

Wolf-watching in Spain

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary (hotel-based)

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Spain; transfer to the mountains
- Day 2/4** Daily programme of wolf-tracking and/or birdwatching excursions
- Day 5** Fly UK

Departs

November, December
(See website)

Focus

Wolves, birds and other mammals

Grading

A. Some easy walks but most of our Wolf watching is done stationary from viewpoints

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code ESP45) or brochure

Highlights

- Very good chances (90%+) of Iberian Wolf - one of Europe's most exciting mammals
- European Otters, Wild Boar, Red Deer & Roe Deer regularly seen
- Great birdwatching, especially birds of prey (up to 10 species seen on most tours)
- Tasty traditional cuisine and local wines (vegetarians well catered for too!)
- Possibility of Wildcat and Cantabrian Brown Bear



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N.B. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and 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 a 5-day (4-night) holiday to a little-known and very rural corner of northern Spain in search of Iberian Wolves in the mountains where we believe that we offer you the best chance of an Iberian Wolf encounter anywhere in Spain, and one of the best chances of a wild Wolf anywhere in the world.

All but two of our groups (well over 50 now) since March 2006 have enjoyed good telescope views of Wolf; on several occasions of as many as 6 Wolves. Wolf-watching can, indeed, seem very difficult during the long hours that need to be put in to track down such a notoriously elusive animal, and Wolves cannot be guaranteed, but an encounter is well worth the wait if it comes!

This tour will provide ample time in which to enjoy this rich birdlife, but it is our quest for the Iberian Wolf that will be our primary goal.

Day 1

Fly Santander, transfer to San Martin de Perapertu

We depart from the UK today, usually departing from London Stansted to Santander. On arrival we head into rural Spain through a changing landscape of farmland before entering into the gently rolling hills, heathland and conifer/oak plantations of the Cantabrian foothills. Here we will be based in a quaint and comfortable hotel in a quiet village of humble granite houses that 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 of nearby villages. This is a 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.

By the time we arrive in the outlying hills of northern Palencia and reach our rural base for the holiday we will be ready for a rest. Our lodging offers warm, comfortable and beautifully clean rooms. Three-course dinners are straightforward but enjoyable and eagerly anticipated each evening. We also include very drinkable local Toro and Duero wines in our package.

This simple, but comfortable environment will be our base for the four nights.



Wolf print

Days 2 – 4

Fuentes Carrionas Natural Park

For the next three full days, from dawn until dusk, we will be mounting our search for the region's Wolves. You will, of course, be free to either join or opt out of any of our excursions that you choose; however, your chances of seeing a Wolf obviously increase the more time you are prepared to put in. Indeed, our chances depend on the hours we put in, our patience in our quest and, above all, the stealth and silence that we maintain during our long hours in the field. This is not a tour for the loud and talkative! You must be prepared, at all times, to follow your tour leader's instructions, and to be quiet at any time, and for long periods. Such patience will, we hope, be rewarded. It should also allow us to see some of the other mammals as well as the birds that inhabit the region.



It is in these hills and mountains of northern Spain that the vast majority of Spain's 1,000 to 1,500 Iberian Wolves are found – the stronghold of the species in Europe. This is a population that has increased markedly since an estimated all-time low in Spain of just 500 individuals in 1970. The depopulation of Spain's rural regions, as Spaniards have increasingly migrated into the cities, has benefited the Iberian Wolf, as has a changing attitude towards an animal that was once viciously persecuted.

The few hot spots and wolf territories known very well by us and our local guides are located amongst rolling hills and broad valleys surrounded by mountains which afford excellent opportunities to scan wide areas of open land and which may easily be accessed via an extensive network of graveled mountain tracks. It is a landscape that is part Scotland, part New Forest; a rolling tapestry of conifer plantations, sprawling oak and beech woodlands, extensive heaths, ancient grazing meadows enclosed by tumbledown dry stone walls, and damp grassy hollows marked by elegant poplar stands. Much of the birdlife here is shared with similar habitats in Britain but easier to find. Birds of prey are much in evidence, and include Red & Black Kites, Hen and Montagu's Harriers, Northern Goshawks, Sparrowhawks, Common Buzzards, Kestrels, Merlins and even the occasional Black Vulture and Golden Eagle. Conifer forests are home to Firecrests, Coal and Crested Tits, Eurasian Jays and occasional noisy flocks of Crossbills. The heaths hold Woodlarks, Stonechats and Dartford Warblers, whilst Ravens honk evocatively as they pass overhead. Good numbers of Wildboar, Red and Roe Deer (the prey of the Wolf!), together with European Otters on a nearby river, complete the picture. But, take a look around the traditional granite-built villages of the region and the Crested Larks, Black Redstarts, Southern Grey Shrikes, Spotless Starlings, Rock Sparrows, Serins, Yellowhammers, Cirl Buntings and Rock Buntings soon confirm that you really are in Southern Europe!

Looking for wolves requires a great deal of persistence, patience and stealth. It also requires a lot of luck... not least with the weather! We will spend much of each day (certainly the first and last three or four hours) ensconced deep in the heather at suitable viewpoints in order to scan for Wolves... and any other mammals and also birds that we may happen to see. Each day will be tackled with flexibility, but a typical day is likely to involve a pre-dawn start to ensure on-site positioning by dawn or sunrise, armed with drinks and some 'nibbles' to keep us going! Later, armed with a packed lunch (or having taken lunch back at base) we will head out into the field again, probably remaining out until dark.



If we are lucky and see Iberian Wolves within the first couple of days – or perhaps wish to make a change from the routine of Wolf-tracking and scanning! – we may offer a full or half day excursion to an area of wetlands, steppe and rolling agricultural land to the south of the mountains.

Here, low intensity farming is practiced specifically to encourage birdlife, especially the Great Bustard. The area offers a bleak yet charming landscape, almost from a bygone age, its undulating plains stretching in all directions to the horizon, a mosaic of stubble, plough and set-aside grasslands broken by wild wetlands and traditional old farming villages, often of mud construction and each dominated by a giant church with statutory Storks' nests adorning each imposing bell-tower. Lavish antique 'pigeon houses' and grain silos, both ornately fashioned from mud and clay tiles, further characterise the landscape. Here, Great Bustards occur in vast numbers; several dozen or more generally being easily observed within a single visit. Amongst other species that we will hope to see will be numerous larks, finches and buntings.

Unfortunately, in common with many of the world's most valuable wildlife areas, the Spanish Steppes are under threat. Rapid agricultural change is sweeping through Spain, mostly prompted by government intervention, and the intensification of traditional farming practices, including the irrigation of land that is converting much of the dry steppe to a monoculture farmland. Over 3 million hectares of steppe have already been lost through irrigation. With this in mind, Birdlife International have been working in conjunction with their Spanish partners to campaign against the continued irrigation of steppeland and for a programme of 'Zoning' where farmers are subsidised for environmentally conscious practices. It is under this scheme that the area we focus on has happily seen its fortunes reversed in recent years.

Day 5

Santander & Fly London

If flight times allow this morning, we will either take to the road for a final look for Iberian Wolves in the surrounding hills or, if we have been successful previously in this regard, we may prefer to spend more time in the forests and steppe lands en route back to Santander for our flight back to the UK.

Tour Grading

Grade A. On this tour we will probably spend at least 50% of our time scanning, stationary, from suitable viewpoints. We may also undertake the odd short walk, though none of them will be long or strenuous. The tour is suitable for all ages and for all degrees of fitness.

Food and accommodation

All food, wine and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday.

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.



Hotel restaurant