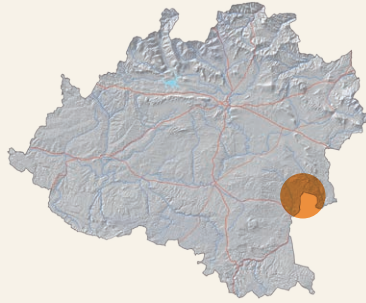


Monteagudo de Las Vicarías reservoir



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Location and access

70km SE of Soria city, in the corner of Las Vicarías. From Soria city take the A-11 Madrid motorway as far as Almazán, from where you follow the C-116 to Morón de Almazán and Monteagudo. From Monteagudo take the provincial road for Serón and Gómara. The reservoir is signposted on the left after 2km. Access from Madrid or Zaragoza is similarly straightforward, taking the N-II until the diversion for Soria and Almazán is indicated. Monteagudo is barely 8km further on.

Status: Included in the Inventory of Wetlands of Special Interest of Castilla y León. The reservoir and a broad peripheral zone comprise an SPA (15,541 hectares). Hunting is prohibited. Fishing was not allowed for a long time but since 2005 is permitted in about half the reservoir, south of an imaginary line linking a viewpoint with the main parking area.

Terrain: An artificial inland wetland.

Means of access: Own vehicle.

Ease of access: Easy. All tracks in the area are for public use.

Visit duration: Allow 2–3 hours to view the entire reservoir. The ease of accessibility means you can spend as much time here as you wish.

Timing: Of interest year-round except perhaps in mid winter (December–January). Passage periods, April–May and August–September tend to be the most rewarding times. The ornithological interest of the reservoir has greatly declined following the large scale introduction of carp and other exotic fish species. In winter especially there is often little of interest here now.

Comments: You are advised not to approach the shoreline. If the water levels are high – as has usually been in the case in recent years – the use of a telescope is greatly recommended. There is a hide at the extreme west of the reservoir. Unfortunately this is in a neglected dirty state, having lost the reed screen on the access track and lacking replenishment of bird recording forms.

The location has a continental climate. It is cold and bleak for much of the time, and frequently very windy. In contrast, the birding hide offers the only shelter from the implacable sun in summer, when early morning visits are recommended.



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

Escala 1km

Site description and itineraries

What is undoubtedly the most important wetland of the province is in the driest part of Soria, the region of Las Vicarías, where annual rainfall is barely 300mm. The reservoir has a long history, the first work on its small predecessor being in 1883. This initial reservoir was enlarged to its present size in 1982, extending over 123 hectares and with a capacity of two cubic hectometres. There are two inflows, the Arroyo del Regajo that arrives via Valtueña, and the river Nágima, which drains Fuentelmonge district. Only the latter of these regularly provides water.

The current aspect of the reservoir is quite different from what it was during the 1980s and until 1995. Water levels are typically high and there is a total lack of marsh vegetation. Previously it tended to hold little water and there was a large peripheral reedbed that accommodated such birds as Reed Warblers, Moorhens, Water Rails and Marsh Harriers, all of which have ceased to nest here.

There is no particular recommended itinerary. A tarmac track borders part of the reservoir perimeter almost as far as the parking area. From there a track leads to the birding hide and ends at the Morón to Monteagudo road. This track is very muddy after heavy rain, when there is a high risk of getting your vehicle stuck. A track on the opposite shore leads to a viewpoint (mirador) from which the whole reservoir may be viewed. This track too becomes very muddy when wet. You are urged not to approach the shoreline, especially during the nesting season.

What birds to see and when

Before describing what may be seen here let us outline what was the case up to the very recent past. Two of the formerly most important species now hardly appear. The largest colony of Black-necked Grebes (57 nests in 2002) in the province used to occur here. This was also a post-breeding moult site for over 1,000 Red-crested Pochards. In winter too, the reservoir attracted large numbers of waterfowl: 1,000 birds on average in the 1980s, 700 in the 1990s until the early years of the 21st century,

but barely 100 birds thereafter. All these negative changes have affected birds that depend for food directly or indirectly on subaquatic vegetation, that has been almost destroyed by carp and other introduced fish. Nevertheless, many bird species may still be enjoyed here, as follows:

Cranes (Mid February/March and late October/mid November). These surely comprise the greatest spectacle that can be seen here. The location of Monteagudo on the migratory flyline of these, and many other bird species, means that Cranes regularly use the reservoir as a stopover site. With luck you may encounter several thousand here. If they stop to roost they do so on the northwestern shoreline, the only part with no nearby track. Walking there will flush the birds and so is highly inadvisable. The mirador offers the best views of the birds. From here an early morning visit may find the birds dispersing, whether to continue their journey or to foraging sites in nearby cereal croplands, notably those of the plain that extends to Fuentelmonge.

Lesser Kestrels (mid July to late August). This species does not breed here nor anywhere else in Soria province. Nevertheless up to 50 birds use the powerlines at the reservoir entrance as perches, from which to hunt their small invertebrate prey. Such post-breeding gatherings are also seen elsewhere in the province and involve displacements from breeding sites on the southern meseta and in the Ebro valley, when the summer heat has largely eliminated prey supplies, to cooler locations further north.

Ospreys and Black Storks (March/ May and mid August/early October).

The European populations of both these species have fortunately increased and seeing them at inland wetlands is not so unusual as may have been the case 25 or 30 years ago. With luck you may see an Osprey plunging for fish. If it is successful it will head for a nearby pylon, to devour it. You should always inspect the pylons and powerlines that surround the reservoir since these are often used as perches by raptors, such as Black Kites; Booted, Short-toed and Golden



Common Crane

Grus grus



Eagles, Common Buzzards and Hobbies, especially in spring and summer. Carrion Crows are omnipresent too, year-round.

Great Crested Grebes (mid February to November). Together with Mallards, Great Crested Grebes are the most characteristic of the reservoir waterbirds, since Coots declined. Their magnificent and spectacular courtship displays may be seen all over the lake. The grebe population may number 50 birds by late summer. The occasional bird may remain in winter but normally all are absent then.

Garganey (March to mid April). Mallard are present year-round and all the common dabbling ducks of the Iberian

peninsula occur in small numbers on passage. They include the Garganey, which still occurs in good numbers on spring migration. They totalled a noteworthy 205 birds in March 2009.

Passerines and other small landbirds.

Although you may not have passerines in mind when visiting a wetland site it would be foolish to overlook the many such species that may be seen here. They are evident even in winter, when there are large flocks of Rock Sparrows and Linnets. Both Crested and Thekla Larks occur alongside each other here, offering identification challenges. Water and Meadow Pipits, and White Wagtails, feed along the shoreline.



The first hirundines appear in March, and are numerous in April, although not in the numbers that occur in autumn, when there may be many thousands of Barn Swallows, House Martins and Sand Martins. The three steppic passerines that are commonest here, the Greater Short-toed Lark, Tawny Pipit and Spectacled Warbler, arrive during April. Yellow Wagtails appear at the waterside. In early May you may be fortunate to see Common and Alpine Swifts hawking for insects. By this time nearly all summer visitors will have arrived, these including the Northern Wheatears that frequent the dam and surrounding areas. The maximum presence of migrant passerines is seen post-breeding, from

late July, through August and until mid September. Such skulking or scarce species as the Grasshopper and Savi's Warblers, and Bluethroat, occur annually here.

Black-bellied Sandgrouse/Stone-curlew/Little Bustard. The cereal croplands that surround the reservoir and extend towards Fuenlmonge and, in particular, towards Almaluez, have been a traditional site for these species. The sandgrouse population, which numbered an estimated 25–30 pairs at the start of the century, was the main reason for the listing of the site as an SPA. Now, however, the sandgrouse have declined greatly and the spectacle of seeing them



overflying the reservoir and descending to drink no longer occurs. Stone-curlews too no longer nest on the slopes and fields alongside the reservoir. To see these species, and perhaps Little Bustards as well, the best option is to follow the road linking Monteagudo with

Almaluez in spring, stopping along some of the tracks that you may find. Here, with luck, apart from the nuptial flights of the omnipresent Calandra Larks, you may see the hasty flyby of a pair of Black-bellied Sandgrouse or come across a male Little Bustard.

Other nearby places for family-centred visits

A **Castillo de La Raya.** Along the road that leads towards Monreal de Ariza, the shape of La Raya castle appears some four kilometres from Monteagudo. The castle is so named because it is sited on the boundary line (La Raya) between Soria and Zaragoza provinces. The hermitage of Nuestra Señora de la Torre lies at its foot, in Zaragoza province, although it is said that those who were baptised there could choose whether to become Castillian or Aragonese. You should leave the car on the approach road to the hermitage since this is in poor condition and space is limited. This is typical habitat for Dartford Warblers – present year-round – as well as Spectacled Warblers. Crested Larks and Rock Buntings also occur but the icing on the cake here is that the castle houses a pair of Black Wheatears, a very scarce species in Soria province.

B **Balsa de Almaluez.** If you have opted to drive from Monteagudo to Almaluez in search of steppic birds you may also stop at the latter village, where there is an irrigation pool (balsa) alongside the municipal swimming pool. Access is via the weighbridge there. The two hectare pool is fenced off but there are always waterbirds to be seen here: Mallards, Little Grebes, Common Coots and Moorhens. The odd Cormorant appears in winter as well as the occasional Common Pochard or Garganey on passage. The reedbeds at the pool and in the nearby ditches offer sight and sound in spring of both Common and Great Reed Warblers, Zitting Cisticolas and Stonechats. In September it is a good idea to follow the track that runs alongside the irrigation channel on the plain, where you can see Spanish Sparrows or look for Bluethroats or Grasshopper Warblers on passage.

CHARACTERISTIC SPECIES

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Breeders

Little Grebe, Black-necked Grebe (no longer annual) Great Crested Grebe, Mallard, Montagu's Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Golden Eagle, Common Kestrel, Hobby, Red-legged Partridge, Common Coot, Black-winged Stilt, Stone-curlew, Little Ringed Plover, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Little Bustard, Little Owl, Long-eared Owl, Calandra Lark, Greater Short-toed Lark, Crested Lark, Thekla's Lark, Skylark, Tawny Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Stonechat, Northern Wheatear, Dartford Warbler*, Spectacled Warbler, Rock Bunting.

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Winterers

Great Cormorant, Grey Heron, Gadwall, Teal, Shoveler, Common Pochard, Hen Harrier, Merlin, Lapwing, Meadow Pipit.

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Migrants

Little Egret, Purple Heron, Great White Egret, Black Stork, White Stork, Spoonbill, Greylag Goose, Common Shelduck (one pair nested in 2003), Wigeon, Pintail, Garganey, Shoveler, Red-crested Pochard, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, Black Kite, Osprey, Crane, Great Bustard, Avocet, Common Ringed Plover, Golden Plover, Grey Plover, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Ruff, Common Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Common Redshank, Green Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, Black-headed Gull, Yellow-legged Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Gull-billed Tern, Common Tern, Black Tern, Whiskered Tern, Common Swift, Sand Martin, Barn Swallow, House Martin.

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Occasional isolated records

Squacco Heron, Cattle Egret, Barnacle Goose, Ruddy Shelduck, Marbled Duck, Ferruginous Duck, Greater Scaup, Red-breasted Merganser, Collared Pratincole, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Turnstone, Great Skua, Little Gull, Common Gull, Little Tern, Greater Flamingo – the sole Soria record.