

birdwatching in Salamanca



salamanca
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introduction

Ornithological tourism is the healthy and respectful passion of watching birds wherever they may be found. Millions of enthusiasts from all over the world share a hobby that makes them travel to all corners of the earth. The strategic position of Salamanca, halfway between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic worlds and on the migration route of millions of birds, makes our province a privileged place to enjoy birds.

Salamanca has a huge variety of habitats ranging from high mountains in the Sierra de Béjar; intermediate mountains and uplands such as the Sierra de Francia, Sierra de Quilamas, and Sierra de Gata which share typical Mediterranean and Atlantic vegetation; the cereal fields of the northeast with their birds of the steppe; Las Arribes del Duero, huge river canyons over 100 kilometres in length with their associated avifauna; and naturally the well known *dehesas* where numerous species of birds coexist in a peculiar and unique landscape. This tremendous variety of ecosystems means that the community of birds is exceptional. If we want to observe large birds of prey, we will go to the sierras of the south of the province and Las Arribes. If we are interested in great bustards, little bustards, hen harriers, or other steppe birds, our destination will be the plains of the northeast. To get to know Mediterranean birds, we can take a walk through any of our *dehesas*. If we want mountain birds, we will go up to the Sierra de Béjar. In this way we can choose from some 300 species that are with us during the year and have been recorded in the province.

We will continue introducing the province of Salamanca by considering six different areas where you can enjoy ornithological tourism. We indicate the ornithological importance of each of them and suggest some of the many possible spots where you can begin to enjoy this activity, which with time and a little practice can become a passion.



■ *Black-winged Kite*



Las Arribes del Duero

For the birdwatcher there is no doubt that this area is one of the most interesting and most surprising of the whole province. In the first place we have Las Arribes properly speaking, which are a series of spectacular canyons on the Rivers Tormes, Duero, Huebra, Uces, and Águeda that will overawe us with their unexpected landscapes. Owing to the peculiar nature of these cliffs they house an extremely rich community of birds. The star bird of prey is doubtless Bonelli's eagle with the largest population in the whole of Castilla y León, but we can also observe the golden eagle; Egyptian, griffon, and black vultures; red and black kites; booted and short-toed eagles; the peregrine falcon; and the sparrowhawk. As we leave the canyons we come into the *dehesas* of oaks and evergreen oaks where we will see other raptors such as the red and black-winged kites, Montagu's harrier, goshawk... and we will also be watchful given the possibility of observing the elusive black stork. There are also very interesting passerines such as the orphean, subalpine, and spectacled warblers, and spectacular birds such as the bee-eater, the hoopoe, and the last rollers in the province. In the canyons of Las Arribes there is also an incipient population of white-rumped swift which we are gradually becoming used to seeing in flight among red-rumped swallows, alpine swifts, and crag martins.

Some places of interest in this area are the following:

1. **The route of the viewpoints of Las Arribes.** We can appreciate the diversity of the landscape on this route for enjoying large birds of prey. It can be followed by car with stops at each of the viewpoints. The outstanding ones are the dam of La Almendra, those of the Picón de Felipe and El Fraile in Aldeadávila, and those of La Code and El Águila in Mieza. The following are also recommendable: the viewpoint of the Ermita de Pereña, El Sobradero in Trabanca, and the well-known Pozo de los Humos between Masueco and Pereña.
2. **Route on foot around the Saldeana Hill Fort.** This allows us to look out onto La Arribes del Huebra, which is no doubt one of the wildest. It is a good place for observing small birds such as warblers, lesser spotted woodpecker, hawfinch, and alpine swift... Black stork, griffon vulture, Egyptian vulture, and peregrine falcon are habitual on this walk. At dusk the eagle owl may surprise us with its call during the cold of winter.
3. **Puente de los Franceses.** This is a simple walk between the villages of San Felices de los Gallegos and Puerto Seguro until the start of a sharp descent to the historic bridge known as the Puente de Los Franceses, which constitutes an unbeatable observatory for the birds of the nature reserve: griffon vultures, Egyptian vultures, and a pair of golden eagles. Throughout the route flutter birds as colourful as the azure-winged magpie, the golden oriole, the woodchat shrike, and almost all the species of Mediterranean warblers.

In the canyons there are several marked paths that are good for birdwatching such as the GR-14 (especially between Aldeadávila and Mieza), the route of El Molinillo in Sobradillo, the Puerto de la Molinera, and the famous Pozo de los Humos (walking from Masueco).

We suggest you avoid the hot days of summer.





Oak and evergreen oakwoods of the dehesa

They occupy most of the province together with a series of low quartzite hills that produce landscapes of true beauty. On a route from north to south or east to west we can see how the harsh Castilian climate, with cold winters and hot dry summers, becomes milder and wetter with the influence of the Atlantic storms that graze the west of the province. Thanks to this increase in precipitation, the resistant evergreen oaks give way to cool *dehesas* of gall-oaks and oaks. The Rivers Yeltes and Huebra are born in these lands of summer drought and harsh winters. Their banks are covered by valuable riverside woodland dominated by ashes and willows. The successive contributions of a multitude of small irregular brooks swell the flow of two rivers that unexpectedly create in their final sections the monumental canyons of Las Arribes del Duero. We can find here one of the best selections of typical *dehesa* birds. In the sky the king is the red kite, with the permission of the booted eagle, hobby, goshawk, sparrowhawk, and other medium-sized raptors; the fascinating black-winged kite stands out. The black storks conceal their nests in the most recondite evergreen oaks, while it is easy to see the azure-winged magpie, bee-eater, cuckoo, great spotted cuckoo, wheatear, and woodchat and southern grey shrikes, among many others. Finally on the border with Ávila we have the *dehesas* by which the imperial eagle is gradually reaching the province.

Some points of interest:

4. **Wet areas among evergreen oaks.** The lagoons of El Cristo and La Cervera and the gravel pits of Alba de Yeltes stand out. The first two are shallow lagoons that tend to persist all year round. They contain variable contingents of various species of ducks, waders, and great crested and little grebes. They are known for their post-nuptial concentrations of black stork, and the courting dances of the great crested grebe are a display of exuberance and imagination. To enjoy this ornithological paradise we must avoid approaching the shores and scaring away birds that may be resting after travelling thousands of kilometres. The lagoons are private; jumping over the surrounding fences is forbidden. In Alba de Yeltes the abandoning of the exploitation of several gravel pits in the river encouraged a splendid natural recolonisation to produce a rich wetland. Nowadays it is home to the marsh harrier, grey heron, kingfisher, coot, great crested grebe, and the always elusive little bittern.
5. **Chapel of El Cueto and the vicinity of Las Veguillas.** The former is an enclave in the heart of the so-called Campo Charro. We can park here and take a walk along the tracks, where we can enjoy birdwatching in a typical Salamanca *dehesa*, which is known for its abundance of raptors and small birds associated with this peculiar ecosystem of trees and shrubs. The peace and quiet of these paths is their greatest attraction to the birdwatcher and the walker at leisure. On the other hand, the paths and tracks that join Las Veguillas and the chapel of the Cristo de Cabrera is another interesting area of easy access where we can enjoy the local birds. Common species are the red kite, buzzard, and booted eagle, together with the black-winged kite, sparrowhawk, and short-toed eagle. Hoopoes, shrikes, azure-winged magpies and jays, cuckoos, and at dusk nightjars and red-necked nightjars will keep us entertained on our walks together with a multitude of more common species such as chaffinches, sparrows, or treecreepers.
6. **The River Tormes and the route of the Puente Mocho in Ledesma.** Perfect for a short walk in a Mediterranean enclave with the chance to observe a large number of birds, in particular warblers, Mediterranean raptors, and riverside birds near the Puente Mocho. The village itself offers a pleasant walk along the river to observe riverside birds and is particularly interesting at migration time.

In general, in this area we can take any public road and penetrate some of the best *dehesas* in the province to make interesting ornithological observations. Some villages now have routes designed for ornithological tourism such as the Ornithological Paths of Monleras or those designed as part of the TRINO project.



Cork oak groves of Espeja (and the surrounding villages)

In the southwest corner of the province bordering on Portugal lies a district full of natural treasures. The warm cork-oak *dehesas* along the banks of the Azaba are a piece of Extremadura in the middle of Castile and the largest stand of this species in the province. This little-known area is part of the Red Natura 2000 network (Campo de Azaba Special Bird Protection Area or ZEPA) owing to its importance for birds; it is one of the best refuges in the whole of Spain for the black stork, which hides among these centenary giants. We can also see the short-toed eagle, red and black kites, and kestrel and lesser kestrel, and black vultures are constantly present which with luck will start a new colony of the raptor with the widest wingspan in Europe. The turtle dove, bee-eater, hoopoe, and all Mediterranean birds in general are plentiful.

7. **Route through the cork oaks.** In principle any solitary road or path in the area is good for birdwatching. A route on several paths and drover's roads is suggested, which can be modified to suit the walker as long as private property is respected. There are no specifically defined areas; parking in any village and taking a walk along its tracks is a good alternative.



Sierra de Gata and El Rebollar

The Sierras of Gata and La Canchera mark the provincial border with Cáceres and link the Sierra de Francia to the Sierra de Malcata in Portugal. On the northern Salamanca side are located the brooks and canyons of the upper River Águeda and its myriad of tributaries, in the rocky clefts of which we can observe the Egyptian

■ European Bee-eater ■ Lesser Kestrel

vulture, golden eagle, eagle owl, and blue rock thrush. On the pine and oak covered hillsides a small colony of black vultures has become established that continues into Extremadura, which means it is easy to see dozens of these birds patrolling in search of food. In the oak and pine groves the elusive bee-eater can be observed together with forest raptors such the goshawk, the booted eagle, or in the right season the shy Eleonora's falcon.

We should also consider El Rebollar, the largest area of Pyrenean oakwood in Spain and a perfect refuge for the honey buzzard and a wide variety of forest passerines.

Some interesting areas for observation are as follows:



8. **Sierra de Gata.** The Sierra de Gata joins Extremadura to Castile and Portugal to Spain. The marked altitudinal contrast with the Cáceres side gives us spectacular views from any of the passes that connect both hillsides. These passes are the best places for observing the daily flight of hundreds of griffon and black vultures. The pine and oak woods that cover this sierra are the haunt of the goshawk, hobby, golden eagle, and a valuable colony of black vultures; with luck at the right time we can locate Eleonora's falcon. The ascents to the passes of Perales, Nuevo, Viejo, or Santa Clara from Navasfrías, El Payo, or Martiago are good areas for observation.

9. **La Genestosa.** There is no doubt that this is the most mature and best preserved of all the Pyrenean oak forests in Spain. Its hundreds of centenary trees harbour a bird community of the Atlantic type: redstart, red kite, buzzard, goshawk, jay, southern grey shrike, treecreeper, nuthatch, green woodpecker, and greater and lesser spotted woodpeckers are among the many species that can be located here.





Cereal plains and banks of the River Tormes

The northeast of the province is much more than an interminable succession of farmland, the quintessence of Castilian landscapes. In addition to the well-known district of La Armuña, land of great and little bustards, stone curlews, skylarks, and calandra larks, we find within its limits natural treasures that remain very little known even to people from Salamanca. From west to east we would like to stress the surprising cork oak, evergreen oak, and oak *dehesas* of Valdelosa and Zamayón, forged by the wet Atlantic influence. Its skies harbour the red kite, booted eagle, black stork, stock dove, turtle dove, lesser spotted woodpecker, and numerous passerines. In its turn the route of the Vía de La Plata from the city of Salamanca towards the province of Zamora is a natural corridor that gives you a good chance of observing the black-winged kite and merlin. The pine woods of the north are a refuge for long-eared owls and kestrels. The Azud de Riobobos appears in the middle of this area and is a must with its thousands of water birds. In their turn, the cool banks of the Tormes and its tributaries (the Almar, Gamo, and Margañán) have an extremely high density of species associated with this ecosystem of river woodland and aquatic vegetation. Finally, the Santa Teresa Reservoir is a haven for thousands of birds in winter when it is known in particular for its flocks of cranes.

The spaces we propose to the visitor include:

10. **Cereal steppe.** Numerous tracks that lead off the village of Rágama take us through this land of great bustards, harriers, and cranes. The route we recommend takes us near the lagoon of Los Lavajares. This lavajo (temporary steppe lake) accumulates water irregularly and may hold large groups of ducks and geese on their long migratory routes. Flocks of great bustards and cranes gather on the hillsides whose waters flow towards this wetland. We can continue the route to the pool of Entrerregaderas and return skirting Los Lavajares on the banks of the River Regamón, where we must be alert to observe the merlin, hobby, hen and Montagu's harriers, and the barn owl.
11. **Azud de Riobobos.** The Azud is an obligatory stopover point for thousands of birds all year round. The birds that rest here in winter include in particular numerous species of ducks, waders, geese, and cranes; the last named frequently number over a thousand. The presence of waders is important especially at migration times and several species of sandpipers, redshanks, and both godwits can be observed, together with pratincoles and whiskered terns. In the years of most water black-winged stilts and ringed plovers nest on its islands. The lesser kestrel colonies in the surrounding hamlets are noteworthy as is the habitual presence of steppe birds such as great bustards, black-bellied sandgrouse, and the last little bustards and pin-tailed sandgrouse of the province and also short-toed larks.
12. **River Tormes and mouths of the Rivers Almar, Gamo and Margañán.** On its right-hand bank the Tormes receives the irregular flow of three small rivers. These three watercourses are joined by tracks flanked by riverside woodland that is home to a multitude of aquatic birds: water rails, moorhens, kingfishers, reed warblers, reed buntings, etc.. The winter roosts of several hundred red kites of Central European origin are noteworthy. Birds of prey such as the hobby and the marsh harrier patrol conscientiously the bulrushes and reedbeds in search of unwary small birds. In their turn the banks of the Tormes are an excellent area for birdwatching owing to their preservation at least as far as the nearby municipal district of Huerta, the river walkway of which makes an excellent observatory for many ducks and the night heron, little bittern, grey heron, great white egret, kingfisher, goshawk, stock dove, and a multitude of birds of the undergrowth such as the chiffchaff and Iberian chiffchaff, penduline tit, lesser spotted woodpecker, and wryneck.
13. **Santa Teresa Reservoir.** This huge wetland holds the largest winter populations of cranes and gulls in the province together with many ducks. In spring it also has the highest breeding densities of great crested grebe and black storks searching for food are often seen on its banks. The best concentrations of birds can be observed from the villages of Salvatierra, La Tala, and Pelayos. On the road from Galinduste to Armenteros we can come upon cranes feeding among the evergreen oaks in spectacular flocks during the winter.

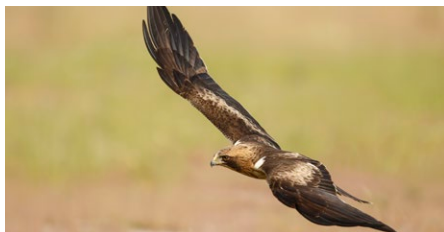


Sierras of Lagunilla and Béjar

This area is characterised by being clearly an alpine habitat and by the succession of thick woodland and deep river valleys that descend to the west to flow into the basin of the River Alagón. The marked geographical and climatic contrast between the final section of rivers such as the Cuerpo de Hombre, and the high peaks of the sierra allow the presence of an outstanding community of birds. Starting from west to east, we will find black storks on the banks of the rivers and brooks of the valley of the Alagón and its tributaries; further east the valleys are steeper and covered with dense oak and chestnut woodland inhabited by the jay, azure-winged magpie, lesser spotted woodpecker, tawny owl, honey buzzard, and a small population of red kite. Immediately to the south and bordering on the province of Cáceres rises the Sierra de Lagunilla, with the only European colony of black vultures established in junipers. Finally we have the dizzy ascent to the highest peaks of the Sierra de Béjar with rocky areas and stands of broom inhabited by birds such as the bluethroat and rock thrush, two mountain specialists.

Recommended routes that allow us to get to know the most outstanding birds of the district:

14. **The Dehesa de Candelario.** This popular route allows us to penetrate one of the last mature woodlands of gall-oak in the province. Above the road itself, which zigzags between oaks and chestnut trees, its most outstanding birds can be observed: honey buzzard, goshawk, sparrowhawk, jay, nuthatch, treecreeper, goldcrest and firecrest, Bonelli's warbler, and pied flycatcher of the Iberian subspecies. In the many brooks that we cross we can observe the dipper, grey wagtail, and with more luck the playful otter. The area holds an incipient population of red-backed shrike.
15. **El Travieso and the First Platform.** This is the best route in the province for true mountain birds. Our first stop will be the First Platform; the pine groves that surround the mountain hut are home to the coal and crested tits and crossbill. On the ascent to El Travieso or the second platform montane meadows appear where ortolan and rock buntings sing. Once at El Travieso we should notice the brooms, where the bluethroat and the dunnock perch to sing, and the bare rocks that are taken over by the bright males of the rock thrush, the most colourful of the raw mountain birds. At migration times huge concentrations of lesser kestrel can be observed together with isolated ring ouzels. The ascent from the first to the second platform may be closed to traffic, in which case one can walk up.
16. **Camino de Santiago.** The Pilgrim's Route of the Camino de Santiago enters the province to the south at the mountain pass of Puerto de Béjar. During its first kilometres it immerses itself in another section of the thick Atlantic forest of the south of Salamanca province. Its two-thousand year old route is flown over by the goshawk, black vulture, and honey buzzard. When we reach the bridge known as the Puente de La Malena we must look out for the dipper that dives into the cold water of the Cuerpo de Hombre River. Two marked detours lead to the upland monumental towns of Peñacaballera and Puerto de Béjar, which give magnificent views over the upper part of this valley and which have both seen the establishment in recent years of a colony of pallid swift, a bird more characteristic of hot climates and as yet unusual in Salamanca.





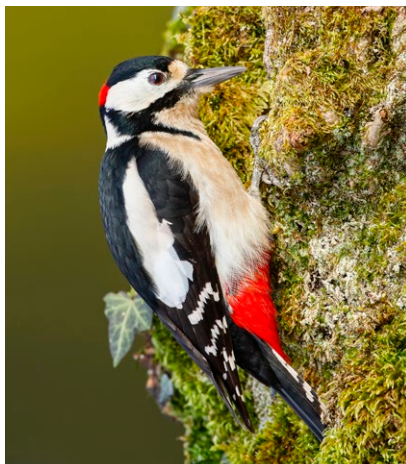
Sierra de Francia and Sierra de Quilamas

The Sierra de Francia is the heart of one of the last forests in Europe, an extensive green mantle that extends throughout the south of the province. The richness of its river network (Alagón, Francia, Batuecas, Quilamas, Sangusín, Cuerpo de Hombre, and Servón) and its mountains (Sierra de Francia, Sierra de las Quilamas, Sierra de Lagunilla, and Sierra del Castillo) and the great altitudinal contrast between its lowest warm lands at the bottom of the Alagón Valley and the cold heights of the sierra, in the vicinity of the outcrop that joins La Orconera, the Peña de Francia and La Hastiala allows the growth of many of the plant formations of the Iberian Peninsula and the prosperity of all its splendid associated avifauna. The high altitude of many of its villages on the valley hillsides allow us to surprise the raptors of the sierra in flight: griffon, black, and Egyptian vultures, honey buzzard, short-toed and booted eagles, peregrine falcon, and with any luck the aerial copulation of the various pairs of golden eagle that breed in the area. It is more difficult to discover the discreet flight of the black stork that struggles to find a quiet spot in the heart of these woods and valleys. Small Atlantic birds such as redstarts and pied flycatchers breed here together with Mediterranean species such as Sardinian or Dartford warblers. It is worth stressing the passage of thousands of migratory birds in the funnel formed by the River Alagón just before it enters Extremadura.

Some areas of interest in the area are as follows:

17. **La Peña de Francia and El Paso de los Lobos.** This area represents an excellent observatory for the autumn migration of cranes, storks, and raptors and for contemplating the daily coming and going of the vultures between Extremadura and Castile in search of food. With them we can also observe other birds of prey such as red kites, honey buzzards, and short-toed and booted eagles. We should equally look out for the territorial flight of golden eagle pairs. Among the small birds two very scarce species stand out: the alpine accentor and the rock thrush, the first of which can be seen in winter and the second on migration.
18. **La Alberca and Laguna de San Marcos.** This simple route explores the interior of this Atlantic forest. The most habitual birds are those characteristic of woodland: the honey buzzard, short-toed eagle, lesser spotted and green woodpeckers, Bonelli's warbler, redstart, and pied flycatcher. In the town of La Alberca it is easy to observe summer visitors as interesting as the red-rumped swallow and the pallid swift.
19. **El Portillo-Las Batuecas.** This pass allows the contemplation of the north and south faces of the sierra and is an unbeatable observation point for the daily coming and going of birds. A path descends to the Monasterio de las Batuecas, which can also be reached by car, where the visitor can take a quiet walk in the valley bottom and enjoy the outstanding Mediterranean woodland. No doubt the Mediterranean species will be the stars of this walk: warblers, bee-eaters, azure-winged magpies, and with luck some of the last black wheatears in the province. The valley holds breeding populations of griffon, black, and Egyptian vultures, black stork, peregrine falcon, and golden eagle and these birds may be surprised at any moment.
20. **Confluence of the Rivers Francia and Cuervo de Hombre in the Alagón.** A pleasant and peaceful marked walk allows us to discover the exceptional avifauna of this area. It is of great importance as a feeding ground for the black stork and for the observation of small Mediterranean species; we can also enjoy large birds of prey.

In the sierra all the villages have many attractive hiking routes that make it easier to watch birds in peaceful quality surroundings, especially the elusive forest passerines.



representative species



LAS ARRIBES

Sedentary: griffon vulture, golden and Bonelli's eagles, peregrine falcon, sparrowhawk, black-winged kite, Sardinian and Dartford warblers, blue rock thrush, azure-winged magpie, chough, thekla lark.

Summer visitors: black stork, Egyptian vulture, Alpine swift, white-rumped swift, spectacled, orphea, and sub-alpine warblers, red-rumped swallow, black-eared wheatear, ortolan bunting.

Winter visitors: bulfinch, redwing, sparrowhawk, fieldfare, hawfinch, dunno.

DEHESAS OF EVERGREEN OAKS, CORK OAKS, AND OAKS

Sedentary: red kite, black-winged kite, kestrel, azure-winged magpie, rock sparrow, thekla lark, nuthatch.

Summer visitors: black stork, black kite, booted and short-toed eagles, lesser kestrel, woodchat shrike, bee-eater, roller, golden oriole, turtle dove, orphea warbler, redstart.

Winter visitors: red kite, sparrowhawk, fieldfare, redwing, golden plover, lapwing, water pipit, brambling.

CEREAL STEPPES

Sedentary: great and little bustards, pin-tailed and black-bellied sandgrouse, hen and marsh harriers, goshawk.

Summer visitors: montagu's harrier, lesser kestrel, short-toed lark, yellow

wagtail, little bittern, black-necked grebe.

Winter visitors: merlin, hen harrier, greylag goose, crane, bluethroat, brambling, aquatic species and waders.

WET AREAS AND BANKS OF THE TORMES

Sedentary: goshawk, marsh harrier, grey heron, great white egret, penduline tit, kingfisher.

Summer visitors: little bittern, night heron, black-necked grebe, black-winged stilt, avocet, reed and great reed warblers, Iberian chiffchaff.

Winter visitors: greylag goose, crane, bluethroat, golden plover, lapwing, ducks and waders.

On passage: osprey, spoonbill, garganey, reed warbler, concentrations of black stork.

SIERRAS DE GATA, FRANCIA, AND BÉJAR

Sedentary: black and Egyptian vultures, golden eagle, peregrine falcon, eagle owl, chough, green woodpecker, lesser spotted woodpecker, crossbill, goldcrest, dipper, crag martin.

Summer visitors: hobby, honey buzzard, short-toed eagle, rock thrush, bluethroat, ortolan bunting, pied flycatcher, pallid swift, redstart, red-rumped swallow.

Winter visitors: alpine accentor, siskin, meadow pipit, lapwing.



final remarks

When watching birds we should consider a series of recommendations that will make our activity truly gratifying.

- It is important to understand that at times we may disturb the birds. Try to avoid this, do not flush them and move quickly away from nests. Except at very few locations, nest observation involves disturbance that may be very harmful (i.e. abandonment).
- Respect private property. If you come across a closed gate, close it again after you.
- The best times to watch birds are generally early in the morning and in the evening, especially on very hot days.

The beauty of birds and the landscapes where they live together with the pleasure of sharing this experience with others make birdwatching a wonderful surprise for all those who venture out with binoculars, in many cases to discover wonders that we can find on our doorstep.

COMPANIES

For those enthusiasts curious about birds, there are a number of specialised companies that offer guided ornithological tours and nature tourism activities and which can help us to take our first steps in this activity.

Aquila Naturaleza

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Iberia-Bird Medioambiente

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