

Spain's Wild Asturias – Realm of the Bear

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 – 13 July 2018

Report compiled by Byron Palacios



Naturetrek Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Byron Palacios (leader) with six Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Friday 6th July

London Stansted – Pola de Somiedo

We left a sunny and rather warm England, starting our journey flying from Stansted airport to Asturias airport. Once in Asturias airport, we all gathered together at the arrival gate and had some dinner while sorting out our van, then we started our drive heading south towards Somiedo Natural Park. It was a dry evening and the drive was quite smooth at that time of the evening; we then arrived to Pola de Somiedo where we checked in to our family-owned hotel for a very restful night.

Day 2

Saturday 7th July

Castro trail – Perlunes view point

We started our first day on a beautiful sunny morning having a delicious breakfast. We drove a short distance from Pola de Somiedo to the point known as La Ruta de Castro (Castro trail) from where we started a long walk towards the village of the same name following a typical “Vaqueiros” old track. We found a few Griffon Vultures sheltered in the many caves of the impressive crags that surrounded the place; and also a flock of passerines which had plenty of Long-tailed Tits, Coal Tits, Western Bonelli's Warbler and Firecrest, amongst others. We also noted lots of colourful butterflies and some very interesting local flowers. We continued our walk down to the village admiring the very beautiful landscape and unique setting of the traditional village alongside birds such as Red-billed Choughs, Northern Ravens, Crag Martins, European Jays and a beautiful pair of Egyptian Vultures. We arrived to the village where we took a break enjoying the surrounding, dramatic crags and river. We then drove up the road where we found a beautiful spot to enjoy our picnic lunch amongst very interesting butterflies and birds.

After lunch and a short break, we took a very short drive to the viewpoint near the village of Perlunes where we had terrific views of the whole valley and a good number of orchids and other interesting flowers, alongside good birds such as Eurasian Jay, Griffon Vultures, European Buzzard and Crag Martins, amongst others.

The late afternoon turned overcast and grey and soon a big rain storm covered the valley: a good time to start our drive back to our hotel in order to get ready to do our checklist and then go for a delicious local supper at Casa Miño.

Day 3

Sunday 8th July

La Farrapona Pass (1,785 m) – Pola de Somiedo

We started today with another fairly early breakfast on another beautiful sunny morning! We left Pola de Somiedo straight after breakfast, heading northeast and driving straight to the top of the Saliencia Valley where the spot known as La Farrapona is located at 1,785 metres above sea level, and we were about to be walking to the highest point on the 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. We started our walk walking down from the car park along the dirt and rocky track where we enjoyed watching good birds such

as Rock Bunting, Dunnock, Crag Martins, European Serin, Water Pipit and Black Redstart. We continued our walk along the lake where we found another obliging Water Pipit, more Black Redstarts, Linnets, Crag and House Martins, and many interesting flowers and butterflies, while the noisy calling produced by Red-billed Choughs was a non-stop rhythmic sound for us to follow. By the time we hit the steep part of the trail, Northern Wheatears and a pair of Egyptian Vultures kept us amused during our resting stops; dozens of Red-billed Choughs and two pairs of Northern Raven kept flying rapidly in and out of the mine. We managed to reach the top, where seasonal-water lakes blended beautifully with the high-alpine landscape: a great place to take a good break before starting our descending walk, getting good views of a pair of Water Pipits, Red-billed Choughs, Black Redstarts, and a beautiful Short-toed Snake Eagle. Once at the car park, we enjoyed our picnic lunch overlooking a breathtaking landscape!

After lunch, we had a quick exploration of the track into the Saliencia Valley, watching a pair of Egyptian Vultures and over a dozen interesting butterflies, which are always great to see! By the mid-afternoon, we started our drive towards Pola de Somiedo, where we took a nice relaxing stroll along the river in order to check a few picturesque brañas (vaqueiros/local cowboys huts) which also produced more interesting birds such as Short-toed Treecreeper, Eurasian Blackcap, Griffon Vultures, Eurasian Jay, and more butterflies.

We then arrived to our hotel in order to take a good break before enjoying a delicious dinner.

Day 4

Monday 9th July

La Peral – Babia Valley

After breakfast, we set off heading south to the village of La Peral where we started a walk from the village towards the hilltops enjoying the spectacular views of the whole valley, mountains and interesting wildlife such as a large group of Chamois, Hen Harrier, Red-backed Shrike, Common Whitethroat, and lots of Apollo butterflies flying around while we were on the top of the mountains. The views of the valley and El Cornón (the highest peak in Somiedo, 2,190 metres) were fantastic and breathtaking, alongside with the daily activity of the valley, its cows, shepherds, wildlife, etc. We had terrific views of a Short-toed Snake Eagle with a snake in its talons.

By noon, we started our walk down back to the hamlet of La Peral from where we drove further south – and higher – to the village of Puerto de Somiedo (Somiedo Pass) and further down the Babia Valley to the area of La Cueta where we enjoyed a delicious picnic lunch, followed by a walk around the mountain, where we spotted interesting butterflies and a few bird species such as Hen Harrier, Short-toed Snake Eagle and Peregrine Falcon, amongst others. We then drove up the valley and towards El Puerto de Somiedo where we continued our walking amongst the broom and heather while enjoying the beautiful views of the Babia Valley in the distance.

After this very interesting visit, we drove back to Pola in order to have an early dinner, setting off to the village of Gúa afterwards in order to scan the rocky meadows in case a Cantabrian Brown Bear turned up. It was a mild early evening and a bit overcast, certainly ideal conditions for the animal to be around. After waiting patiently over one hour, our patience was paid off when this beautiful Cantabrian Brown Bear was spotted walking along the hedges, in search of tasty berries, and lifting rocks too, in case large invertebrates were found. We so enjoyed watching this amazing creature for over an hour - what a joy, what an amazing portrait of this wonderful area

and the icing on the cake! As the natural light was going and the night was falling, we happily returned to our hotel in order to celebrate this fantastic event drinking the tasty, but nevertheless strong, Orujo shots!

Day 5

Tuesday 10th July

Valle del Lago (Lake Valley)

We woke up today on a very beautiful sunny morning, having an early breakfast and setting off to the eastern valley of Valle del Lago, home of our local botanist guide Gloria who has been living up here all her life. We met her briefly at the top of the hill-top trail where we took a very good walk in these gorgeous surroundings and enjoyed the picturesque glacial landscape. The trail leads to the ancient Braña de Sousas which link to other 20 main brañas located along the pass from the Mediterranean slope to the Cantabrian seaside slope. We started our walk at Valle de Lago, located at nearly 1,500 metres above the sea level, doing a loop from the bottom of the village up to the track which leads to the high end of the impressive glacial valley, formed by lush meadows, beech forest and impressive rocky crags. Our route offered fantastic views of beautiful flowers, butterflies and a variety of birds such as Garden Warbler, Yellowhammer, Tree Pipit, Red-billed Chough, Eurasian Stonechat, Black Redstart and Mistle Thrush, amongst others. We gradually walked up to the top of the trail, passing the tree-line and getting to the open alpine meadows, where we found a pair of nesting Egyptian Vultures, European Buzzard, Red-billed Choughs, Northern Raven and Griffon Vultures, amongst others. We took a break at a very nice and natural view point from where we could appreciate the gorgeous valley and pristine beech and oak woodland on the side, complemented with the dramatic crag formations. We found very interesting flowers, birds and butterflies up here.

We trekked back to the village of Valle del Lago in order to have a delicious picnic lunch and coffee break at Gloria's camping area. We then walked down the main road towards the village car park where our van was, making a couple of stops to check some other wildlife, getting good views of a Rod Deer with her new-born fawn. We drove back to the village in order to take a break and we then gathered together again to do our checklist of the day, followed by a delicious dinner at our hotel's restaurant Casa Miño.

Day 6

Wednesday 11th July

Piedrafita de Babia – Riolago de Babia – Perlunes

After having our breakfast, we drove up the valley and heading south into the province of Leon and eventually to the Valley of Babia. The weather was wet but definitely better than Somiedo, where the rain was heavy at the time we left our hotel. We hit the mountain tracks anyway in search of one of our target endemic flowers in this valley, *Saxifraga babiliana*, which we found in the village of Piedrafita de Babia. Then we continued on the main road, from where we saw many White Storks, plus Common Buzzard, amongst others. As the weather was getting wetter, we called at a lovely local cafe where we warmed up with a nice coffee and hot chocolate. We then visited the village of Riolago de Babia where we visited the very nice local museum which gave us a great idea and close insight approach of this interesting area; we enjoyed a lot knowing more about the traditions of the valley as well as the interaction between the locals and its wildlife. We left the museum and drove back to Pola de Somiedo in order to have our picnic lunch at our hotel followed by a break until the rain eased a bit.

After lunch, we took a little drive towards the village of Perlunes, passing amazing crags and natural rock tunnels. We then walked up the track and along the lush meadows and craggy landscape, getting terrific views of Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Common Buzzards, Roe Deer and a beautiful Chamois. The late afternoon weather stayed overcast in but threatened to change again to wet, so we drove back to our hotel for a break, checklist and a delicious local dinner at Casa Miño.

Day 7

Thursday 12th July

Pineda Valley – Castro trail

The weather was back to being gorgeous today, so we set off down the River Somiedo valley road and drove up along a very steep track which took us to the beautiful village of Pineda from where we started our exploration of this lush area. The activity was a bit slow along this valley, but we managed to see some interesting butterflies, Chamois, and some birds such as Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, Griffon Vultures and Serin, amongst others. We got to the top of the road where the village of Pineda lies: a hamlet with only two permanent inhabitants! After enjoying the views of the valley from this very traditional-looking little village, we started our walk back to the minibus, before driving to a lush picnic spot to enjoy our meal.

In the afternoon, our resident botanist Gloria joined us once again, to walk the Castro trail where we continued finding very interesting birds and butterflies, alongside gorgeous and interesting plants, including another endemic *Centaureum somiedensis*, another of our targets. We spent the rest of the afternoon walking along this lovely trail before the early evening, when we drove back to our hotel in order to take a break and get ready for dinner.

Day 8

Friday 13th July

La Peral - Pola de Somiedo – Asturias Airport to Stansted

We had a very early start this morning in order to drive to the village of La Peral from where we scanned the hilltops and meadows in search of mammals, birds and other creatures. The morning was glorious, and we very much enjoyed the views of the valley of Somiedo from the view point of La Peral. Lovely birds such as Red-billed Chough, Northern Raven, Common Whitethroat, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures and a lovely Eurasian Sparrowhawk were spotted and seen beautifully! We didn't see any large carnivores, but we had great views of Chamois grazing along the meadows and walking on the hill tops, looking around as though they were on guard from any threat. It was a chilly morning, despite of the sun which was already up and shining; the mountains looked quiet as there was no sign of any of our major targets, thus it was time to drive back to Pola in order to have a late breakfast/brunch and then we had enough time to pack all our belongings in order to start our drive to Asturias airport.

Another trip for us which has come to an end; although a very happy one, we were slightly sad to be leaving behind this wonderful area of high meadows and mountains. A very unknown and unexplored area for the average visitor, we were fortunate to be in the heart of this unique part of northern Spain. Somiedo is a truly hidden jewel of the Cantabrian Mountains, a place which shared its wonderful wildlife, landscapes, gastronomy, kind people and culture. A place which took our minds away for a week and transported us to a different level of enjoyment which will remain in our hearts and minds forever and might bring us back again some time for a

second visit - definitely a place to come back to, to the beautiful landscapes and wildlife of Somiedo Natural Park.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Bear watching by Ted Flexman

*There was a hush of suppressed, shared excitement,
A comradeship of expectation, as we joined
The watchers on the terrace.
Nikons and Swarovski scopes poised and waiting,
Aimed at the steeply wooded scree slopes
Across the valley.
"This morning he left the cover of the woods,
Crossed into the open, down to the broken stone wall
To feed up on cherries.
He's sure to come again."
Twenty pairs of eyes scan the valley side.
Swifts cut the evening air.
Nothing else moves.
The light dims a little,
The warden paces nervously as reason questions hope.
The children fidget.
Cameras, binoculars, stools and folding chairs are packed
away.
Resigned, the group breaks up and people leave*

*Ignoring the blackbird's lucid evening hymn.
We stay on.
A single chamois and two deer
Are not enough compensation for
A failed opportunity.
Then Byron quietly says, "There he is!"
Emerging from the scrub, ambling into the open,
Comes a bear.
A massive furry boulder, blond as youth,
Careless of our silent attention, hones his senses on a supper
of
Berries, beetles, ants and worms,
His bulk perfectly engineered for searching
These rock strewn spaces.
We watched in the fading light,
Extraordinarily privileged to be observers of his ordinary
everyday,
His ordinary every night,
Our once in a life time.*

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	July						
			7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				✓			✓
2	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			✓		✓		✓
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>							✓
4	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
5	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	✓						
6	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		✓	✓				
8	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓				
9	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>							✓
10	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			✓		✓		
11	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>			✓				
12	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓			✓			✓
15	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				✓	✓		
17	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>	h					h	
18	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓				
19	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>			✓				
20	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
21	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>			✓		✓		
24	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
25	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓		✓		✓	
26	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	
27	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
28	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		h	h				
29	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
30	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
31	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
32	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓				✓		
33	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>	✓						
34	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>	✓						
35	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
36	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		h	✓	✓			
37	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		✓					✓
38	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	✓	✓				✓	
39	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	h	h	h		h	
40	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		h		✓		✓	
41	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	h		h	✓		h	
43	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>						h	
44	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	
45	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>				✓			
47	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓				✓

	Common name	Scientific name	July						
			7	8	9	10	11	12	13
48	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓				
49	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			✓	✓			✓
50	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
52	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>			✓	✓			
55	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		✓		✓			
56	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
57	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>				h			✓
58	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
59	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	h				✓
60	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>				✓			✓
62	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		✓	✓				

Mammals

1	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>					1		
2	Cantabrian Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>			1	1			
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus cervus</i>			2	2			
4	Pyrenean Chamois	<i>Rupicapra pyrenaica</i>			✓	✓	1	1	✓

Butterflies

Apollo, *Parnassius apollo*

Large White, *Pieris brassicae*

Small White, *Pieris rapae*

Clouded Yellow, *Colias crocea*

Pale Clouded Yellow, *Colias hyale*

Mountain Dappled White, *Euchloe simplonia*

Cleopatra, *Gonepteryx cleopatra*

Ilex Hairstreak, *Satyrium ilicis*

Little Blue, *Cupido minimus*

Black-eyed Blue, *Glaucopsyche melanops*

Mazarine Blue, *Cyaniris semiargus*

Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*

Silver-studded Blue, *Plebejus argus*

Small Tortoiseshell, *Aglia urticae*

Peacock Butterfly, *Inachis io*

Comma Butterfly, *Polygonum c-album*

Silver-washed Fritillary, *Argynnis paphia*

High Brown Fritillary, *Argynnis adippe*

Shepherd's Fritillary, *Boloria pales*

Knapweed Fritillary, *Melitaea phoebe*

Provençal Fritillary, *Mellicta deione*

Marsh Fritillary, *Euphydryas aurinia*

Ringlet, *Aphantopus hyperantus*

Piedmont Ringlet, *Erebia meolans*

Swallowtail, *Papilio machaon*

Black-veined White, *Aporia crataegi*

Orange Tip, *Anthocharis cardamines*

Berger's Clouded Yellow, *Colias alfacariensis*

Mountain Clouded Yellow, *Colias phicomone*

Brimstone, *Gonepteryx rhamni*

Wood White, *Leptidea sinapsis*

Gavarnie Blue, *Agriades pyrenaicus*

Green-underside Blue, *Glaucopsyche alexis*

Turquoise Blue, *Plebicula dorylas*

Adonis Blue, *Polyommatus bellargus*

Escher's Blue, *Polyommatus escheri*

Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*

Large Tortoiseshell, *Nymphalis polychloros*

Painted Lady, *Vanessa cardui*

Cardinal, *Argynnis pandora*

Dark Green Fritillary, *Argynnis aglaja*

Marbled Fritillary, *Brenthis daphne*

Glanville Fritillary, *Melitaea cinxia*

Spotted Fritillary, *Melitaea didyma*

Heath Fritillary, *Mellicta athalia*

Marbled White, *Melanargia galathea*

de Prunner's Ringlet, *Erebia triaria*

Meadow Brown, *Maniola jurtina*

Dryad, *Minois dryas*
Pearly Heath, *Ceononympha arcania*
Wall Brown, *Lassiomata megera*
Red Underwing Skipper, *Spialia sertorius*
Mallow Skipper, *Carcharodus alceae*
Small Skipper, *Thymelicus sylvestris*

Small Heath, *Ceononympha pamphilus*
Speckled Wood, *Parare aegeria aegeria*
Grizzled Skipper, *Pyrgus malvae*
Large Skipper, *Ochlodes sylvanus*
Essex Skipper, *Thymelicus linolea*

Moths

Wood Tiger Moth, *Parasemia plantaginis*
Humming-bird Hawk-moth, *Macroglossum stellatarum*

Herald Moth, *Scoliopteryx libatrix*
Scalloped Hook-tip, *Falcaria lacertinaria*

Other Insects

Mayfly, *Palingenia longicauda*

Black-tailed Skimmer, *Orthetrum cancellatum*

Reptiles & Amphibians

Viviparous Lizard, *Zooteca vivipara*
Iberian Rock Lizard, *Iberolacerta monticola*
European Frog, *Rana temporaria*

Common Wall Lizard, *Podarcis muralis*
European Toad, *Bufo bufo*