

Spain's Wild Asturias – Realm of the Bear

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Asturias and transfer to Somiedo National Park
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- Day 2/7** Days walk in the Cantabrian Mountains of the Somiedo region
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- Day 8** Return Asturias; fly London
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Departs

July

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ESP10) or brochure

Grading

Grade B. A program of day walks, at altitudes between 1,000 and 2,000 metres

Focus

Birds, plants, mammals, butterflies and walking – with an optional emphasis on Bear-spotting!

Highlights

- A chance to explore a habitat which hold Iberian Brown Bears and Iberian Wolves!
- Black Kite, Honey Buzzard, Short-toed Eagle & Griffon Vulture in summer
- Rock Thrush, Ortolan, Red-billed Chough, Black Woodpecker & Crossbill present
- Mammals such as Chamois, plus Roe & Red Deers



Images (from top to bottom):
Brown Bear and cubs, Dipper and Saliencia Valley



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

This is an 8-day (7-night) holiday to the little-known and very rural corner of Spain at the western end of the Cordillera Cantábrica, home to Bears, Wolves, and a rich flora and birdlife. We will enjoy this wildlife on mountain walks through the spectacular Somiedo Natural Park.

The Brown Bear is a rare and endangered species in Spain today. Just 130 animals remain, split between two isolated populations at either end of the Cordillera Cantábrica. Here they dwell in the wildest regions, high in the steepest and most wooded parts of this spectacular – but little visited – mountain range. The majority of the Bears, around a hundred, are to be found in the western population, twenty of them in the deep valleys and rugged terrain of Somiedo Natural Park. Established as recently as 1988 (and declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 2000), this 29,164-hectare park protects some of the highest and most scenic peaks and valleys of the region; a most pleasant mix of dramatic and craggy limestone peaks and cliffs, upland lakes, fast-flowing streams and rivers, magnificent oak and beech forests, ancient stone-walled upland pastures and high alpine meadows, regarded as the best



Somiedo National Park

preserved montane environment in the Iberian peninsula. In particular, this rich and varied tapestry of habitats not only suits the omnivorous Bear, but also supports a very large population of Chamois, Roe Deer and Red Deer, the prey of at least four packs of Wolves that roam elusively through the rugged regions of the park. We would, of course, be lucky to see a Bear or a Wolf, but we will look hard for them nonetheless as we pursue our main focus – the region's birdlife, flora, butterflies and other mammals – during our daily walks in these mountains.

It is the human presence, however, that makes this region so very special. As if the wonderful Asturian architecture of the stone and clay-tiled villages of Somiedo's valleys – each dwelling with its separate, classically Asturian, stilted storehouse – were not enough, here the resident farmers continue to practice an age-old pastoralist life-style, maintaining their traditional and unique *brañas*. These are seasonal 'villages' of ancient stone and thatch huts, set in the high pastures, from which the cow-herds manage their herds of distinctive red Asturian cows each spring, summer and autumn. The region is also the land of the *vaqueiros*, a community of pastoralists from the coast who, for centuries, have seasonally driven (more often in a truck these days than on foot, as in the

past!) their cattle between winter pastures on the coast and the high pastures in Somiedo's mountains where they spend each summer living in traditional seasonal vaqueiro villages and hold colourful bi-annual livestock fairs.

We have chosen to visit in June since this is the season during which the Bears venture out into the pastures to 'graze' on the spring grass before they retreat into the forests to feed on fruit, nuts and other forest produce. It is also, of course, the best time of year for birds and for flowers. Amongst the former, an important, though declining population of Capercaillie is protected here, although the chance of seeing one is extremely low. Resident birds of prey include Golden Eagle, Goshawk, Peregrine and Griffon Vulture and these are joined in summer by good numbers of Black Kites, Short-toed Eagles, Honey Buzzards and Egyptian Vultures. Crag Martins, Rock Thrushes and Rock Buntings, and both Red-billed and Alpine Choughs frequent the high meadows. Red-backed Shrikes, Melodious Warblers, Cirl Buntings and Rock Sparrows may be found at lower levels, whilst Black Woodpeckers call from the beech forests and Crested Tits and Crossbills may be heard amongst the coniferous woodlands.

Some 1,125 vascular plant species occur in Somiedo, and these include such regional endemics as *Centaurea janeri* subsp. *babiana*, *Armeria bigerrensis* subsp. *legionensis*, *Saxifraga babiana* and, most notably, the very rare Somiedo Centaury (*Centaureum somedanum*). However, it is likely to be the sheer abundance of flowers along the wayside and in the hay meadows and alpine pastures, and the butterfly and insect-life it supports, that affords us greatest pleasure at this season.



Lizard Orchid

To best enjoy the natural history of these mountains, we will be based for the week in one of the larger villages of Somiedo and will spend each day on foot, enjoying a programme of gentle-paced day walks which we traditionally break with a delicious al fresco picnic. In order to stand a chance of seeing a Bear, however, or even a Wolf, we must also put in long (but optional) hours of patient scanning from one spot, probably during the early mornings and late evenings. But, whatever we see on this holiday, it is the simple magic of this rich, scenic and timeless region, lying in a forgotten corner of rural Spain, that is likely to leave us with our most lasting and delightful memories.

Day 1

Somiedo National Park, Cordillera Cantábrica

We depart from London on a flight to Asturias in north-eastern Spain. On arrival at this quiet little airport, situated on the coast of northern Spain, we head south into rural Spain on a drive of just



Chamois

an hour or two into the rugged hills and mountains of the Cordillera Cantábrica. Quaint villages and hamlets lie intermittently along our route, all exemplifying the wonderful Asturian architecture of the stone and clay-tiled houses typical of Somiedo's valleys – each dwelling with its separate, classically Asturian, stilted storehouse. Many of these stone houses stand in varying stages of dilapidated antiquity. Elderly ladies dressed in black, and hunched, walnut-faced menfolk beneath

weathered caps, amble occasionally and sedately about the streets, and remind one of a bygone age that, actually, to some degree, still persists in this backwater of rural Spain that seems, for now at least, to have escaped the EU and local government funding that has recently so transformed so much of Spain's countryside.

We will be based in one of the larger villages in the park, Pola de Somiedo, the sleepy hub of the region. Our hotel is clean and comfortable, but not flash! Its rooms are basic but functional, and all have an attached bathroom with toilet. The hotel's restaurant is located a minute's walk away in the main square, serving delicious wholesome Asturian fare. Breakfasts are traditionally spartan, just bread/toast and jam with tea or coffee but could also be quite substantial as they may add fruit, eggs and even pancheta (the local crispy streaky bacon)! This simple, but comfortable, environment will be our base for the week.

On our arrival, there will be time to settle in, and perhaps explore the village or take a drive up the valley to scan the slopes for our first wildlife.

Day 2

Somiedo National Park, Cordillera Cantábrica

Today we will drive high into the valley of the Rio Somiedo, a wonderland of steep slopes adorned with rugged rocky outcrops, Beech woodlands and lush alpine pastures – the land of Bears, brañas and vaqueiros! Leaving our vehicles, we will spend most of the day completing what is normally a 4-hour traverse of the high slopes back towards Pola de Somiedo. With so many magnificent viewpoints over the valley to the slopes on the opposite side, we will stop regularly to scan with binoculars and telescopes in the hope of sighting a Brown Bear as it grazes in a stone-walled meadow or on a pasture of fresh spring grass, the favourite food of the Bear at this season. A sighting is, of course, a rare bonus, but patience and long hours of careful scanning can be rewarding, and on this holiday we will provide the opportunity (albeit always optional) to put in such long hours! There is also always the very slim possibility of a sighting of one of the park's four packs of Wolves. Such sightings are rare, but on this walk in particular we are likely to find both Wolf tracks and droppings, as these slopes are a favourite hunting area.



Walking through a small village in the heart of the Cordillera Cantábrica

During the first half of our walk, the open mountain slopes provide the best scanning opportunities and, as well as mammals (the most likely of which we are to see – probably in some numbers – are Chamois), we are also likely to be provided with wonderful views of birds of prey. Griffon Vultures may often be seen cruising beneath us, whilst others to look out for include resident Golden Eagles, Goshawks and Peregrines plus good numbers of such summer visitors as Black Kites, Short-toed Eagles, Honey Buzzards and Egyptian Vultures. At these altitudes we will also hope to see Crag Martins, Rock Thrushes, and both Rock and Ortolan Buntings, whilst both Red-billed and Alpine Choughs frequent the high meadows and are often seen wheeling overhead in large flocks.

We will rest and enjoy a picnic lunch at one of the best preserved brañas in the region, then descend through Beech forests in the afternoon.

Day 3

Somiedo National Park, Cordillera Cantábrica

The exquisite, if dilapidated, hamlet of Aguino lies in a steep-sided and blissfully peaceful valley not far from Pola. As we drive there this morning, crossing the impeding high pass on a winding and narrow road lined with flower-filled verges, we will stop to scan the mountain slopes from the pass

and suitable viewpoints. Again, a rather old-fashioned landscape of Beech and oak woodlands, craggy limestone peaks and cliffs, and ancient stone-walled pastures and alpine meadows lend constant hope that a Bear may be around the next corner or on the mountain slope ahead. More likely, we will have to settle for the birds of prey that favour this valley, a favourite haunt of Short-toed Eagles that patrol it in search of snakes and lizards that bask on the sunny slopes.

In the valley bottom we will walk in the riverside woodlands adjacent to Aguinu, hoping for a Black Woodpecker and woodland passerines. In this sunny and sheltered environment we will also hope to see a wide range of butterflies and plants.

In the spectacular Hoz del Furáu, in the valley of the Ríu Aguino, the steep slopes either side of the road are favoured by large numbers of Chamois. Here we will take our time enjoying a leisurely and lavish picnic lunch, hoping to enjoy – and perhaps photograph – the Chamois, and again be rewarded by a rich flora and butterfly-life amongst the scree and roadside verges on these limestone slopes.

In the afternoon we will proceed to Perlunes, a remote village at the end of the valley where it would appear that there have been few changes in recent centuries! Here we may choose to walk up into the meadows above the village, or we may content ourselves in its vicinity, scanning for Chamois and both Red and Roe Deer that are common here.



Giant Orchid

Returning to our hotel around tea-time, those who prefer to relax may do so, whilst those who would like to head back out into the field and spend time at suitable lookouts scanning for Bears and other mammals may do so.

Day 4

Somiedo National Park, Cordillera Cantábrica

Today we will rise early and head for La Peral, a high altitude vaqueiro village. We will spend some time scanning the surrounding slopes for mammals (Chamois, Wild Boar and both Roe and Red Deer being most likely) before heading off on a long day-walk of some 8 to 10 kilometres. Those who would prefer not to walk the full distance may choose to return to our vehicles when they have had enough, perhaps after we have enjoyed our traditional picnic lunch. Those who continue all the way to Villar de Vildas – another traditional farming village that time seems completely to have passed by – will be able to enjoy some of the finest brañas of all, notably La Pornacal.

En route we will pass through pastures, alpine meadows and beech forest, and walk beside streams where Grey Wagtail are common. Overhead vultures, eagles and choughs may be seen, whilst in the meadows and pastures we will look for Water Pipits, Rock Thrushes, Red-backed Shrikes and

both Rock and Ortolan Buntings. Lower down we may see Subalpine and Melodious Warblers, Cirl Buntings and Rock Sparrows.

Unexpectedly, a simple hotel is to be found amongst the farmhouses of Villar de Vildas, and here we may be able to enjoy a beer or welcome cup of tea whilst we wait for our vehicles and drivers to come and pick us up for the return journey to Pola de Somiedo, a most scenic ride through the lower, thickly forested hills of the Somiedo National Park. En route we may stop to enjoy some of the wayside flora and butterflies to be found at these lower altitudes.

Day 5

Somiedo National Park, Cordillera Cantábrica

Today we will head slowly up the valley to the village of Valle de Lago. En route we will pass the picturesque villages of Coto de Buenamadre and Urria. We will drive slowly, making stops en route to enjoy the birds, butterflies and rich flora of the wayside woods and fields that lie at a lower altitude to those we have explored up to now. Red-backed Shrikes, Rock Sparrows, Dartford and Garden Warblers, and Cirl, Rock and Ortolan Buntings may be found here; Black Woodpeckers call from the beech forests and Crested Tits and Crossbills may be heard amongst the coniferous woodlands. Overhead Egyptian and Griffon Vultures and Short-toed Eagles are amongst the birds of prey that may be seen.



Short-toed Eagle

However, best of all at these levels are the hay meadows (especially in June). Our Naturetrek botanist, and other botanists in our party, will be in their element enjoying the hay meadow flora; so too will be the butterfly enthusiasts for, as long as the sun is out, a wealth of butterflies and other insects are to be found here.

At the road head beyond Valle de Lago we will set off on foot for a gentle walk up the scenic valley of the Ríu Valle. Crested and Coal Tits, Firecrests and Crossbills may be encountered in the forests here, and Golden Eagles and both Chough species regularly patrol the skies overhead. Once again, as we ascend, we will pass the quaint 'medieval' thatched brañas along the wayside that so characterise these hills where time seems to have stood still.

Should time permit at the end of our day's exploration of this valley, once we have returned to our hotel in Pola, any group members keen to head back out into the field and spend time at suitable lookouts scanning for Bears and other mammals may do so.

Day 6

Somiedo National Park, Cordillera Cantábrica

We will spend this morning in the high meadows scanning, once again, for Brown Bears and other mammals. Doubtless in the process we will also see a good variety of birds of prey as they pass up and down the valley, or overhead. Those less interested in this sedentary pastime, which will require great patience, may prefer instead to search the meadows for flowers and butterflies with our botanist.

Once again we will enjoy a picnic lunch at a suitable scenic look-out before heading to the Saliencia Valley this afternoon

The Saliencia Valley is one of the most beautiful in Somiedo, and perhaps also the one that best preserves the region's traditional livestock farming, its many brañas still being well used and maintained. A small museum is worth a stop, though is not always open, and the valley offers plenty of short walks from which to choose.

Day 7

Somiedo National Park, Cordillera Cantábrica

Once again we will offer an opportunity to those that wish to scan the high pastures for Bears and other mammals.

For others we will offer a more leisurely start and a full day's exploration of the nearby valley of the Ríu Oríu. We will walk from the attractive village of Coto de Buenamadre and enjoy the delightful tapestry of riverside meadows, stone-walled meadows, hedges, spinneys and woodlands where a wide selection of birds may be found. These include such species as Hoopoe, Blue Rock Thrush, Red-backed Shrike, Black Redstart, Subalpine and Melodious Warbler, Rock Sparrow, Serin, and Cirl, Rock and Ortolan Buntings. Black Woodpeckers – and even Middle Spotted Woodpeckers – may sometimes be seen, and overhead we will look for Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Goshawks, Honey Buzzards, Black Kites and Short-toed Eagles.

The lush hay meadows here are filled with flowers and, if the sun is out, we can expect to spend time enjoying and identifying the many butterfly and other insect species that favour such environments in large numbers.

Day 8

Somiedo National Park, Cordillera Cantábrica

On this last day, we will have a few hours today at leisure. This will provide you with an opportunity either for a spot of local shopping in Pola de Somiedo, or to visit the excellent museum which lies just a short walk from our hotel (or both!). Alternatively you may prefer to join one of your leaders

for a final couple of hours in the field – either for some final ‘bear-scanning’, or to re-visit a favourite area or search for anything missed during the week.

By mid morning we must board our minibuses and depart from Pola, heading back north out of Somiedo National Park to Asturias airport, a journey of an hour and a half or so. There we board our flight back to London.

Tour grading & focus

Grade B. On this holiday we will be based at one hotel throughout. We will explore the mountains of this spectacular region, and enjoy their butterflies, birds, flowers and, of course, mammals by means of day walks of between four and ten kilometres in length. Our pace will be gentle, and we will frequently be merely pottering as we take a closer look at the butterflies, mammals, birds and plants. We will probably have the support of two minibuses to allow maximum flexibility, and provide options to each day's programme.

We are hopeful of seeing bears but a sighting is by no means guaranteed. Any sighting is likely to be distant and through binoculars and telescopes. To photograph bears our bear-watching holidays in Finland and Sweden are a better bet.

Weather

We have chosen June for this holiday as this month gives us the best chance (albeit a slim one) of seeing a Brown Bear in the open. They are also, of course, amongst the best months for birds, butterflies and flowers in this mountainous region of Spain. However, as we will be high in the mountains throughout this holiday you must be prepared for the very variable weather associated with all mountain ranges. Whilst we can expect some clear, sunny and hot (c 75°F) weather, we should also expect some wet, cloudy and cooler weather; the changes can be dramatic, so bring a good range of clothing!

Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this single-centre holiday, based in a simple but very clean and comfortable village hotel; all rooms have attached private shower-bathrooms.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call

us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.



Iberian Brown Bears



La Farrapona - Salencia valley



Our accommodation in the Cordillera Cantábrica

