

# Spain – Realm of the Iberian Lynx

Naturetrek Tour Report

12th – 17th February 2023

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Eurasian Otter



Iberian Lynx



Greater Flamingoes



Spanish Imperial Eagle

Tour report by Niki Williamson. Photos by Niki Williamson & Alejandro Onrubia

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Tour participants: Niki Williamson (leader), Alejandro Onrubia (co-leader) with 12 Naturetrek clients

## Summary

The star of the show this week was undoubtedly Sed, a young female Iberian Lynx who gave us three fantastic encounters as she stalked across her realm in Doñana National Park!

She had a strong supporting cast though, with Red Deer, Wild Boar, a young Spanish Imperial Eagle, plentiful Iberian Grey Shrikes and Eurasian Hoopoes, confiding Little Owls and two stunning Great Spotted Cuckoos. The wetlands of Doñana shone in their own right, bring us local specialities such as Marbled Teal and Red-crested Pochard among a host of Greater Flamingoes and Western Swamphens!

Up in the mountains we enjoyed superb weather, and days full of Red and Fallow Deer, Iberian Ibex, Mouflon, Wild Boar and European Otters. Amongst the crags, woodlands and river valleys of Sierra Morena, Blue Rock Thrush, Hawfinch, Dartford Warbler, Rock and Cirl Buntings, Common Kingfisher, Crested Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch and Firecrest abounded. Raptors were plentiful – Griffon and Eurasian Black Vultures, Golden and Spanish Imperial Eagles rode the thermals – we even witnessed a superb display involving four grappling adult Spanish Imperial Eagles!

Superb weather and great traditional Spanish hospitality and food in both locations helped make this a fabulous trip!

## Day 1

## Sunday 12th February

Niki and Alex met the group at Sevilla airport from various flights and early arrivals, and we were soon on our way towards our first base in the village of El Rocío.

Thanks to the midday arrivals, we had plenty of time to explore and do a little birding on the way, so we stopped by the lagoons of Dehesa de Abajo reserve to look out for some local avian specialities.

It was a beautiful sunny day and as we arrived we were greeted by Barn Swallows overhead and the sight and sound of a sea of Greater Flamingoes and Northern Shoveler. Among them were a nice selection of ducks, grebes and waders including Red-crested Pochard, Black-winged Stilt, Black-tailed Godwit, Northern Pintail and Black-necked Grebe. White Storks circled overhead and we could hear their bill-clapping display echoing out from the nesting colony. Several Marsh Harriers constantly flew over, causing panic as they went. A Booted Eagle soared by.

We were thrilled to get lovely views of several Marbled Ducks - with less than a hundred pairs left in Spain, it's always a privilege to see this Doñana speciality.

Moving on we soon arrived at El Rocio, where we checked into Hotel Toruño, our accommodation located in Plaza Acebuchal – the town's old main square, where the olive trees are several hundred years old – on the shores of the Madre de las Marismas lagoon. Here we had time for a wander before dinner, picking up Glossy Ibis and Purple Swamphen up close and Red Deer on the far shore.

## Day 2

**Monday 13th February**

This morning we headed out at first light with local guides Angelica and Jose-Manuel from Doñana Nature, a local company with 4x4 minibuses and permits giving access to private areas of the National and Natural Park. With them we would spend the day searching for Iberian Lynx in the forest and heathlands, while enjoying all the other wonderful nature on show! As the sun rose over the woodlands, we picked out the unmistakable silhouette of a Eurasian Hoopoe – a lovely view and the first of many!

After a morning searching the Stone Pine forests, we had come across some fresh Iberian Lynx tracks but the cat itself had eluded us. We did find plenty of its prey items in the form of European Rabbits and Red-legged Partridge! Also, two fabulous Little Owls perched nearby on tree stumps.

We made a stop at an area where we could stretch our legs. It was a fortuitous one, as we found ourselves looking at a young Spanish Imperial Eagle perched in a tree! This juvenile (1-2 years) bird carried a straw-coloured breast and much rufous colouration, which really shone in the morning sun! Next, we spotted both Griffon and Eurasian Black Vulture, also perched in trees. Two Iberian Grey Shrikes hunted and called to one another.

We moved on to Coto del Rey, once the king's private hunting estate. We took a walk on the heathland there where we came across many more Iberian Grey Shrikes and flocks of wintering Northern Lapwings and Golden Plovers. Some fresh tracks in the sand had our hearts racing for a moment, but on closer inspection the visible claw marks showed them to be of a European Badger – still nice to see!

We headed back to El Rocío for lunch, where our host Diego presented us with typical local dishes including a delicious chickpea stew flavoured with cloves. There was then some free time to wander the lake shores or the unusual town, with its famous sandy streets made for horse-riding.

We headed out again late afternoon. After a short time, the amazing eyes of Jose Manuel picked out a Lynx wandering through the scrub! He was able to recognize her as a young two-year-old female called Sed. The encounter was brief, but everyone got a view of her before she stalked away into the undergrowth a minute or two later. Fantastic!!

Stopping to enjoy views of two Great Spotted Cuckoos in a Stone Pine, we drove on to spend some time at Jose Valverde Visitor Centre, at the side of a freshwater lagoon. A Barn Owl was obligingly roosting right next to the road! On the water we got nice views of Black-tailed Godwits, Pied Avocets, Purple Swamphens and two graceful Marbled Ducks. There was time for a coffee as Common Cranes flew overhead.

Then it was back for our farewell dinner at Hotel Toruño, featuring Wild Boar stew and their legendary Flamingo-shaped dessert!

## Day 3

**Tuesday 14th February**

We headed out once more with Angelica and Jose Manuel to take a final look around the Iberian Lynx territories of the area. Following the same routes as yesterday morning, we came across some familiar faces, such as our

Little Owl pair, and some new ones, like the family of Wild Boar we encountered, mum stood stock still, stripey piglets scampering for cover! Four Hoopoes sat nicely in a field for the photographers.

But the star was again our Iberian Lynx Sed, who today put in two appearances! First, we spotted her sat beneath a Cork Oak tree, where she stayed for several minutes before stalking away and giving us all great views! Later we spotted her again, much closer to the path, resting beside a bush.

Fantastic encounters!! But having crossed paths three times we decided it was time to leave her in peace and head back to El Rocío. Here we said our goodbyes to the team from Doñana Nature, and also our hosts at Hotel Toruño as it was time to head upstream to our second base in Sierra Morena.

En route we took our picnic lunch at Acebuche heath, where flurries of Iberian Magpies delighted the photographers, and a gigantic *tortilla de patatas* delighted everyone!

We arrived at our accommodation at Los Pinos Complejo Rural with time to relax and settle into our new habitat, before our first outstanding three course meal courtesy of Ramón and the team.

## Day 4

Wednesday 15th February

Today we got our first real views of our new mountain habitat – and very beautiful it was! We drove up to the well-known Iberian Lynx-spotting area of La Lancha, which gives expansive views out over a huge wooded valley.

Here we watched the morning unfold accompanied by the calls of Iberian Green Woodpeckers, Red-legged Partridge, Hawfinch, Sardinian and Dartford Warbler, with Red and Fallow Deer dotted across the landscape, and three Iberian Ibex glimpsed on a distant hill.

As the midday quiet settled in, vultures began to leave their colonies so we headed on to our picnic point, picking up on the way Iberian Green Woodpecker and Blue Rock Thrush perched together on a boulder. The picnic tables overlooked another vast valley, home to many raptors, and we immediately picked up many Griffon Vultures and Eurasian Black Vultures, and a Golden Eagle perched on a rock.

As we finished our picnic we noticed a group of Iberian Ibex had quietly joined us! This group of young males were tranquil and allowed us to get quite close. Meanwhile it all kicked off at the tables and we returned to find a post-picnic party of Eurasian Nuthatch, Crested Tit and Firecrest!

Next we descended down to the dam at the base of the valley, picking up Rock Buntings on the way down. From the dam we could see a mother and kid Spanish Ibex perched precariously (to human eyes!) on a rock face. Many Eurasian Crag Martins perched on the dam, and a Blue Rock Thrush showed nicely by the reservoir.

We finished the day back at La Lancha, where we were treated to an incredible display by four adult Spanish Imperial Eagles! We watched them for a long time, calling, stooping, rising again, grappling talons and even having a go at a Griffon Vulture! A spectacular end to a fantastic day in the hills. It kept on giving as we came across six male Mouflon on the way home!

We celebrated with the restaurant's stunning food, which today featured *lomo de orza* (local speciality of slow-boiled ham cured in a ceramic pot with spices and lemon), *tomates a la abuela* (granny's tomatoes, with local olive oil, garlic and sea salt), local lamb chops and an outrageously rich chocolate mousse!

