

## Villaseca plain



---

# 13

---

### Location and access

From Soria take the A-15 as far as Medinaceli and the SO-411 from there until you reach the high speed train (AVE) line. From Guadalajara/Madrid via the A-2, leave at Alcolea del Pinar to take N-211 and later the GU-411 to Layna.

**Status:** Entirely within the "Páramo de Layna" SPA.

**Terrain:** Limestone pavements and paramos forming part of the Páramo de Layna. Includes cereal crops on red soils and a small endorheic humid zone.

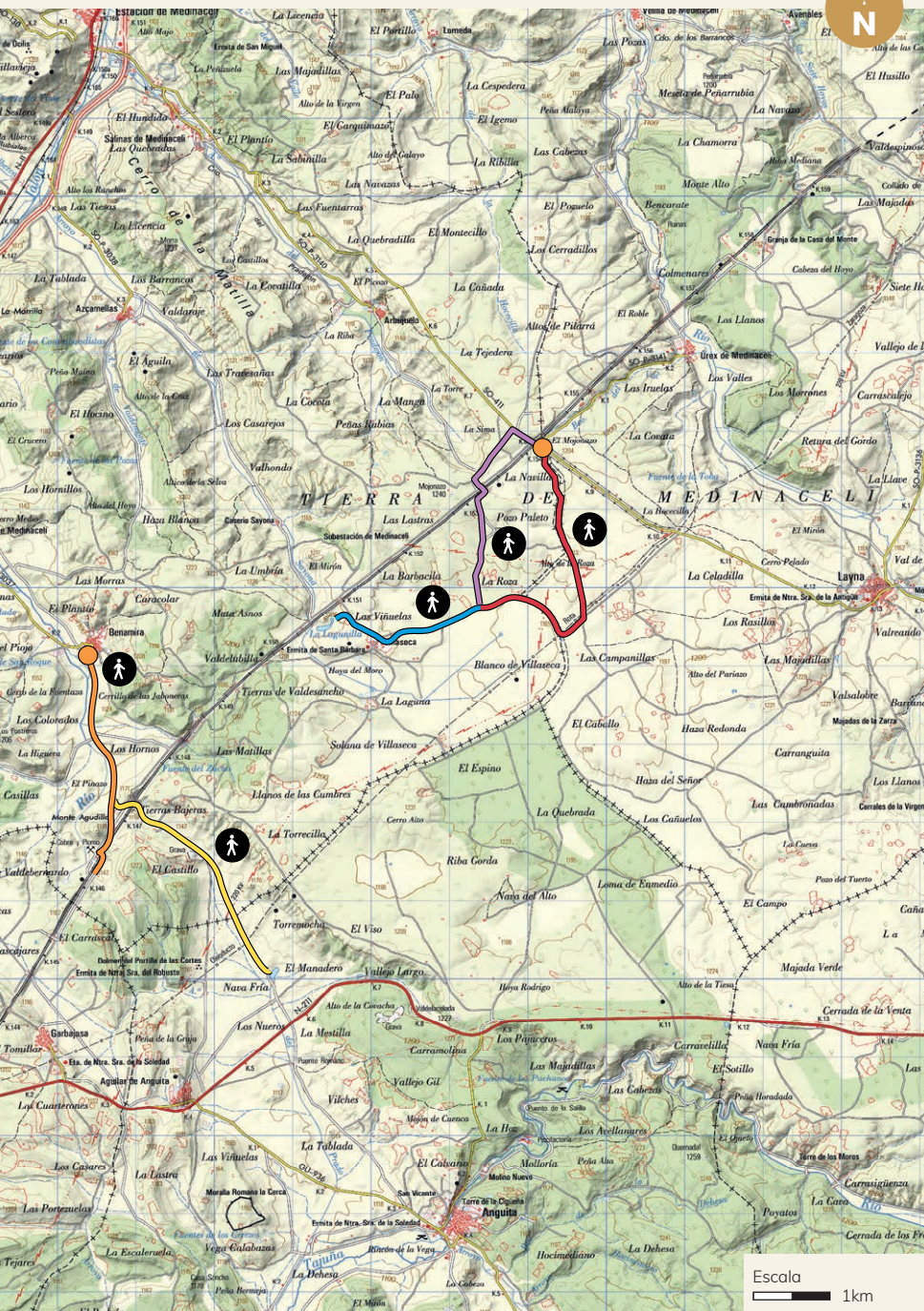
**Means of access:** Own vehicle. Access to the deserted village of Villaseca is closed to vehicles but is permitted on foot.

**Ease of access:** Easy, on account of the generally level terrain.

**Visit duration:** Three hours will suffice to visit the most important areas.

**Timing:** Spring visits are recommended.

**Comments:** Here too the AVE shows the less friendly face of economic development in these parts, having taken up a sizable amount of land. If we add the electricity gantries of the Ave, wind farms and the afforestation of a considerable extent of paramo some years ago, the general outlook is somewhat sobering and pessimistic.



Escala 1km

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

## Site description and itineraries

The harshness of the climate and the lack of economic development on the former Tierra de Medinaceli is evident in that many of the villages are now deserted, a pale reflection of the former occupancy of these cold lands. Sayona, Corvesín, Yuba, Avenales, Loméda, Obétago... many more than a few settlements have been abandoned.

The desertion of the village in question, Villaseca, accelerated during the 1950s and 1960s. It now comprises a cluster of ruined houses disfigured by two modern agricultural warehouses. It is hard to imagine why anyone thought to build a village here, on treeless terrain, open to the four winds with no available shelter and offering limited possibilities for subsistence. Nevertheless, many bird species find ideal living conditions here. A significant portion of the best areas for Dupont's Lark is in this region of the Layna paramo, where hillocks covered with a sparse scrub of thyme and broom alternate with a few farms. To the south there is a more extensive region dedicated to cereal crops, comprising the largest farms in the SPA, El Llano and El Blanco de Villaseca.

It is likely that this may once have been a wetland of considerable extent given the shallow gradients and that the stream that drains it is an artificial, straight channel. As it is, there exists a more or less permanent wet area, Las Lagunillas, barely a hectare in extent and covered in marsh vegetation, held back by the AVE embankment immediately north of Villaseca. In the south of the region, within Guadalajara province, a Black Pine wood that was planted some years ago holds most of the woodland birds to be seen here. There otherwise remain some clumps of Portuguese Oaks forming small copses towards Benamira.

**T**he proposed itinerary starts by taking a track that heads southwards on the right just beyond where the Layna road passes through a tunnel under the AVE line. After a couple of kilometres through worked land and scraps of paramo you get to where a gas pipeline is signposted. Follow the pipeline as far as a large expanse of farmland. Head northwards along the edge of this

until you reach a good track of white gravel, that runs as far as Villaseca. Here you can choose **(1.1)** to continue to Villaseca, to have a look at the wetland there, or **(1.2)** retrace your steps. This itinerary is almost certain to produce all the interesting birds of the area.

## What birds to see and when

Here you are in one of the best areas in which to find the steppic, paramo birds. Winters are harsh here and heavy snowfalls are not infrequent. Few species or individuals are hardy enough to withstand these conditions. Hence it is in spring that these lands burst into life, visits in April, May or June being ideal for observing the following.

**Dupont's Larks.** Their songs are a constant accompaniment almost as soon as you leave your car. Remember though that using playback to attract them is prohibited. You should remain along the tracks or field edges, not risking causing disturbance at a critical stage of the nesting season. They again make themselves noted in October, when there is a brief resurgence in song, but most disappear in winter for destinations as yet unknown.

**Little Bustards.** For the time being this is one of the few places in Soria where it is possible to see several males within a relatively small area. The first farmlands that we visit are chosen by Little Bustards for their leks. They arrive late here, perhaps not until early May, spending the month in trying to attract the few remaining females with their calls and displays. It is sad to note that the Little Bustard population is in steep decline and many of the residual populations seem to comprise males but no females.

**Stone-curlews.** Another of the steppic species that is absent in winter, arriving here in April. It may still be encountered in small numbers. Early morning visits are advised since this and other species are then highly vocal but become much less active as the day progresses.

**Black-bellied Sandgrouse?** The question mark is on account of the



Little Bustard

*Tetrax tetrax*



irregular occurrence of this species. Hardly any are seen in some years but there are seasons when they are more evident. Little is known of their seasonal movements but it seems clear that birds from other zones appear here at times.

**Great Bustards.** From June onwards male Great Bustards appear on the central plains of Villaseca, shown on maps as El Llano or El Blanco de Villaseca. Their origin is the same as those that occur around Barahona: they are from the Madrid population and are individuals that abandon their breeding grounds to spend the summer in higher and cooler regions. Up to 30 have appeared on these plains and on adjacent parts of Guadalajara, but visits by these giants of the steppe seem to be on the wane.

**Other paramo birds.** We always mention Dupont's Larks but this is one of those places where many other interesting species may be found in good numbers. Greater Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipits, Rock Sparrows, Skylarks and Thekla Larks make up a contingent of dun-coloured birds that search for food on these plains. Both Marsh and Montagu's Harriers nest in these fields and in the nearby valleys. Together with Booted Eagles they are the most frequent hunters of the paramo passerines. The Little Owl also is present here. If you follow the route between mid August and the end of September it is not unlikely that you may come across the Dotterel, a bird that is much given to stopping over on the paramos.

## Other nearby places for family-centred visits

**A** **Source of the Jalón.** Although many contend that the source of the river Jalón is the springs of the Esteras de Medinaceli, the 'official' source of this significant river is in hinterland of Benamira, at the Fuente Vieja, very close to the boundary with Guadalajara. A track from Benamira runs for some three kilometres to the base of a hill, at the Fuente. The poplar plantations at the village offer easy opportunities to see common birds.

Along the road, in spring or summer, you will see many Yellow Wagtails and constantly hear Reed Warblers singing in the reed beds along the river. You are likely to see a Montagu's Harrier quartering the valley and the 'zip-zip-zip' song of the Zitting Cisticolas will also be evident, unless the previous winter was very cold. The hillsides have the same avifauna as those of the Blanco or Arbujuelo valleys, the Ortolan Buntings being especially noteworthy.

**B** **El Prado salt pans and pastures at Aguilar de Anguita.** Once more we cross the provincial boundary into the Alcarria region of Guadalajara. The track that leads to the source of Jalón continues under the AVE track. Some salt pans appear on the left once past Aguilar de Anguita. These are disused but still hold some water in very wet years.

The Little Ringed Plover is a regular inhabitant, as at the Salinas de Medinaceli. Thereafter, continuing along the same track and crossing the N-221 Maranchón/Aguilar road, there appears a signposted Roman bridge. This marks the start of a kilometre-long expanse of pasture and sedgebeds, offering such birds as Yellow Wagtails, Reed Warblers, Water Rails and Mallards, and also interesting flora.

# CHARACTERISTIC SPECIES

## [ o ]

### Breeders

Booted Eagle, Montagu's Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Water Rail, Stone-curlew, Little Bustard, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Little Owl, Dupont's Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark, Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush, Spectacled Warbler, Orphean Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Reed Warbler, Golden Oriole, Rock Sparrow, Ortolan Bunting.

## [ ❄ ]

### Winterers

Hen Harrier, Merlin, Meadow Pipit, Yellowhammer.

## [ → ]

### Migrants

Lesser Kestrel, Dotterel, Great Bustard, Bluethroat, Sedge Warbler, Great Reed Warbler, Grasshopper Warbler.