

Spain - Realm of the Iberian Lynx

Naturetrek Tour Report

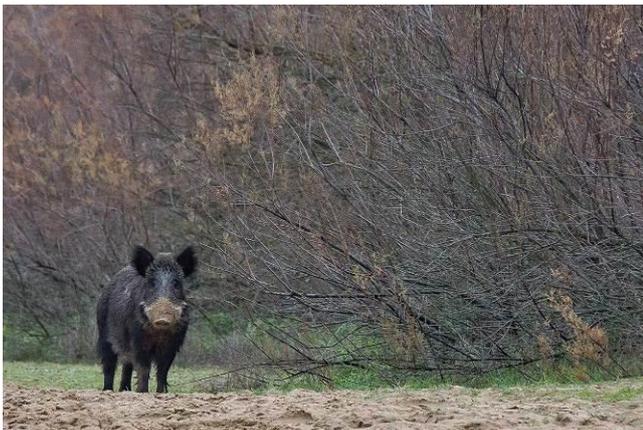
14 - 19 January 2018



Iberian Lynx



Short-eared Owl



Wild Boar



Two Iberian Lynx!

Report and images by Niki Williamson & Simon Tonkin



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Simon Tonkin and Niki Williamson (Leaders) and a group of 13 Naturetrek clients

Summary

This two-base tour took place in the atmospheric misty woodlands and wetlands of Doñana Natural Park, as well as the sweeping Cork Oak forests of the Sierra Morena near Andùjar. The group were thrilled by close encounters with Wild Boar, Red and Fallow Deer, Spanish Ibex and two species of bats, as well as an impressive array of mountain, wetland and farmland birds, including Blue Rock Thrush, Iberian Magpie, Eurasian Hoopoe, Southern (Iberian) Grey Shrike, Cinereous Vulture, Crag Martin, Western (formerly known as Purple) Swamphen, Greater Flamingo, Black-winged Stilt, Eurasian Spoonbills, and Spanish Imperial Eagle.

But of course the outstanding highlights were our unbelievable daily sightings of Iberian Lynx in all aspects of their daily routine, from dawn prowling, to morning pair-bonding, to noon sunbathing! The group was blown away by no less than six encounters, some merely metres away.

Day 1

Sunday 14th January

Simon and Niki connected with Nick and Diana at the airport, who had been enjoying a stay in Barcelona for a couple of days prior to the trip. The rest of the group arrived on their flight from the UK and we loaded up into our minibuses for the short one-hour drive to our hotel in El Rocio.

We made for Hotel Toruño without further ado, to give the group time to relax and freshen up before dinner. The drive was through picturesque Andalusian countryside, and we spotted Iberian Magpies, Western Cattle Egrets, a Booted Eagle, Common Buzzards and a Red Kite in the afternoon light.

Arriving at El Rocio, the group were thrilled with the sand-covered streets and painted wood façades of the quirky Wild West-style town. After a welcome drink and snacks at our hotel, the group had time to settle in before heading out for a relaxed afternoon, watching birds and other wildlife around the town's tranquil lagoon, just at the bottom of our street.

Of course our eyes immediately settled on the larger star birds! Many Eurasian Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis and Greater Flamingoes were wading in the expansive waters of the newly-refreshed lagoon. Around them scooted Northern Shovelers, Eurasian Teal, Greylag Geese (the wild kind!), Northern Pintail and a veritable army of Common Coots! Black-winged Stilts, Northern Lapwing and some striking Common Snipe paddled and probed the shallows, while overhead we had lovely views of Red Kites, and two Marsh Harriers were eating something grim on the ground! As we wandered further along the boardwalk, it was the reedy fringes of the lagoon that provided the much smaller stars! Right in front of us a pair of Penduline Tits were calling as they stripped little clouds of fluffy seed from the Bulrush. Next up was a tiny but beautiful white-spotted Bluethroat, which treated us to stunning views as it picked about the shore, bringing a touch of glamour to a patch of mud!

After a bit of down time and chance to wander the town, we were soon sitting down for our delicious evening meal. We sampled local venison and *natillas*, a delicious traditional pudding before taking a nightcap of local Sanlucar sherry.

Day 2

Monday 15th January

After breakfast we made our first early morning foray into the Parque Nacional de Doñana, now home to around 90 Iberian Lynx. The sun rose on a frosty morning as we entered the park and, for a little while, it seemed like all the wildlife had been stunned into silence by the unacustomed chill!

We drove slowly through an area of Stone Pines and Mastic bushes, where a pair of Iberian Lynx had been seen in previous weeks. And suddenly there it was! After less than half an hour in the park, we were looking at a Iberian Lynx, walking nonchalantly away from us in the middle distance! It rounded the corner of a bush and we sped after it, to find ourselves within metres of this beautiful cat, which maintained full eye contact while performing its morning, erm, ablutions! Untroubled by the minibuses, it eventually wandered off down the sandy track and finally disappeared after some minutes, into the undergrowth! What an incredible start!

We encountered a fantastic array of wildlife as we travelled on through more open areas of the park, including large herds of Red Deer, many Eurasian Hoopoes, Dartford and Sardinian Warblers, Southern Grey Shrike, Iberian Magpies, Skylarks, Crested and Calandra Larks, many wintering Chiffchaffs, and a newly emerged Small Copper butterfly.

As we drove on to a more open, heathy area, we were thrilled to see a large number of Griffon Vultures on the ground. Stopping to scope them up, we saw that they had clearly just feasted on not one but two horse carcasses, and were now digesting their feast in the sun.

We stopped to view out over a lagoon and enjoyed waterbirds and waders including Western Swamphen, Black-winged Stilts, Common Snipe, Northern Shoveler, Common Gadwall, and a beautiful female-type Marsh Harrier perched up a little awkwardly in a Tamarisk.

We took a long, restful lunch at a local restaurant – introducing the group to the area's tasty *salmorejo* soup – before heading back to our hotel for a siesta and some free time to explore the idiosyncrasies of our Spanish horseman's town.

We headed back out into the park later that afternoon. It was a fantastic time for raptors, and as well as almost innumerable Common Buzzards and Common Kestrels, we encountered a young male Hen Harrier and the park's young prince or princess – an immature Spanish Imperial Eagle sitting up in a disused White Stork's nest. As well as a couple of Little Owls perched up on a tree stump trying to blend in, we also suddenly stumbled across a perched Short-eared Owl, right at the roadside, staring us right in the face!

The sun was now well on its way to setting, so we took a last look around the Lynx territory. Unbelievably, there was Fraile, a nine-year-old collared male, lying at the base of a bush! This gorgeous beast, who is Doñana born and bred, treated us to amazing views from just metres away before disappearing off into the woodland. An incredible two-Lynx day, and we retired ecstatic to Hotel Toruño to relax before celebrating with a well-earned beer and more superb local food!

Day 3

Tuesday 16th January

We set off into another Doñana dawn, with soft golden light illuminating the frost-covered ground. We headed straight back to the area where the Lynx had been so active, and immediately started scanning the sandy dunes and the bases of bushes, in the hope of another encounter. Thirty minutes passed, then the shout went up again! "Lince, Lince!". Unbelievably, we found ourselves watching not one, but two of the world's rarest cats! A female – most probably yesterday's – flirting and playing and fighting with a male who most definitely wasn't Fraile! How absolutely stunning to watch them in full pair-bonding behaviour, oblivious to our presence just metres away. They spent their time preening each other and engaging in gentle head-butting, as well as doing a lot of lazing about!

So entranced were we that we could easily have missed the single, enormous male Wild Boar, that sloped out of the forest and ambled almost right up to our group before he noticed us, stamped his feet and ran away into the forest at high speed!

In the end we enjoyed over two hours in the company of our loved-up Lynxes, spotting a Hen Harrier, several Griffon Vultures and two Little Owls as well as being serenaded by Short-toed Treecreepers and Common Firecrests in their less active moments. But as the sun warmed the air, they eventually got up and wandered away, giving the most stunning views right in front of us!

It was time to move on to our second base in Andùjar, so we said "¡Hasta luego!" to the Wild West and headed east. En route we stopped at Acebuche heathland and took our picnic of local breads, cheeses, olives, meats and salads beneath the shady Stone Pines, surrounded by gregarious and beautiful Iberian Magpies and loitering Woodlarks.

The drive to Andùjar took us through the rolling farmlands of Huelva and Seville provinces and past the historic city of Córdoba, where we broke up the journey with a refreshing coffee and ice cream stop. We arrived at our rural accommodation at the edge of the Sierra Morena National Park and had plenty of time to relax, freshen up and enjoy a cold beer before dinner.

Dinner was a selection of delicious local specialities, served tapas-style, including partridge pâté, tomato and garlic salad, local beef steak and *revuelto* - a tasty egg and asparagus dish.

Day 4

Wednesday 17th January

This morning we headed out into Sierra Morena National Park, one of the host areas of a successful Iberian Lynx reintroduction and conservation programme and now home to over 200 of the animals – almost half the remaining wild population.

Although Lynx are numerous here, their territories are large, and seeing one in this enormous area is a combination of local knowledge and a great deal of luck! We headed to an area known as La Lancha, where we knew Lynx to be particularly active. We enjoyed a slow meander through rolling, wooded hills where Red and Fallow Deer lingered beneath the Wild Olives and Cork Oaks.

We spent a relaxed morning enjoying the expansive landscape at La Lancha, and its abundant birdlife. Sardinian and Dartford Warblers sang from the undergrowth and occasionally showed well, and Rock Buntings called around us and flew over our group, and we could see a distant adult Spanish Imperial Eagle perched rather incongruously in a Wild Olive tree. Almost as we were about to head for lunch, we received a call from our friends, so we joined them and here was our next Lynx! On a hillside across from us, a young male Iberian Lynx was stretched out enjoying the late morning sunshine. We watched him for a good ten minutes before he eventually sloped away – his limp giving away his identity as the active male often sighted in this area.

Heading back, Dan's spotting skills (or was it the now so-called 'Lucky Seat' at the back of the bus?!) came into play again, and we enjoyed a good look and some great photographic opportunities with a group of Mouflon next to the road.

After a quick trip to the supermarket with those of the group that wished to join us, we headed out for a delightful picnic lunch alongside Rio Jándula. As we enjoyed a selection of local wines, meats and cheeses, Short-toed Treecreepers, Eurasian Nuthatch, Long-tailed Tits and lots of Iberian Magpies decorated this beautiful peaceful spot. We were also treated to an amazing mating display by a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles, gronking overhead.

Carrying on to the Embalse del Encinarejo upstream, we waited to see if the local female Lynx was active in the area today. Sadly, she didn't join us, but the afternoon passed pleasantly in the sunshine, with views of Roe Deer, Hawfinch, Blue Rock Thrush, Crested Tits, Cinereous and Griffon Vultures overhead, and another turn from the Spanish Imperial Eagles, now joined by a Golden Eagle as well!

As the light faded we made our way home, stopping briefly at Mirador el Peregrino to view out over the beautiful forested landscape, before heading back for more delicious local fare at our hotel.

Day 5

Thursday 18th January

This morning we made a slightly later start to allow a relaxed revisit to La Lancha in the morning. This morning our panoramic view of the area was positively dripping with herds of Red and Fallow Deer, and we spotted a lone male Mouflon Grazing. Once again, the Spanish Imperial Eagle graced its favourite Wild Olive tree, and we had great views of a close Iberian Grey Shrike, making all manner of bizarre sounds to lure in its prey. But despite the abundance of European Rabbits and Red-legged Partridge in the landscape, no Lynx were on view this morning, so we moved on to our picnic site.

We lunched in the shade of Wild Olive trees, with dramatic views over the Embalse del Jándula, a large gravel-sided reservoir, stretching out in the valley below us and enjoyed a large kettle of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures over the hillside.

A Golden Eagle hove into view, prompting a debate on the ID features of Golden versus Spanish Imperial Eagle in flight. Liz headed back towards the van to fetch a Collins guide for perusal. And how unspeakably fortunate that she did! While our attention was focused on the superb raptors, an Iberian Lynx was crossing the road just metres behind us! It sauntered across the track, glanced in our direction and carried on nonchalantly down the

hill, melting quickly away into the undergrowth and leaving us speechless! This is the nature of Lynx-spotting – just another story of incredibly lucky close encounters that could just as easily never happened!

A Spanish Ibex on a distant hillside encouraged us to descend into the nearby valley, next to another reservoir dam. Here we had great close views of a Blue Rock Thrush and a smart male Black Redstart. A family of Spanish Ibex were grazing low down on the crag, providing great views. Walking through a tunnel in the cliff face, we searched drill holes in the ceiling and found Schrieber's, Lesser Mouse-eared and Daubenton's Bats roosting.

High on yet another successful Lynx-spotting day, we headed back in plenty of time for people to pack and relax before dinner. On the way we explored further farm tracks, enjoying watching the Red and Fallow deer mixing with the magnificent local bulls, pigs and sheep. We also came across a lovely mixed flock of buntings, pipits and finches amongst which we found Rock Sparrows!

At dinner, hotel owner Ramòn gave us a drink of complimentary *cava* and toasted our successful day of mammal- and wildlife-watching before feeding us more superb food. Today we had *secreto iberico* on the menu, a very typical tender cut of pork from locally-bred Iberian Black pigs – sooo good!

Day 6

Friday 19th January

The group had a relaxed start to catch their lunchtime flight from Seville, with a stop on the way for a final Andalusian coffee!

We got to the airport in plenty of time and said goodbye to most of the group. Several of the group were making use of the opportunity to extend their stay and explore Andalucia in more depth. Simon and Niki escorted Nick and Diana to their Seville hotel and, as they were passing on the way home, drove Sheila and Rob (Jukes and Morse, Lynx Detectives!) to Cadiz.

Niki and Simon had a great time guiding this group and seeing a superb selection of mammals, birds and other wildlife. We'd like to thank them for their great company during a truly breath-taking trip, during which we're sure lasting friendships were forged!

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	January				
			14	15	16	17	18
1	Iberian Lynx	<i>Lynx pardinus</i>		2	2	1	1
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>				✓	✓
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>					1
5	European Mouflon	<i>Ovis orientalis musimon</i>				8+	6
6	Spanish Ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>					6
7	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>		✓			
8	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>			1M		
10	Schreiber's Bat	<i>Miniopterus schreibersii</i>					3+
11	Lesser Mouse-eared Bat	<i>Myotis blythii</i>					✓
12	Daubenton's Bat	<i>Myotis daubentonii</i>					✓

Birds

1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓			
2	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2				
3	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		20+			
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	4+	
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓	✓		
6	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	10+		2		
7	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓		2	
8	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓				
9	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		40+		✓	✓
10	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		3			
11	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	150+	20+			
12	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	15+	50+	30+		
13	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	200+	50+	50+		
14	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	30+	30+	10+		
15	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓		
16	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1		1	3	1
17	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2	3	2		
18	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	5+		2	8	10+
19	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		c.50	20+	10+	150+
20	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>				2	10+
21	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		2			
22	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		1		3	2
23	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				1	3
24	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					2
25	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	5+	10+	2		
26	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1	1		
27	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	10+	6	10+	1	2
28	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	c.5	
29	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		1			
30	Western (Purple) Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	1	10+			
31	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	3	2		1	
32	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓		
33	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	20+	40+	✓		

	Common name	Scientific name	January				
			14	15	16	17	18
34	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	20+			
35	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	30+	5+			
36	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	150+				
37	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	3				
38	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1				
39	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	1	3			
40	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓		✓		
41	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	2				1
42	Pin-tailed Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles alchata</i>		1			
43	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		2	2	2+	8
47	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>		1			
48	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1			2	
49	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		8	1	1	10+
50	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			1		1
51	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>				3	c.5
52	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	5+	20+	✓		
53	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		2	1+	1	2+
54	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>				2	
55	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		✓	30+	50+	✓
56	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	20+	✓
57	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
58	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		15	30+	4	4
59	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				1	1
60	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	1	5+	1	5	10+
61	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		5+	6+	10+	20+
62	Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	2				
63	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			3	2	
64	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		10+			
65	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>					2
66	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓		2
67	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		5+			
68	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1				
69	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				5+	40+
70	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	2	1			
71	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		10+	✓	✓	✓
72	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	40+	20+	✓	✓	✓
73	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	1	2			
74	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				1	1
75	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		2		3	2
76	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>		5+	4+	10+	5+
77	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			1	20+	2
78	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1+		5+	1
79	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				1+	1
80	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		1	1+	5+	3+
81	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		6		4	10+
83	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	2	10+	5+	✓	✓
84	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				5+	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January				
			14	15	16	17	18
85	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>	1	1			
87	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	1	10+	5+	10+	20+
88	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				1	3
89	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓		10+
90	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
91	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>					4
92	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				4	3
93	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				2	1
94	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	4+	✓
96	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				2	2
98	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		1		1	1
99	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		4			2
100	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
101	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		1	5+	10+	20+
102	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		✓	✓		50+
103	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>				4	3
104	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				1	
105	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	1				

Insects

1	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>		✓	✓		
2	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓	✓		✓
3	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>		✓			

Reptiles

1	Iberian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanica</i>		✓			✓
2	Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>				1	1



Iberian Magpie



European Mouflon