

Itinerary

Río Blanco valley



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Location and access

From Soria take the A-15 towards Medinaceli and the SO-411 from here as far as Layna. From Guadalajara/ Madrid via the A-2, turn off for Alcolea del Pinar via the N-211 and then take the GU-411 to Layna.

Status: Bounded entirely to the west by the Páramo de Layna SPA but outside it. Includes a small botanical reserve: SO-004, Dehesa de Urex de Medinaceli-Río Blanco, as well as the Cerro Pelado paleontological site.

Terrain: An open valley fed by various watercourses of karstic origin that drain the surrounding paramera. Includes Portuguese Oak woods, Poplar copses and pastures.

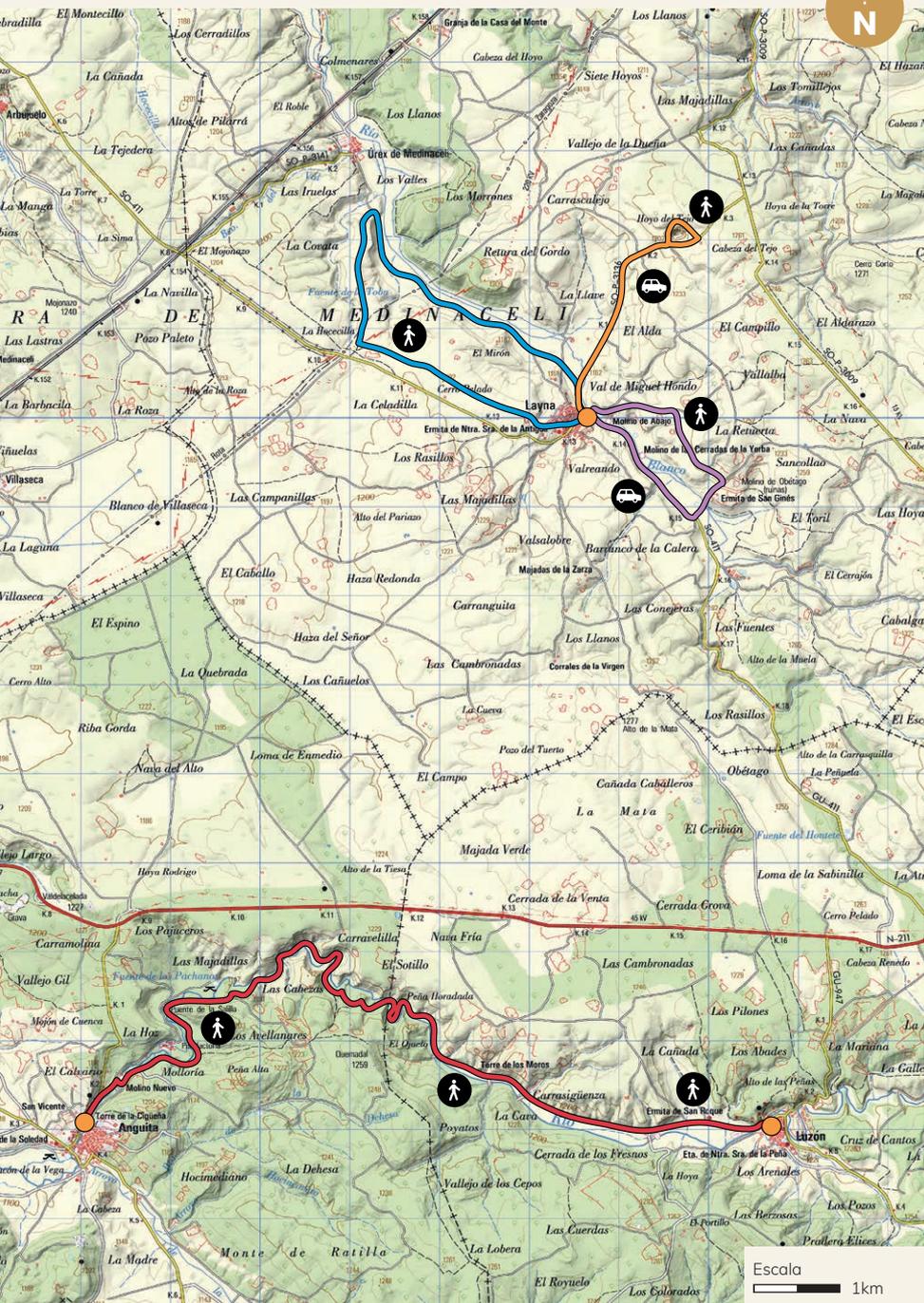
Means of access: Own vehicle.

Ease of access: Easy. Largely via roads and tracks with gentle gradients.

Visit duration: Dependent on the routes chosen. The most interesting parts can be seen in three to four hours.

Timing: Late spring and early summer are most productive.

Comments: The high speed train (AVE) passes just by Urex village, creating a powerful visual and acoustic impact when it does so.



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Site description and itineraries

The río Blanco is the most important river in southern Soria province. According to geographical indications it seems to arise in the Maranchón or Luzón districts in Guadalajara but its true origins, in the form of regular and permanent headwaters, are at 'Las Fuentes' in Layna district. It is yet another of the karstic upwellings of the province. Along its course to Velilla de Medinaceli the river receives various tributaries, the more interesting and significant of these being in Urex district.

One of the best areas on this itinerary lies there two kilometres in the Velilla direction. It consists of 14 hectares of wet pasture, together with a small poplar plantation, making for an ideal habitat for many bird species. This valuable and well-conserved marshy environment lies along a sinuous stretch of the river Blanco, in the form of floodplains on both sides of the basin featuring a diversity of sedges and other plants. These last include some very interesting orchids such as *Dactylorhiza incarnata*, *Orchis palustris*, *Epipactis palustris* and the only known population in Castilla y León of *Platanthera algeriensis*. The diverse very rich flora features plants of both northern and southern affinities, including numerous rarities such as *Ophioglossum vulgatum*, *Sonchus maritimus* subsp. *aquatilis*, *Thalictrum flavum* subsp. *costae*, *Berula erecta*, *Senecio carpetanus*, *Carex rostrata* and *Carex disticha*, whose presence implies the high level of conservation of the habitat.

Although the valley sides are quite open they are less so than in other nearby locations, there being a good Portuguese Oak wood at the head of the valley and another sizable Holm Oak wood adjacent to Urex de Medinaceli.

The distance from Las Fuentes to the pastureland mentioned above is some ten kilometres, each way. It is therefore probably best to follow two separate routes both starting from Layna.

1 One heads to the provincial boundary along the road, returning via the deserted village of Obétago.

2 The other would be from Layna along the road to Urex and the pastures. From there you can reach the road and paramo via the small gorge known as 'La Hoceilla', from where a track parallel to the road leads back to Layna. You will have passed near the Cerro Pelado archeological site but you would be lucky to notice it since it is very poorly signposted.

What birds to see and when

The river Blanco valley ranks as something of an oasis within such a steppic and apparently birdless landscape. Certainly those who are familiar with the paramo environments are aware that they are far from birdless. However, bird diversity is very much enhanced by the presence of water, small copses, pastures and cultivation.

May is the best month for achieving a more than respectable bird list. If you choose the Layna–Pastizal de Urex option you will find a succession of the birds of agricultural lands, woodlands and paramos. It is not unusual for example to be walking along the road and hearing Dupont's Larks singing on the paramo above, provided you have made an early morning start. You will also see Dartford and Spectacled Warblers and Northern and Black-eared Wheatears, and hear the song of the Ortolan Bunting, on the open hillsides that descend from the paramo. A brief search should let you see the buntings.

Alongside these species, the poplar plantations and the riverine pastures draw in a varied collection of birds that include species of northerly affinities such as the Song Thrush and Red-backed Shrike. The abundance of Yellow Wagtails is noteworthy, these alongside Cetti's Warblers and Zitting Cisticolas. Water Rails may be heard in the damp pasturelands, where there are Mallards and both Marsh and Montagu's Harriers breed. Corn Buntings are everywhere. You may also expect Stonechats – and Whinchats on passage – Goldfinches, Linnets and Woodchat Shrikes in what is a birding hotspot of the first rank.

Chaffinches and Bonelli's Warblers predominate in the Urex oakwood but both Subalpine and Orphean Warblers



Northern Wheatear

Oenanthe oenanthe

occur there in good numbers. There are also Turtle Doves, even though you are 1,200m above sea level here.

We have mentioned May but, given the high elevation of the area, June and early July are also very suitable for birding here. Family parties of nearly all species are about in July. The neighbourhood of Layna is bustling with swifts, swallows, House and Rock Sparrows, Magpies, Collared Doves, Spotless Starlings, Crested Larks and Thekla Larks, species associated with human habitation but no less worthy of mention for all that. By then the Marsh Harriers, but not yet the Montagu's Harriers, will have fledged young. These are the most evident raptors at this time, alongside Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Common Buzzards and Common Kestrels.

The valley and its neighbourhood offer good opportunities to see migrating birds, especially raptors, in August–September. Large flocks of Black Kites and Honey Buzzards then occur, together with parties of Bee-eaters and others.

Autumn and winter are relatively quiet, especially on the surrounding paramos from which many species disappear. However, Redwings and Fieldfares appear in the fringing woodlands, where good sized flocks of Rock Sparrows and Chaffinches also remain. Large coveys of Red-legged Partridges may be seen on the hillsides if they have had a good breeding year. Not infrequently a Hen Harrier may be seen hunting the partridges here. Yellowhammers also arrive from the north to overwinter in the valley.



Other nearby places for family-centred visits

A Tejo sinkhole. This remarkable sinkhole is on the left of the road towards Sagides, 2.5km from Layna. It is not the only one to have formed here. There are also some perfect sinkholes a further 2km to the north but these are hard to find. The sinkhole in question is near the road and surrounded by woodlands of Portuguese and Holm Oaks, enabling woodland bird species to be seen here. In winter these include some Fieldfares, Redwings and Goldcrests.

B Luzón Gorge. This lies in Guadalajara province but is a good additional option. The gorge has been formed in the limestone paramera by the river Tajuña, between Luzón and Anguita. A track along the bottom of the gorge covers the eight kilometres that separate the two villages. Poplar plantations, cultivation and some pastures and rocky stretches promise good observations of a typical assortment of the bird species of these uplands. They will include Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Peregrines and Golden Eagles. The most interesting sector is between the fish farm at Anguita and the Peña Horadada at Luzón.

CHARACTERISTIC SPECIES

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Breeders

Golden Eagle, Griffon Vulture, Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Eagle, Sparrowhawk, Booted Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Water Rail, Eagle Owl, Little Owl, Wryneck, Dupont's Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark, Song Thrush, Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush, Blue Rock-thrush, Spectacled Warbler, Orpheap Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Reed Warbler, Golden Oriole, Red-backed Shrike, Red-billed Chough, Ortolan Bunting.

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Winterers

Hen Harrier, Merlin, Meadow Pipit, Yellowhammer.

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Migrants

Honey-buzzard, Black Kite, Lesser Kestrel, Ring Ouzel, Bluethroat, Sedge Warbler, Great Reed Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler.