

Spain's Cantabrian Mountains - Realm of the Bear

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 21 June 2009



La Peral



Valle del Lago (Cantabrian Mountains)

Report and images compiled by Byron Palacios



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Day 1

Sunday 14th June

London – Asturias – Pola de Somiedo

We caught our flight to Asturias from Stansted and all participants met at the luggage area after the flight. We arrived in Asturias in the early afternoon full of enthusiasm for the start of our tour. After a quick snack at the airport, we got in our van and then made our way south and up into the Cantabrian Mountains. The scenery became increasingly impressive as we progressed. We made a brief stop in the lovely village of La Riera overlooking the main gully towards Somiedo. The stop produced our first views of Griffon Vultures, Girl Bunting, Yellowhammer, Serin and Crag Martins. We continued our driving and finally arrived at our comfortable hotel in Pola in the heart of the Somiedo National Park in good time to settle in, check the hotel surroundings and get ready to enjoy our first local dinner together.

Day 2

Monday 15th June

Valle del Lago & Ruta de Castro

We started very early this morning in order to try to see any signs of Brown Bear in the area of Llamardal, but the foggy morning did not allow us to see much. The morning looked promising but chilly, and there were some patches of mist along the base of the hills around the village, but still the small streets and river introduced us to a range of common local birds including Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Black Redstart and Serin. After breakfast we drove up to Valle del Lago and walked on the Sousas trail where the first Yellowhammers, Red-Billed Choughs and Rock Buntings were seen. The scenery was superb and the flowers spectacular. Chamois posed on the crags, Iberian Rock and Viviparous Lizards scuttled over the boulders and butterflies such as Moroccan Orange Tip, Green Hairstreak and Wall Brown flew over the grassland. Bird highlights included great views of Red-backed Shrike, Tawny and Meadow Pipits, Garden Warbler, Rock Bunting, Black Kite, Griffon Vultures, more Red-billed Chough, Kestrel and a nice Booted Eagle that passed close overhead and over a nearby hilltop.

Once we were back in the van, we continued driving south and stopped in a lush picnic area at Gloria's parents' campsite, located at 1,400 metres above sea level in Valle del Lago. After a picnic lunch we set out to enjoy the rest of the area looking for gorgeous flowers and beautiful birds, including Girl Bunting and Yellow Wagtail, Rock Bunting, Buzzard, Grey and White Wagtails, and Northern Wheatear. After exploring the other side of the hill, we drove back to the hotel in Pola for a little break. After this, we drove three miles out of Pola to our first Brown Bear spot but to no avail. We decided to drive back and enjoy our succulent dinner.

Day 3

Tuesday 16th June

La Peral, Puerto Somiedo & Caunedo Valley

A pre-breakfast bear watch took us to the same point we tried the day before, again with no luck. After breakfast, we drove a short distance to the village of La Peral. The morning was very pleasant and sunny, perfect for flowers, butterflies; some large mammals like Red Deer and a Red Fox. We then enjoyed a walk to get up to view the picturesque Valley of Rio Somiedo. We explored the first area where a viewpoint has been made and had sightings of at least 20 Griffon Vultures, two pairs of Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed Eagle, Chiffchaff, Meadow Pipits, Stonechat, Red-backed Shrike, Yellowhammer, Red-billed Chough, Jay, Raven, Black Redstart, and others. Some Roe Deer, Chamois and Red Deer were concentrated on the meadows in good numbers. We also had good views of Blackcap, Coal Tit and more.

After the walk, we came down to the village car park to collect our van where several Garden Warblers and Stonechat were calling away. We drove up to one of the highest points of the road, Puerto Somiedo at 1,500 metres above sea level. We stopped by the road to take a look in a cattle meadow where we saw Rock Thrush, Meadow Pipit, Serin, Linnet, White Storks, Griffon and Egyptian Vulture, Black Kite, Raven and a beautiful Montagu's Harrier!

Around lunchtime, we found a pleasant picnic area where we tried for some other birds but the mist made the visibility poor and the wind also came up, which was an issue for birds especially. We saw many beautiful orchids such as Lizard, Military, Fly, Bee and Burnt-tip on the adjacent meadows, and then we drove back to Pola for a break, nibbles and supper!

Day 4

Wednesday 17th June

Valle De Salencia, Perlunes

Today started with a beautiful sunny morning. After breakfast we drove south from Pola and up to the mountains, following the route towards the Salencia Valley, located at 1,710 metres above sea level, the highest point we visited during our trip. The clear sunny day gave us great views of La Farrapona, an underground water lake system, surrounded by alpine crags and rocky beds, an ideal habitat for many good species, and we indeed saw several such as Alpine Chough, Alpine Accentor, Crag Martins, Rock Thrush, Serin, White Wagtail, Garden Warbler, Common Whitethroat, Dunnock, and more. We walked the track around the valley having dramatic views down to the whole valley far below, with Chamois walking and grazing on the hills - just great scenery to look at!

We found a good place for our picnic lunch in the village of Arbeyales, where we found an interesting Garden Snake resting within the creek pond! After lunch and having a relaxing coffee break in the local cafe, we drove to the area of Perlunes. A few stops were made in order to see some old brañas, while watching Whinchats, Northern Wheatears, Spotless Starlings and Corn Buntings, all of which appeared to be absent from the high valleys of Somiedo. At one point we stopped to scan the surrounding slopes and were rewarded by good views of two. Back at the hotel, most of us were keen for a cool Sidra drink (local cider) at the main square and were ready to enjoy another delicious local supper.

Day 5

Thursday 18th June

Valle del Lago & lower slope of Valle del Lago (Coto de Buenamadre)

We drove a short distance north from Pola de Somiedo until we got to the entrance of Senda de Castro trail. Lots of active and very vocal Firecrests and Bonelli's Warblers were around, as well as Iberian Chiffchaff, Crag Martins, Griffon Vultures, Common Buzzard, Short-toed Eagle and Kestrel. Lots of nice flowers and plants were found along this trail, including the very rare and endemic flower *Centaureum somiedensis*. We also saw many beautiful orchids such as Lizard, Military, Fragrant, Man, Fly, Bee and Burnt-tip. The sunny day brought some beautiful butterflies too, such as Large Tortoiseshell, Orange Tip, Moroccan Orange Tip, Little Blue, Idas Blue, and Marble White, amongst others.

We walked down to the picnic area in order to enjoy another Spanish-style picnic while watching some Griffon Vultures and a Short-toed Eagle, this time soaring very high in the sky. We moved on through Pola on the road towards Valle del Lago. We stopped half way up the road where we started walking towards Coto de Buenamadre. We took the trail from there down towards Pola de Somiedo. There were a great many colourful flowers and lots of species of plants were seen, including a wide range of orchid species such as Early Marsh, Robust Marsh, Dark Red Helleborine, a white variety of Early Purple and Lesser Butterfly Orchid.

Late in the afternoon, we kept our binoculars scanning the hilltops and meadows of the valley, just in case an elusive Brown Bear crossed by, but not today. We drove back to our hotel for nibbles and drinks at the hotel's bar and then we walked down the street to the restaurant, where another delicious local dinner was served for us.

Day 6

Friday 19th June

Castro – Pineda trail, Puerto Somiedo

The weather changed dramatically this morning, as we awoke to a grey and overcast day. During a cold morning's walk starting in the village of Castro, not far from Pola, a beautiful trail took us through a pristine beech forest where Great-spotted Woodpecker, Nuthatch, Blue, Coal, Great and Long-tailed Tits were seen. We walked this nice trail – although a bit muddy in parts – enjoying the scenery and the ancient villages that the trail took us through. We arrived to the village of Pineda and walked down the track towards the main road.

We enjoyed our lunch, but the weather became even mistier and drizzly, with some fog up in the upper area of La Peral and Puerto Somiedo. We drove to try to avoid the lower mist, and ended up in Pola, where we had a little walk around the village, watching some Yellow and White Wagtails, Blackcaps, and a nesting pair of White-throated Dippers.

Day 7

Saturday 20th June

Monasterio de Hermo & Puerto Somiedo

Another grey and wet morning today...after an early breakfast, we drove for more than an hour to the furthest side of the Somiedo National Park, where a very pristine old beech and oak forest lies in a deep valley at Monasterio de Hermo. Unfortunately, we couldn't do much as the weather was bad at our arrival, frustrating for all of us after the long drive.

Despite that, we found a nice spot over the mountains in Cerredo where we had our picnic lunch, and the weather was getting better and sunnier than the other side of the valley. We could see here some Griffon Vultures had started to get some thermals to fly! We continued driving back towards Pola and we decided to check the area of Puerto Somiedo again, as the weather dramatically improved. We walked the trail used by the sheep and cattle, having amazing views of a male Montagu's Harrier scanning the opposite meadows. We also enjoyed the rest of the area looking for flowers and also birds, including Yellowhammer, Yellow Wagtail, Rock Bunting, Buzzard, Grey and White Wagtails, White Stork, Northern Wheatear, Common Kestrel, Crested and Thekla Larks, Rock Pipit, SkyLark, and fantastic views of Ortolan Bunting. We then enjoyed the magical and quiet scenery having a little siesta break on the meadows. We had good views of Chamois, Red and Roe Deer grazing on the meadows beside the local 'ganado asturiano' (local breed of cattle from the region). We came back to our hotel ready to enjoy our last 'Asturian' supper of the trip together.

Day 8

Sunday 21st June

La Peral & Pola de Somiedo to Asturias Airport to London

A beautiful sunny morning took us to the high view point of La Peral, from where we overlooked the whole valley whilst watching a handsome male Hen Harrier gliding over the meadows, showing off! A few Griffon Vultures started their usual morning flights over the mountains, while Red-billed Choughs were having a noisy start. Garden Warblers, Stonechats, White Wagtails, Black Redstarts, Northern Wheatear and Yellowhammers were seen around the tiny little village. After being besotted by the lush views of the surrounding landscape, we decided to go back to Pola and have breakfast. Suddenly, a beautiful female Wild Cat turned up when we were leaving La Peral, posing for us for a couple of minutes amongst the tall grass...what a treat!!! Certainly, a wonderful way to finish our tour!

We had breakfast and then some of us went to the shops to get some souvenirs and some local La Peral blue cheese, which was very popular and eaten heartily as part of every picnic lunch. With bags and suitcases packed and loaded, we left Pola and made our way back down towards the coast.

We stopped en route for a break and to stretch and made it to the airport in good time. We were a bit sad leaving this incredible hidden part of Spain...a truly enjoyable experience!

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Species List

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	June								
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
1	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			✓					✓	
2	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>			✓	✓					
4	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>			✓	✓					
5	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>		✓							
6	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>									✓
7	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>			✓					✓	✓
8	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		✓							
9	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					✓				
10	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓					✓	
11	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				✓					
12	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>						✓			
13	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>								H	
14	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓					✓	
15	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>			H						
16	European Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>					H				
18	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>						✓			
19	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>			H	✓				✓	
20	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>								✓	
21	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>								✓	
22	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				✓	✓	✓			
23	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>		✓							
26	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus</i>								✓	
27	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	✓					
28	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		✓			✓				
29	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Spanish (Yellow) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>				✓					
31	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓	✓					
32	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓
34	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
35	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>		✓		✓					
36	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				✓	✓				✓
38	Common Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				✓				✓	
39	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>				✓		✓			
40	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			H						
41	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			H			H			
42	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		✓	H	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓
45	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>			✓	✓					
46	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>			✓			H			
47	Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>					H				

	Common name	Scientific name	June							
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
48	Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>					✓			
49	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			H	H	✓	H		
50	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>			✓		✓	H		
51	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
52	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>						✓		
53	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓
54	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>								
55	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>						✓		
56	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					✓	✓		
57	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>						✓		
58	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>			✓					✓
59	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>					1			
60	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>			2		3	2		
63	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhcorax pyrrhcorax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	H		
64	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhcorax graculus</i>				✓				
65	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓							✓
68	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	H		✓	✓	
70	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>			✓	✓				✓
71	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>					✓			
72	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
73	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓	✓					
74	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓					
75	Ortolan Bunting	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>			H					✓
76	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		✓	✓	✓				
77	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		✓	H					

Mammals

Red Fox Red Deer Roe Deer Chamois Wild Cat

Red Squirrel

Reptiles

Viviparous Lizard Iberian Rock Lizard Green Lizard Sand Lizard

Butterflies

Swallowtail Scarce Swallowtail Large White Small White

Green-veined White Orange Tip Moroccan Orange Tip Clouded Yellow

Brimstone Cleopatra Wood White Green Hairstreak

Purple-shot Copper Holly Blue Short-tailed Blue Little Blue

Black-eyed Blue Turquoise Blue Adonis Blue Common Blue

Red Admiral	Small Tortoiseshell	Peacock Butterfly	Queen of Spain Fritillary
Glanville Fritillary	Knapweed Fritillary	Spotted Fritillary	Provencal Fritillary
Chapman's Ringlet	Small Heath	Pearly Heath	Spanish Heath
Speckled Wood	Large Wall Brown	Wall Brown	Grizzle Skipper
Red Under-wing Skipper			