

Arbujuelo valley



11

Location and access

From Soria city take the A-15 as far as Medinaceli, the starting point of this itinerary.

Status: The entire valley is within the 'Paramo de Layna' SPA and Special Conservation Area. It includes a small, recently designated, botanical reserve, SO-001: "Microrreserva de flora de las Salinas de Medinaceli"

Terrain: A typical valley of the upper Jalón basin, running between largely deforested hillsides and through small crop fields along the Pradejón stream. The brackish water of this stream enables the existence of saltpans – the only ones in Soria – near Pradejón village.

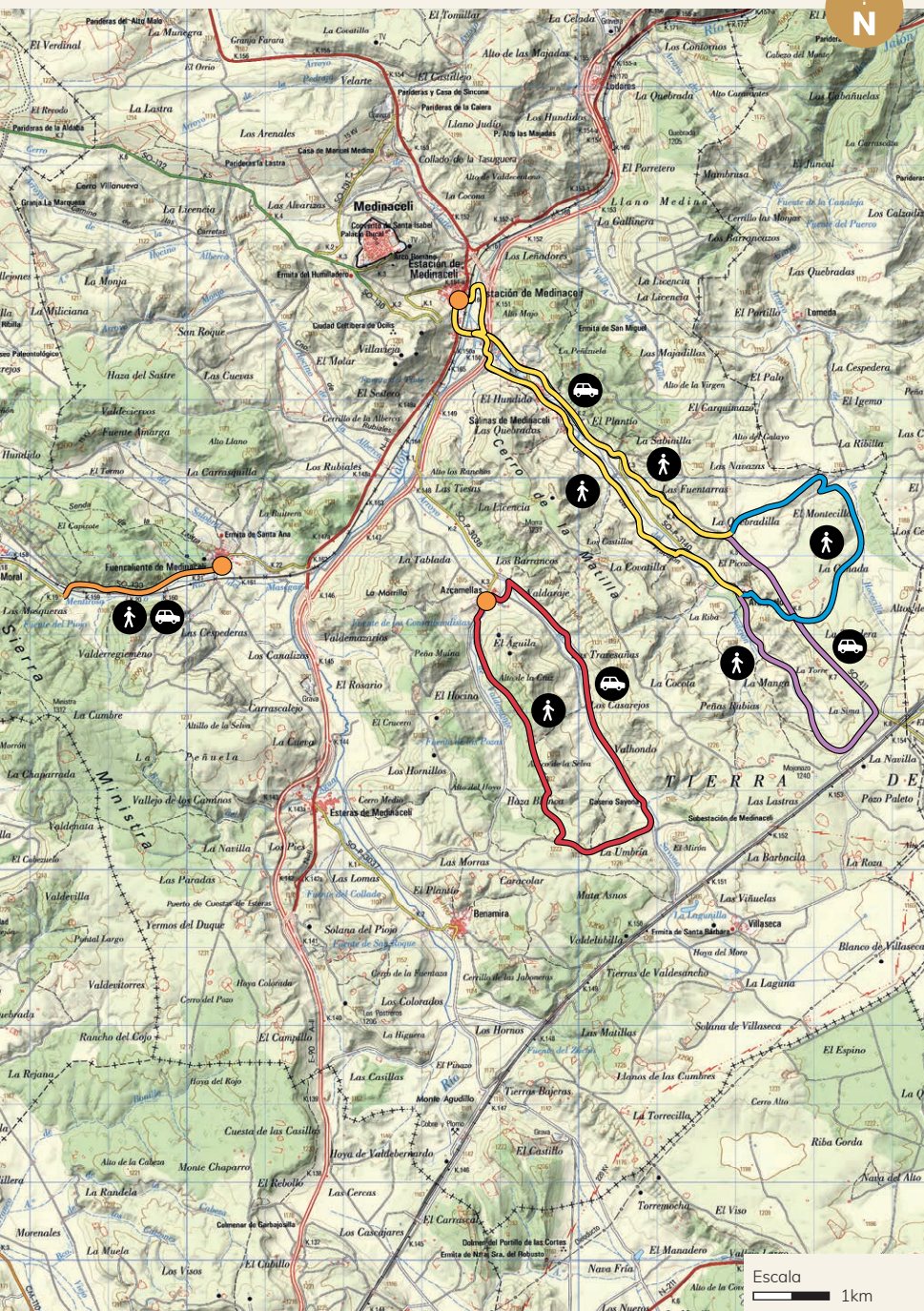
Means of access: Unlike nearly all the other sites covered here the village of Medinaceli has excellent communications, given its situation alongside the Navarra and Aragón motorway (A-15). There is also railway access.

Ease of access: Easy, and suitable for a short visit or a longer one that takes in the adjacent parameras.

Visit duration: The main suggested itinerary will take some two hours if limited to the Medinaceli reserve and the adjacent saltpans. Continuing to Arbujuelo and ascending via the GR86 path to the paramera along the Layna road is recommended and would take a further two to three hours.

Timing: Spring visits are best but something of interest may be seen year-round.

Comments: Human impacts on the environment, in the form of road noise from the nearby motorway, aggregate workings and windfarms, are an unwelcome presence.



- Itinerary 1
- Family itinerary A
- Itinerary on foot
- Start Itinerary
- Itinerary 1.1
- Family itinerary B
- Itinerary by car
- Itinerary 1.2

Site description and itineraries

The Valle del Arbujuelo is a line of communication between Castilla-Jalón and the Alto Tajo. It is a deep valley, excavated by the Pradejón stream that is fed by small springs that drain part of the Layna paramo to the north, some of the slopes of the Cerro de la Matilla to the west and the slopes above Medinacelli in the east. Between the Mojonazoto the south, at 1,240m, and the Jalón at 1,020m, the hillsides comprise bare treeless slopes with curious rock formations formed by erosion, such as the stony pinnacles known as the 'hermanitos' (little brothers) of Arbujuelo.

The salty sediments of the lower valley seem to have been exploited as saltpans since Roman times. The vegetation here is halophytic, perfectly adapted to the salty soil, as recognised by the botanical reserve. This is the site of the only records for Castilla y León of two species: the Sea Milkwort *Glaux maritima* and the composite *Scorzonera parviflora*. Two other characteristic halophytes here are the glasswort *Salicornia ramosissima* and the Sea Sowthistle *Sonchus maritimus*.

The best route coincides with this sector of the GR86 long-distance path. Medinacelli is worth a visit for its cultural, historical and landscape attributes but, unlike similar settlements, there is no corresponding birding merit. The birding route commences at Medinacelli station from where you can access the walkways that preserve the protected flora, that has withstood the onslaught of the aggregate workings, car parks and rubbish.

Before you cross the motorway the path borders the river Jalón and a goldfish farm. The latter is private but some interesting birds may be seen from outside. Beyond the motorway the path runs near the saltpans but not alongside, so you should leave it for a closer view.

It is some six kilometres to Arbujuelo, passing through poplar stands and fields along the river, with its reedbeds. There are two options from there. **(1.1)** You can follow the Layna road back to Medinacelli, although there is some traffic to contend with. **(1.2)** Otherwise you can continue up the Arbujuelo valley along

the track that runs parallel to the river as far as the bottom of the valley, ascending the slope where a pothole is signposted.

What birds to see and when

This short stretch of the river Jalón is a good place for birding year-round. The recent construction of the Medinaceli water treatment works has improved its water quality considerably. Birds attracted to it include Grey Herons, Mallards, Meadow Pipits, Zitting Cisticolas, the occasional Marsh Harrier, Water Rails, Moorhens and Cetti's Warblers.

As spring progresses there appear Yellow Wagtails, Tawny Pipits and Reed Warblers as well as passage migrants such as Sedge, Great Reed and Grasshopper Warblers, Kingfishers and Montagu's Harriers. Little Ringed Plovers also appear at the saltpans, where at least a couple of pairs may be found every year.

Away from the wetlands the quantity and diversity of birds that may be seen in this area are greatly reduced outside the spring period. Only the hardiest species overwinter on these slopes: Dartford Warblers, Rock Buntings, Rck Sparrows, coveys of Red-legged Partridges – not easily hunted here – and Thekla Larks, with Common Kestrels, Griffons and Golden Eagles overhead. This valley is one of the best sites for seeing Golden Eagles, with birds from nearby territories nearly always hunting here.

The situation changes markedly in spring, May and June being spectacular birding months here. The reedbeds along the stream in the valley fill with Yellow Wagtails, Reed Warblers, Nightingales and Stonechats. Bee-eaters and Hoopoes are not hard to find. The poplar copses at Arbujuelo attract Wrynecks, Golden Orioles, Chaffinches, Blackcaps, Garden Warblers and Robins. The best option is a good stroll keeping a sharp eye out and ears attuned to the birdsong on the slopes. Ortolan Buntings appear here in good numbers; these lovely birds are best being located by their song. Nearby, and according to the available cover, there will be Melodious, Orphean, Subalpine and Spectacled Warblers, alongside the abundant resident Dartford



Rufous-Tailed Rock-Thrush

Monticola saxatilis

Warblers and, in some years, Sardinian Warblers. There may also be a pair of the ever more threatened Turtle Dove.

If you ascend the slopes you can readily find the Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush on the screes, in the company of the noisy Rock Sparrows as well as Northern and Black-eared Wheatears, Linnets and Hoopoes. The Blue Rock-thrush also occurs here, especially at the rock formation known as the Dos Hermanas (two sisters) de Arbujuelo.

The longer option will have brought you on to the paramo. According to the time that you get there the chorus of Sky Larks, Greater Short-toed Larks and Tawny Pipits will be accompanied by the 'pu-cheeee' of the Dupont's Larks. It makes for a fitting conclusion – or start if doing the route in reverse – to a day on these high southern Sorian uplands.

Other nearby places for family-centred visits

A **Sedge bed at Fuencaliente de Medinaceli.** The village name implies no shortage of water and indeed the Arroyo de la Mentirosa carries water year-round, fed here by springs and by its headwaters at Torralba and Ambrona. Take the road to those villages and shortly after a wide bend across the railway line you come across 'El Masegar', a broad expanse of marsh vegetation. Reedbeds and sedges cover nearly a hectare of this hollow that draws water from the nearby slopes. The easiest birds to see here in spring are Reed Warblers, Zitting Cisticolas and both Montagu's and Marsh Harriers. The surrounding splendid woodland of Portuguese Oaks, still young but spreading, allows you to add Golden



Orioles, Green Woodpeckers, Jays and Turtle Doves to the bird list, not to mention the Roe Deer that are incredibly numerous in this valley. The bridges across the railway line have nesting House Martins, as well as Red-rumped Swallows, which are quite recent arrivals here. The Fuencaliente poplar plantations have Spanish Sparrows.

B Azcamellas. To the west of the valley formed by the Arroyo del Pradejón there is another valley of similar characteristics, where the Arroyo de Sayona descends from the depopulated village of Sayona. If time is short a stop on the outskirts of Azcamellas will allow you to see a good number of the bird species that occur at Arbujuelo. This valley is perhaps somewhat more arid, with no riparian woodland of any type. A pine plantation on one of the slopes may produce one or two additional species, such as the Coal or Crested Tits. Once again, though, the occupiers of these apparently inhospitable slopes include Ortolan Buntings, scrub-warblers, rock-thrushes and Golden Eagles. A stroll towards Sayona village will increase the species list.

CHARACTERISTIC SPECIES

[o]

Breeders

Griffon Vulture, Short-toed Eagle, Sparrowhawk, Golden Eagle, Booted Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Eagle Owl, Wryneck, Red-rumped Swallow, Crag Martin, Mistle Thrush, Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush, Blue Rock-thrush, Spectacled Warbler, Orphean Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Reed Warbler, Golden Oriole, Red-billed Chough, Ortolan Bunting.

[❄]

Winterers

Hen Harrier, Merlin, Meadow Pipit.

[→]

Migrants

Kingfisher, Ring Ouzel, Bluethroat, Sedge Warbler, Great Reed Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler.