

Caracena Gorge



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Location and access

90km southwest of Soria city. From Soria take the N-122 as far as El Burgo de Osma, and then the SO-V-1601 to Caracena. Access from Madrid is via the A-1, then the N-110 and then the N-122 to El Burgo de Osma.

Status: No special protection, despite a long but unsuccessful campaign to register the area as an SPA. Within IBA 076, Tiernes-Caracena, part of the SEO/Birdlife Important Bird Area network.

Terrain: One of the deepest and most typical limestone gorges of this sector of the meseta. There are paramos on the uplands and also residual Holm Oak and Juniper copses.

Means of access: Own vehicle.

Ease of access: Moderate. The recommended route is subject to the state of flow of the river Caracena, given that it crosses the river at various points.

Visit duration: The return journey between Caracena and Tarancueña is some 18km: allow at least six hours when viewing birds. Shorter visits are possible according to personal preference.

Timing: Spring is the best season, as is generally the case at moderate elevations. Autumn is also a good time to come, although there are fewer species then. Summer visits are only advisable if you start very early, since it gets very hot along the gorge floor, where there is little shade.

Comments: Visits by tourists and ramblers have increased in this area so you may meet quite a few people, by Soria standards, along the recommended route. Early in the morning, and away from the main route, there is little difficulty in getting to enjoy the solitude of this region.



Site description and itineraries

The Caracena is another of the small rivers that emerges from the Sierra de Pela and heads for the Duero. It crosses diverse calcareous mesetas that it and its tributaries have eroded extensively, creating a landscape of gorges and escarpments. The slopes continue to erode, the abundant sheep flocks of yesteryear having largely deforested the entire area.

The Caracena gorge is highly attractive, and not only on account of its aesthetic merits: it is one of those landscapes that surprises if not forewarned. Alongside the screes and escarpments, the landscape includes a mosaic of small fields and paramos of natural vegetation that connect with nearby areas that we also consider here – the paramos of La Perera-Madruédano. There are also Holm Oak and Juniper copses on the slopes and paramos, and riverine woodlands. Particularly outstanding among these are the Valderromán Holm Oak wood and the riverine woodland around the Fuencaliente spring.

1 The main route follows the sector of the GR86 long-distance trail that follows the canyon floor, between Caracena and Tarancueña. This is a clearly signposted stretch, eight kilometres one-way. If you start at Caracena the final two kilometres are less interesting if you are looking for rock-loving species, since there are no noteworthy escarpments there.

2 Access to the surrounding paramo is available from Caracena, specifically from the road leading to the castle – itself offering views of a spectacular landscape – leaving behind to either side the Gargantas and Pilonos escarpments. This road leads to Valderromán but if you are keen to explore this sector of the paramo on foot you should take the track that leads eastwards in a cultivated area following the boundaries of Tarancueña and Caracena districts, returning eventually to the castle.

What birds to see and when

Soria province boasts many historical villages that are also a delight for a birding visit, especially those settlements that are in rocky terrain. Walled villages such as Calatañazor or Rello, and those on hilltops such as Peñalcazar or the castle at Gormaz, nearly all appear to be extensions of the surrounding rocky ground. Caracena, once the headquarters of a more flourishing town and country community than now exists, is one such village. It is difficult to imagine a place with so many historical and artistic attractions within such a small area. It merits careful inspection.

Imagine arriving there very early one May morning. At once the bustle of Rock Sparrows and Black Redstarts draws attention. The former greatly outnumber the rather scarcer House Sparrows. If you decide to ascend to the castle you will be accompanied along the way by paramo and rocky area birds: Linnets, Northern and Black-eared Wheatears, Tawny Pipits and Woodlarks, among many. One or two pairs of Black Wheatears used to nest at the castle and in the nearby gully: the decline of this species throughout the region is a puzzle but it has disappeared almost everywhere. Crag Martins and both Blue and Rufous-tailed Rock-thrushes do remain and these, together with the ubiquitous and generalist Rock Sparrows and the acrobatic display flights of Choughs, make a visit to the castle unforgettable.

The continuous and cheerful song of scores of Skylarks will accompany you if you decide to explore the fields and steppe. Dupont's Lark is also found here, mainly in the south, but is relatively scarce. Greater Short-toed and Thekla Larks, Spectacled Warblers and both Rock and Ortolan Buntings are easier to find. You may or may not encounter the few remaining Black-bellied Sandgrouse.

During August–September, there is a very good chance of encountering Dotterel here, as on nearly all parameras. If you choose to return to the village and to follow the canyon you will encounter birds associated with the river, such as Robins, Wrens, Nightingales, Bonelli's Warblers and Song Thrushes. There will also be the species that use the escarpments: Griffon and Egyptian



Egyptian Vulture

Neophron percnopterus

Vultures, Common Kestrels, Golden Eagles, Ravens, Red-billed Choughs and Crag Martins, with Dartford Warblers and Rock Buntings among the scrub. Autumn is a good month to visit the gorge since several migrant species then occur: including Siskins and Yellowhammers, and Alpine Accentors on the rocks.

Other nearby places for family-centred visits

A Valderromán Holm Oak wood. It is only a few years since a tarmac road has linked the Caracena and Tiermes district via Valderromán. The road crosses the Valderromán oakwood, which is noteworthy for its centenarian oaks, some of them five metres in girth. Unfortunately heavy snow in 2018 brought down a branch of the finest tree, the only signposted specimen. A short stroll here should find a good range of

woodland birds, notably Nuthatches year-round and Common Redstarts, both on passage and nesting in small numbers.

B Fuencaliente–Virgen del Monte. The erosion activity of the river Caracena does not end at the town but some way further downstream (see Site 4, Vildé gorge). Two kilometres along there is a stretch of very characteristic rock formations, along the road to the Virgen del Monte hermitage and the Fuencaliente spring, where there are the remains of an illegal encampment. Rupestral species – Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Peregrines and Crag Martins – occur, and Song Thrushes, Nuthatches, Wrens, Robins and Common Chiffchaffs inhabit the lush riverine vegetation. Spanish Sparrows have recently established colonies here. A climb to the Arab watchtower promises splendid views of the entire valley.





CHARACTERISTIC SPECIES

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Breeders

Griffon Vulture, Egyptian Vulture, Golden Eagle, Booted Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Common Kestrel, Red-legged Partridge, Black-bellied Sandgrouse? Eagle Owl, Little Owl, Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Greater Short-toed Lark, Dupont's Lark, Skylark, Woodlark, Crag Martin, Grey Wagtail, Tawny Pipit, Dunnock, Black-eared Wheatear, Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush, Blue Rock-thrush, Bonelli's Warbler, Common Chiffchaff, Nuthatch, Red-backed Shrike, Rock Sparrow, Spanish Sparrow.

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Winterers

Hen Harrier, Merlin, Alpine Accentor, Siskin, Yellowhammer.

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Migrants

Dotterel.