

Spain - Realm of the Iberian Lynx

Naturetrek Tour Report

19 - 24 January 2020



Iberian Lynx



Iberian Lynx



Cinereous Vulture



Sunset

Report compiled by Niki Williamson
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Tour participants: Simon Tonkin & Niki Williamson (leaders) with 13 Naturetrek clients..

Summary

For our band of patient nature-lovers, this six-day exploration of the realm of the Iberian Lynx gave us something amazing every day! Six different individuals of the endangered Spanish Imperial Eagle, rare Marbled Ducks, Hawfinches, Spanish Ibex cantering across a rock face, herds of Red Deer swimming a lake, duetting Little Owls, clouds of Cinereous and Griffon Vultures, Golden Eagles and shades of blue in the form of Bluethroat, Blue Rock Thrush, Iberian Magpie and Common Kingfisher were just some of our trip's natural highlights.

Our hosts' hospitality was fantastic at both bases, and the group enjoyed sampling delicious local food such as chickpea and spinach stew, *salmorejo* soup and egg *revuelto* dishes, not to mention mouth-watering picnics in the sun, sometimes accompanied by dazzling flocks of Iberian Magpies, always accompanied by wine!

Our fleeting glimpse of a female Iberian Lynx in Doñana Natural Park was to provide a suitable appetite-whetter for our superb encounter in Sierra de Morena, where a stunning female stalked across the track in front of us before taking up a pose on a nearby rock, allowing us to watch for over an hour!

Day 1

Sunday 19th January

Leaders Simon and Niki met the group as they converged on Sevilla airport, from various flights and pre-trip stays. We were soon on the road to our first base at El Rocío, passing through olive groves and Cork Oak *debesas* and enjoying views of White Storks and Red Kites as we drove. We arrived at our lakeside hotel and enjoyed welcome drinks and nibbles before a little time to unpack and settle in.

In the mild late afternoon sun, we enjoyed our immediate surroundings, viewing out over the western end of the "Madre de las Marismas" – "mother of the wetlands" lake, on whose shores El Rocío is situated. A wealth of wintering wildfowl, waders and waterbirds awaited, including Black-winged Stilts, Black-tailed Godwits, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Teal, Northern Pintail, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Spoonbills and many hundreds of Northern Shoveler and Greylag Geese. A haze of pink decorated the back half of the lake as hundreds of Greater Flamingoes waded in the shallows.

Close to our vantage point, flocks of Common Waxbills entertained, and a plucky, vividly-coloured male Bluethroat provided an early highlight for many! Red Deer could be seen grazing on the lake's opposite shore.

As the sun set, we returned to our hotel to freshen up before our first three-course meal of traditional Andalusian fayre. Not bad for a travel day!

Day 2

Monday 20th January

Today we set off in 4x4 vans at first light, driven by Irene and Jose Manuel. These expert local guides from Doñana Nature are able to take us into parts of the National Park we would not otherwise be able to visit.

As we drove slowly round the sandy tracks, Mediterranean scrub and Stone Pine copses searching for our cat, we enjoyed the sun rising on dew-covered grass, and watching the habitats of the park gradually come to life. Groups of Red Deer surveyed us from the forests, and we saw numerous European Rabbits, that favoured food item of the Iberian Lynx. Flocks of Iberian Magpies fluttered through the trees where Common Buzzards roosted.

And then, the Iberian Lynx herself! A female was glimpsed sitting for several seconds, but frustratingly turned and stalked away into the cover of nearby Mastic bushes, not to be seen again.

As the morning warmed, we headed over to Coto del Rey, one of the permit-only areas of the park, where we were able to go for a stroll on the heath. Here we enjoyed great views of Woodlarks and Eurasian Hoopoes feeding on the ground. A young Spanish Imperial Eagle took our breath away by landing in a nearby tree! We couldn't pick it out among the branches but suddenly it was airborne again, and it joined three other juvenile birds in a nearby field! What a privilege to get such great 'scope views of not one but four of Doñana's other famous resident!

We headed back to lunch at a restaurant in town, and a chance to try local specialities like *albondigas* (meatballs) in a spiced sauce and the area's well-known chickpea and spinach stew. There was then time to walk around town and enjoy its unique nature! El Rocío is a horseperson's town, and its sandy streets, whitewashed buildings and ubiquitous hitching posts make it reminiscent of a Wild West film! It is also uniquely Andalusian, and has much cultural interest due to the pilgrimage route connected with its most venerated statue of the Virgin of El Rocío.

In the late afternoon we headed out to the Jose Valverde visitor centre in the Park's wetland area. This year, due to drought exacerbated by intensive agriculture, the area was completely dry, except for around the visitor centre which was being kept wet by pumping water from the Guadalquivir River. An extraordinary number of wildfowl were congregated here, including Glossy Ibis, Black-winged Stilts, and around 2,000 Greylag Geese. On the way we picked up several Black-winged Kites, in flight and perched in treetops and on pylons.

We spent more time at dusk seeking our elusive cat, but luck was not on our side this evening.

Day 3

Tuesday 21st January

We spent first light with Doñana Nature again, enjoying singing Woodlarks, views of Marsh Harriers and both male and female Hen Harriers hunting on the heath.

After packing time, we said goodbye to our hosts at Hotel Toruño and headed towards our second base, via a picnic at Acebuche Heath. White Storks bill-clapped from their nests on the visitor centre roof, and we were treated to flurries of blue and peach as cheeky flocks of Iberian Magpies surrounded us and eyed up our picnic scraps!

On the way to our stop at Dehesa de Abajo, we stopped for a stunning view of a Black-winged Kite perched on wires by the road. Arriving at the lake, we were chuffed to find 23 Marbled Duck close by, another of Doñana's much sought-after residents. As well as thousands more wintering ducks and Greater Flamingoes, we had great views of showy Red-crested Pochard drifting with groups of Common Pochard.

As we set off, a Black-crowned Night Heron roost caught our eye, where we counted 127 individuals adorning the bushes like lingering Christmas decorations!

Our journey north through the Andalusian countryside soon slipped by, and we arrived in the early evening to a warm welcome from the team at Los Pinos hotel, who settled us in to cosy rooms before dinner.

Day 4

Wednesday 22nd January

Today we spent the day surveying the magnificent landscape of the Sierra de Morena, Andalusia's main stronghold of the Iberian Lynx, where over 400 individuals now reside, thanks to successful conservation projects over recent decades.

After driving through miles of pretty woodland we stopped on the fabled Lynx-watching road of La Lancha. Here we spent the morning in the sun, with views out over the entire realm, enjoying fantastic experiences of nature.

An adult Spanish Imperial Eagle was spotted roosting in a tree, which also gave us fantastic flight views throughout the morning. A female Eurasian Sparrowhawk caught and killed a Woodpigeon right in front of our eyes.

A host of woodland and mountain birds sang and called around us, including Crested Tits, Dartford Warblers and Hawfinches, among the European Robins, Blackbirds and Mistle Thrushes. An Iberian Green Woodpecker perched on a rock, where nearby several Little Owls called and duetted.

A group of four adult male Mouflons could be seen battling it out with enormous curled horns. Red and Fallow Deer were scattered through the landscape.

As the air warmed in the late morning, it filled with dozens of Griffon and Cinereous vultures leaving their roosts, then circling right over our heads. This was our cue to head off to our picnic stop a little further down the road, where we looked out over the Embalse del Jandula. Here, as we tucked into a lavish spread of fresh bread, salads, local meats, cheese and wines, we enjoyed Golden Eagles and more Spanish Imperial Eagle views as they joined the throngs of thermalling vultures.

Next, we dropped down to the dam itself, where we were thrilled to observe several Spanish Ibex resting on the rock face opposite. A group of five – a gorgeous horned male with a group of young females - cantering across the rock face towards us before resting up within good reach of our optics! An obliging Blue Rock Thrush sang from a boulder at the water's edge.

We returned to our spot at La Lancha for the afternoon, and despite working extremely hard until the last of the light was failing, we weren't lucky enough to find a Lynx. However all agreed it had been a truly spectacular day, and there was more enjoyment to come in the form of a superb three-course meal courtesy of Ramón and the Los Pinos team!

Day 5

Thursday 23rd January

When it comes to spotting the world's most endangered cat, it takes a combination of judgement, luck and spending the time. We had applied the first, hoped for the second, and this morning it was determined application of the third that finally paid off for our patient group!

And what a pay-off! We had been watching at La Lancha for around an hour when Mark spotted a female Iberian Lynx sauntering along a nearby track! With much urgent whispering and quiet relocation, we managed to track her progress to a group of boulders. Here she chose one on which to sit for almost an hour, not thirty yards from where we were watching! We had superb views, taking in her smart ear tufts, fine patterning and marvelling at her almost complete camouflage against her background, despite being sat right out in the open. We also enjoyed her rabbit-hunting technique, which appeared to involve mostly snoozing in the sun, followed by brief spurts of activity, then a lot more snoozing! A beautiful cat, seen completely free and wild in her natural habitat.

Elated, we headed back to base for a coffee and to compare photos! Then we went for our picnic lunch at a tranquil spot by the Río Jandula. Here we enjoyed many wintering Common Chiffchaffs, a Common Kingfisher and brilliant views of Hawfinches in the trees.

We spent a peaceful afternoon around the dam of the Embalse de Encinarejo, again enjoying a perched Common Kingfisher, an Iberian Green Woodpecker in a tree and Grey Wagtail on the river. By the reservoir's edge, we had extraordinary views of a herd of Red Deer swimming all the way across it, seemingly to escape some unseen threat or disturbance. On the way back we made a final sunset stop at the Mirador del Peregrino viewpoint, which offered a sweeping vista across the valley to the monastery at Virgen de la Cabeza.

Our final three-course meal awaited, featuring shared starters of salads, *revuelto* with chorizo and *jamon ibérico*, some of the best cheese known to man, followed by outstanding main courses of seabass, locally-produced beef or local vegetables *a la plancha*, and an indulgent chocolate pudding for dessert! A fine way to end the trip, especially with the promise of a lie-in in the morning!

Day 6

Friday 24th January

After a leisurely breakfast and some final glimpses of the local Hawfinches, we said goodbye to Ramón and the Los Pinos team and made our way back to Sevilla. After bidding farewell to most of the group, Simon made sure the remainder connected with trains and hotels in Sevilla for their ongoing stays. This was a fantastic trip to reflect back on, an enjoyment of the lynx's realm, in which we saw something amazing every day!

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	January						
			19	20	21	22	23	24	
1	Iberian Lynx	<i>Lynx pardinus</i>		1				1	
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
3	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>				✓	✓		
4	European Mouflon	<i>Ovis orientalis musimon</i>					4		
5	Spanish Ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>					11		
6	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
7	Brown Long-eared Bat	<i>Plecotus auritus</i>					1		

Birds

1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	50	2,000	✓				
2	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓	✓				
3	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		20	✓				
4	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	1	20	✓				
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2	✓	✓				
6	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	15						
7	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓				
8	Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>			23				
9	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>			✓				
10	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			✓				
11	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		6	✓	✓	✓		
12	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		2	4			1	
13	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	50	200	300				
14	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	20	10	✓				✓
15	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	30	50	50				
16	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	20	30	20				
17	Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>			127				
18	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓
19	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2		10			1	2
20	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		2	6				
21	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	4	6	10			1	
22	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2		✓	14	2	5	
23	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	1	4	1				1
24	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>				50			✓
25	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>				10		2	
26	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		4		4			
27	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				2			
28	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				3		1	
29	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	3	7	✓				2
30	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1	2				
31	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	2	7	5				20
32	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2	4	✓	✓			✓
33	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		10	3				
34	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		4	5				
35	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓	✓				
36	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	200	200	30				
37	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	20	30	✓				2
38	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	4	20					

	Common name	Scientific name	January					
			19	20	21	22	23	24
39	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	20	20				
40	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		4	5			
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	3		✓			
42	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		2	3			✓
43	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			5			
44	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
47	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		1		1	1	1
48	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1		4	2	
49	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1				2	
50	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		4	1		2	
51	Great-spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>		1				
52	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>			1			
53	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	1	2	2	1
54	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>				4	6	2
55	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	8	✓	4		8
56	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		1				
57	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		3				
58	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>					3	
59	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				4	1	
62	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		4	✓		✓	✓
63	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	6	15	4	8	4	6
64	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				3	2	2
65	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		3	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			2	5	2	
68	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		4		3	3	
69	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			✓			✓
70	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			30			10
71	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			4	1		2
72	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				✓	✓	✓
73	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	2	1	2			1
74	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	1	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>				2	1	
78	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	2	3	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>					1	
80	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2	1	4	3	2
81	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				4	3	
82	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		3	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		Y	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				4	4	2
87	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	4	6	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	White-spotted Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>	1					
89	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	5	10	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	January					
			19	20	21	22	23	24
90	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				2		
91	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
93	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava flava</i>			1			
94	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	10	2	✓
95	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
96	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				✓	✓	2
98	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	2		3		5	✓
99	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		10	✓	✓		✓
100	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
101	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	20	10	✓	✓	✓	✓
102	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		10	✓			✓
103	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>				1	2	

Butterflies

1	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colia croceus</i>		✓				
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