France. There was plenty of snow around at this elevation, though it didn't feel at all cold in this sheltered spot where we were able to easily locate our target species – **Alpine Chough**. There were at least thirty around the ski resort car park, and with a little encouragement they came to pick up crumbs just a few feet away from us. At least half a dozen **Alpine Accentors** were also resting on the roof of the restaurant, no doubt waiting to come down and pick up scraps around the tables too. Of course at this altitude there were no other birds around at all, so we quickly made our way back down into the lower elevations of the valley below, near Canfranc. We made a stop along the river here, seeing both **Dipper** and **Grey Wagtail**, and then at the far end of the town another short stop produced calling **Iberian Green Woodpecker** and overhead, a stunning adult **Lammergeier** which flew low above us.



Alpine Chough, Astun

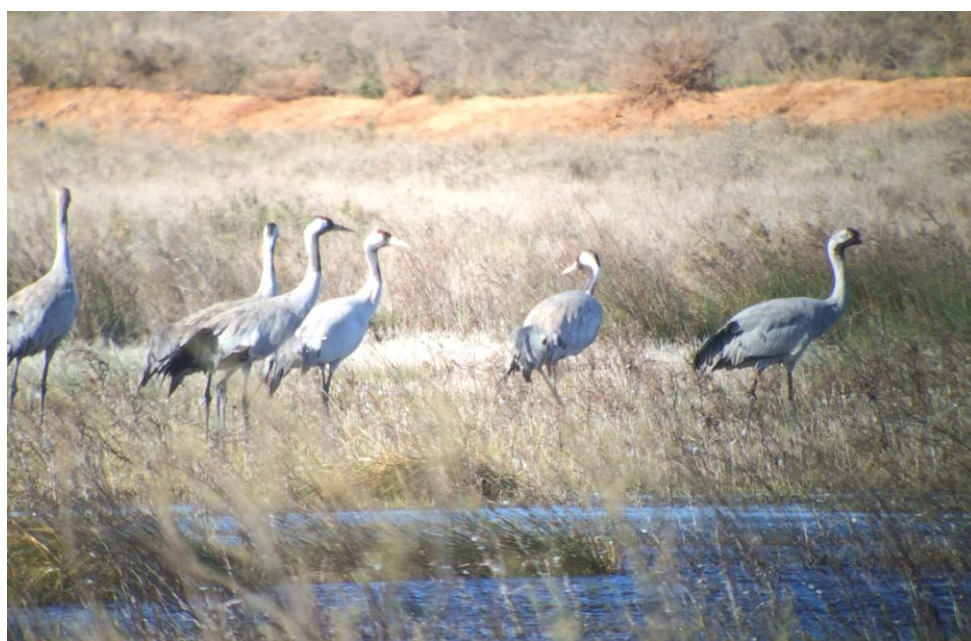
Nearby in the town of Jaca, we stopped by the small park for coffee [and tapas!] before exploring around a bit – **European Serins** were singing everywhere and in the park itself, a dazzling **Firecrest** was flitting around, two **Crested Tits** performed well and a **Short-toed Treecreeper** was also present. Afterwards, we headed south of the town and took the minor road up to Oroel, a flat topped mountain heavily dusted with snow and clad with pine forest, where we hoped to find **Black Woodpecker**. We tried hard, but couldn't even hear one on this visit, and had to make do instead with a huge flock of around one hundred **Goldcrests**, several **Crested Tits**, **Coal Tit**, **Firecrest**, **Eurasian Siskin** and two **Common Crossbills** which perched nicely in the treetops. From here, we

decided to spend a bit of time checking spots east of Sabinanigo for Citril Finch, a species we have consistently struggled to find on these trips [mainly due to the time of year, as well as their relative scarcity]. Carles knew a spot where four had been seen recently, but we couldn't find them – **Cirl Bunting** and a nice adult **Egyptian Vulture** overhead were some compensation.

The journey back through Monrepos pass afforded spectacular views back north into the high Pyrenees and Ordesa National Park, and another quick stop along the road here for a false alarm possible Rock Bunting, produced absolutely stonking views of an adult **Golden Eagle** cruising past. There were several **Black Kites** moving singly and in small groups, north through the valley, for the remainder of the afternoon – the vanguards of the spring migration. Our final stop of the day was about 6 miles off the motorway at the Salto de Roldan viewpoint, and when passing a small finca on this winding road, we found a large mixed flock of Yellowhammer, Corn Bunting, **Cirl Bunting**, **Crested Lark**, Common Linnet and **European Serin** feeding in the farmyard. At the watchpoint itself, it was incredibly windy, and so our planned vigil to look for raptors was cut somewhat short. We arrived back wearily into Arbanies around 1830 after another full day in the field.

THURSDAY 3RD MARCH – *Strong winds and sunshine, 10C*

We departed straight after breakfast this morning and made the 90 minute journey south to the steppes of Belchite, south-east of Zaragoza. We arrived at the SEO reserve at El Planeron around 0930, and began our first search for its speciality bird – the Dupont's Lark or 'ghost bird' as the Spaniards call it! This super-skulker specialises in the short tussocky saline grasslands of this dramatic steppe area, but boy is it hard to find! The strong winds were going to make our task doubly difficult, but in any case there were many other great birds to look for here too. In fact a **Golden Eagle** flew low over the track as we turned into the reserve, and at our first stopping place overlooking the grasslands, we enjoyed ace views of both **Calandra** and **Lesser Short-toed Larks**. These species, along with **Thekla Lark**, were very common throughout the reserve and their songs were a constant backdrop to our birding. We thought that we caught a couple of snatches of Dupont's song on the wind, but couldn't see anything here, so carried on a bit further. A party of **Common Cranes** were resting in a marshy area, looking splendid in the morning sunshine, and shortly after two **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** flew by and around our vehicle. Trying another spot for the lark, the winds seemed to be getting worse and we were getting nowhere, but a pair of **Stone Curlew** flushed from the side of the track and gave super flight views as they headed across the track and away. We had several sightings of **Hen Harrier**, involving at least two possibly three birds, one of which was a fine male – a really productive two hours despite no sign of our target.



Common Cranes, El Planeron

We decided to break off from El Planeron and head into the town of Lecera for coffee and a toilet break, at our motel accommodation. We were able to drop our luggage in the rooms which was useful, before heading out for the afternoon to Los Monegros, a vast area of cultivated steppe south of the town of Bujaraloz. It took about an hour to get here via the toll motorway, and soon we arrived at a freshwater pond at the edge of the town where a number of waterbirds could be seen. These included Common Greenshank, Green and **Wood Sandpipers**, a Common Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail and **Water Pipit**. Heading south, our next target was the small population of **Great Bustards** that are clinging on in this area, and thankfully we picked the right track and it took only five minutes to find them! We could see five, but taking another track in order to close the distance, we could see twenty two! Wow! What a fantastic sight, to find a flock here this big – it was certainly a big chunk of the entire population which comprises only 14-16 pairs. We stayed in the vehicle so as not to disturb them, and then turned around and headed back to the main road. We continued on towards Laguna la Playa, a large salt lagoon, and in the stony fields around we had superb views of several **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** from the roadside. There were quite a number in this area, but we couldn't find any Pin-tailed among them. **Red-billed Choughs** were pretty common, often to be found prospecting the derelict farm buildings, quite unlike the kind of terrain we would expect to find them in in Britain. Over the distant ridge, two large raptors appeared, struggling into the wind and heading straight towards us – they were **Egyptian Vultures**, a nice bonus indeed and clearly on migration. After spending some time exploring further south unsuccessfully, we decided that with the afternoon wearing on, we would head back to El Planeron for another try at the lark.



Great Bustards, Los Monegros

Our route took us down across the Rio Ebro, and we picked up roadside **Southern Grey Shrike**, **Great White Egret** and another superb adult **Golden Eagle** hunting a low ridge close by. We made a short stop in the town of Quinto for toilets, and ten minutes later we were back at the reserve. It was still extremely windy – the **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** had settled in a stony field near the entrance, and afforded super views – we had done really well with this species today. Trying three spots with a park and listen tactic, we heard nothing but wind and **Lesser Short-toed Larks** [which we had great views of!] and of course **Calandra Larks** – nice birds, but not quite the 'big money'. We had to admit defeat, and headed back to the accommodation – it had been a very long day indeed.

FRIDAY 4TH MARCH – *Sunshine and light winds, 15C*

What a difference a day makes! We packed up the van and enjoyed a hearty breakfast before heading straight back to El Planeron this morning – we had about an hour spare before we had to start the three hour journey back to Barcelona for our afternoon flight. We arrived on the steppe to find virtually no wind, amazing light and air full of lark song. Perhaps we would have a chance! We parked at our favoured spot, where we had thought we could hear **Dupont's** yesterday morning, and straight away we could hear two different birds signing. We scanned and scanned, both from within the vehicle and outside with a telescope, but we couldn't pick them up – they sounded just a touch too far away. We returned to the main track and parked again – two more **Dupont's Larks** singing, maybe three – but where were they? Eventually the perseverance paid off and we spotted one, typically nestled in the top of a grass tussock on a ridge about 150 metres away. Everyone had a decent view on the scope for several minutes, and relief washed over the whole group – especially the leaders! It eventually dropped down off the tussock and scurried away, so we piled back in the van, turned around and began heading back up the track. About ten metres away, perched on a stony ridge by the side of the track, was a lark, sitting in the open as proud as punch – bloody hell, it was a **Dupont's**!!! We stopped, right beside it at point blank range, and had the most amazing views of the bird feeding, oblivious to our presence, right beside our vehicle. The superlatives were flowing, but they really didn't do the experience justice, what a truly amazing and privileged experience! We actually had to drive away and leave it, as we needed to crack on with the journey – there would be plenty of time on the flight home to compare photographs! A fitting finale to a great few days birding this incredibly rich region of North-east Spain.



Dupont's Lark, El Planeron 4th March 2016

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Little Grebe
2. Great Crested Grebe
3. Great Cormorant
4. Cattle Egret
5. Great White Egret
6. Little Egret
7. Little Bittern
8. Grey Heron
9. White Stork
10. Black Stork
11. Gadwall
12. Common Teal
13. Mallard
14. Northern Pintail
15. Northern Shoveler
16. Common Pochard
17. Red Crested Pochard
18. Black Kite
19. Red Kite
20. Eurasian Griffon Vulture
21. Lammergeier
22. Egyptian Vulture
23. Marsh Harrier
24. Hen Harrier
25. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
26. Common Buzzard
27. Golden Eagle
28. Bonelli's Eagle
29. Common Kestrel
30. Merlin
31. Peregrine
32. Red-legged Partridge
33. Water Rail [H]
34. Common Moorhen
35. Common Coot
36. Common Crane
37. Great Bustard
38. Stone Curlew
39. Little-ringed Plover
40. Northern Lapwing
41. Common Snipe
42. Green Sandpiper
43. Wood Sandpiper
44. Common Greenshank
45. Yellow-legged Gull
46. Black-headed Gull
47. Black-bellied Sandgrouse
48. Rock Dove
49. Woodpigeon
50. Collared Dove
51. Common Kingfisher
52. Ring-necked Parakeet
53. Iberian Green Woodpecker

54. Great-spotted Woodpecker
55. Eurasian Hoopoe
56. Dupont's Lark
57. Lesser Short-toed Lark
58. Calandra Lark
59. Crested Lark
60. Thekla Lark
61. Skylark
62. Crag Martin
63. House Martin
64. Sand Martin
65. Barn Swallow
66. Meadow Pipit
67. Water Pipit
68. White Wagtail
69. Grey Wagtail
70. Dipper
71. Wren
72. Dunnock
73. Alpine Accentor
74. European Robin
75. Black Redstart
76. Common Stonechat
77. Black Wheatear
78. Blue Rock Thrush
79. Blackbird
80. Song Thrush
81. Mistle Thrush
82. Redwing
83. Fieldfare
84. Zitting Cisticola
85. Cetti's Warbler
86. Sardinian Warbler
87. Dartford Warbler
88. Blackcap
89. Common Chiffchaff
90. Goldcrest
91. Firecrest
92. Long-tailed Tit
93. Blue Tit
94. Great Tit
95. Coal Tit
96. Crested Tit
97. Penduline Tit
98. Bearded Tit
99. European Nuthatch [H]
100. Wallcreeper
101. Short-toed Treecreeper
102. Southern Grey Shrike
103. Black-billed Magpie
104. Red-billed Chough
105. Alpine Chough
106. Western Jackdaw
107. Common Raven
108. Carrion Crow

- 109. Common Starling
- 110. Spotless Starling
- 111. House Sparrow
- 112. Rock Sparrow
- 113. Snow Finch
- 114. Chaffinch
- 115. European Serin
- 116. Greenfinch
- 117. Goldfinch
- 118. Eurasian Siskin
- 119. Common Linnet
- 120. Common Crossbill
- 121. Bullfinch
- 122. Hawfinch
- 123. Rock Bunting
- 124. Cirl Bunting
- 125. Yellowhammer
- 126. Reed Bunting
- 127. Corn Bunting

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