## Day 5

## Thursday 16th February

We began the day once more up at La Lancha. It was definitely a Mouflon day, with several groups of horned males scattered across the landscape during the course of the morning.

The group spread out along the road so we could look out and cover different areas between us in our search for a lynx sighting, but even in the absence of the elusive cat there was plenty to enjoy, with more good looks at the local residents including Dartford Warbler and a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles.

We took our picnic once more at Los Escoriales – featuring as ever a mouth-watering selection of local olives, salads, cheeses, and wines. Once everyone had finished eating Niki presented the group with a Lynx poop she had found nearby!

After returning to the hotel for a quick coffee and a bit of downtime, we headed to a different area, to the banks of Rio Jándula, to explore different Iberian Lynx territories. This area had a very different feel, with Cirl Buntings, Long-tailed Tits, Firecrests and Short-toed Treecreepers accompanying us on this pretty riverside walk.

The section of river concludes in another reservoir dam, and we looked out from here for a while, enjoying the activities of many noisy Spotless Starlings and wintering Common Chiffchaffs as the sun lowered.

## Day 6

## Friday 17th February

Time for another walk to the dam. In the early morning light, we were alerted to the presence of a European Otter fishing really close! We watch quietly as he dove around in the pool. It soon became apparent there was a second otter with him and we got great views of the two together.

By the river, more Lynx scat, made almost entirely of rabbit fur, but with some intriguing traces of Iberian Magpie wings!

From the dam we enjoyed Grey Wagtail activity and a Common Kingfisher perched close. Crested Tits called from the Stone Pines, Woodlark sang and we got some great views of European Serin as we walked back to the vans.

All too soon it was time to take one last look at this beautiful landscape and head back to Los Pinos, where we said “*¡Hasta la proxima!*” to Ramón and the team before leaving the lynx's realm and making our way towards Sevilla airport.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, N = Near endemic)

		February 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	20	✓	✓			
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓	✓			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	4	4				
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		4				
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓		4	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓					
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	20	6				
Marbled Duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>	8	2				
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>	12					
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		1				
Great Spotted Cuckoo	<i>Clamator glandarius</i>		2			2	
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	2	20				
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1	1			3	1
Red-knobbed Coot	<i>Fulica cristata</i>	2					
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓	✓				
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		✓				
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	2	2				
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓					
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	1					
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	200	✓	✓			

		February 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	20	4				
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		2				
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓				
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		10				
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		2				
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓				
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	6	✓				
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1	4				
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓					
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	1	1				
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓					
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓				
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓				
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2	✓		12	8	✓
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓	✓				
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	20	✓				
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	4	✓	✓			
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	2		1	1	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	1	2				
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	3					
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	1					
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		2	2	✓	✓	✓
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		1		6	✓	
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	1					
Spanish Imperial Eagle - N	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		1		5	2	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				2	1	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				1		
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	8	2				
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		✓				
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓				
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		1				
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				1	1	1
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		2		6	✓	
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		20	✓		1	
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>						2
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1	1	2
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>				4	✓	2
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	2		1	1	1
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1		
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		✓	1		1	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>					2	2
Iberian Magpie - N	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

		February 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				2	4	
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓				✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	✓	6		2	
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				3	4	2
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>				✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>	1					
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		1		3	✓	1
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		2				
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		4	2			
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>		1				
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	2	✓				3
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	2					
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Whitethroat	<i>Curruca communis</i>		1				
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>			1	3	3	
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>				1	1	1
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓			1	1
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				4	✓	
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>				✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			1			
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		6		✓	✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>					1	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>				3	1	
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓		1	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>				1	1	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>						2
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓			✓	✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				4	8	✓



		February 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>						✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓				✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>				4		2
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>					2	2

## Other vertebrates

E=Endemic		February 2023					
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Iberian Lynx - E	<i>Lynx pardinus</i>		1	1			
Eurasian Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>		tracks				
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>			6			
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>		5		✓		
Spanish Ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>				10		
Mouflon	<i>Ovis orientalis</i>				6	8	
Pipistrelle spp	<i>Pipistrellus spp</i>	✓	✓			✓	
Schreiber's Bat	<i>Miniopterus schreibersii</i>				2		
European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>						2
<b>Reptiles</b>							
Vaucher's Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis vaucheri</i>					✓	
European Pond Turtle	<i>Emys orbicularis</i>					✓	✓

## Invertebrates

<b>Butterflies &amp; Moths</b>	
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>