

# Wolves & Bustards in Rural Spain

Naturetrek Tour report

26 - 30 October 2010

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Great Bustard in flight



Wolf-watching country



Red Deer Stag

Report compiled by Dave Pierce

Images by kind courtesy of Pete Ramsey



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## Day 1

Tuesday 26th October

### Weather details; clear & sunny

The group's flight to Valladolid arrived on time and we soon assembled in the airport including Jeremy and Philip who had travelled by car. Just as we were about to set off in our mini conveyer Pete spotted a couple of Red Kites circling near the car park. Following this good start we were soon driving northwards with further Red Kites frequently seen, along with Buzzards & Kestrels. Passerines during the journey included our first Crested Larks and Spotless Starlings. At the town of Medina de Rioseco, with its impressive church spire, we turned west. As we drove along some of the occupants of the first bus noticed a group of Great Bustards, with the second bus spotting a Southern Grey Shrike, whilst the escorted Volvo reported a Lesser Kestrel.

We took our lunch by an almost dried up salina near Villafafila. Across the hazy, baked mud of the salina around 200, recently arrived Common Cranes were busy feeding, interrupted by regular bouts of excited calling. On the mud were four Golden Plover, whilst closer at hand a Stonechat was flitting amongst some short scrub. Raptors here included Marsh Harrier and Sparrowhawk. However the star birds here were Great Bustards. We taxied about a kilometre to draw nearer these spectacular birds, and enjoyed wonderful views at relatively close range in the adjoining fields. If this wasn't enough, we were treated to several groups in flight, observing their heavy ponderous wing beats. Around 200 were seen before we continued on our way. An apparently late Hobby was seen by some from both vehicles on this final leg of the journey. We finally arrived at the rural village of Villanueva de Valrojo, at 800 metres in the Sierra de la Culerbra, where we checked into the posada (inn), which was to be our base for the next 4 nights. Soon afterwards we drove the short distance to the nearest wolf watching point (Ferrerias de Arriba), which overlooked the village and much of the surrounding area. Red Deer were soon obvious, with around two dozen being seen, plus a single Roe Deer. Malcolm pointed out a distant male Hen Harrier and in the rapidly fading light he did well to find and draw our attention to a foraging Red Fox.

However with the coming darkness, that was the only canine of the evening and we returned to the posada for the first of several splendid meals, accompanied by some equably splendid local vino tinto.

## Day 2

Wednesday 27th October

Weather details; a frosty start, with some fog pockets, followed by a clear sunny day

After scraping the ice of the vehicle's windscreens, we returned to the previous evenings watch point for our dawn vigil. As the light improved numerous Red Deer were revealed, though no Roe Deer were seen. However the presence of the smaller species was betrayed by the frequent barking of a hidden animal. I couldn't help wondering what had caused it to alarm. From our vantage point the group were carefully and continuously scanning all around and after some time Alan picked up what he thought might be distant wild boar. Dave quickly checked this sighting and was elated to discover it was the object of our quest, a Wolf, indeed two of them! Possibly three!! They were a long way off and showing only for brief moments at a time, being obscured by clumps of deciduous trees for much of the time and even these glimpses quickly ended before everyone in the group had had a view or a satisfactory view. Frustrating as it was, Alan's observation was to prove the breakthrough we needed. Although I couldn't put a finger on it at the time there was something puzzling about the sightings. And when we later learned that there had been no wolf sightings in the area for months that added to my puzzlement. Before we departed for breakfast amongst the bird passerines around, a female Crossbill gave good scope views.

Whilst the guides were shopping for lunch, some good birding was to be had in and around the village. Jeremy and Philip had not far from the posada Rock Sparrow and a pair of Cirl Buntings. It was possibly the male of this pair that was a little later singing by posada. It was here too, in a bush, that Anna spotted a Ring Ouzel. Meanwhile on the village fringe Dominic had found a Dartford Warbler. A little later, when we had all gathered, we drove in the direction of Ferreras de Arriba, passing the turn off for this morning's watch point, and stopping as the road saddled the ridge. Here we viewed the corrales, dry stone circular structures with a partial roofed heather thatch, formerly used for keeping sheep in overnight, primarily to protect them from wolves, but also from the elements. A male Black Redstart was perching on the uppermost parts, whilst there were several Meadow Pipits flitting around the site. The area produced some butterflies and other insects with David finding a Praying Mantis. There was birdlife in adjoining pines and Dave pointed out Iberian Chiffchaff and Crested Tit, together with the more numerous Coal Tits. A Red Kite circled overhead, however the highlight of this stop was over 20 vultures which drifted slowly overhead, mainly Griffons, but including 3 Blacks.

Eventually we moved on to our picnic spot by an inlet on the Embles de Valparaiso near the village of Coinal. Several Cormorants flew by as we enjoyed a leisurely lunch in the warm autumn sunshine. A White Wagtail was feeding along the shore and a Southern Grey Shrike was using some overhead wires for its lookout. From here we drove slowly back towards the posada. On approaching Villanueva de Valrojo we stopped by the roadside and scanned around. A stunning grey male Hen Harrier was quartering some fields and open country across the road. Whilst observing the large flock of passerines which may have attracted the harrier, they were scattered by a dashing male Merlin. A little further along a Southern Grey Shrike was showing well on some bushes to the right of the road, whilst on the left a Corn Bunting was doing similar.

For this evening's watch we located ourselves by a rail track near the village of Boya, with extensive views over rolling heather moorland with a few fields and small woods dotted around, bisected by the occasional dirt road or track. Of the Red Deer in view there were a couple stags which were sparring rather than rutting.

Despite the vigilance of the group, plus observers from several other parties, we did not manage to spot any wolves, but our efforts were not entirely in vain. A Wild Boar sow approached amongst the heather from the left, a short distance across the railway, and then emerged in full view onto a wide track, enabling everyone to obtain excellent views, as she waited for her 7 youngsters to join up with her, before carefully proceeding slowly off to the right. A wonderful end to our first full day in the Sierra de la Culerba!

## Day 3

Thursday 28th October

Weather details; a cold, though not frosty start, followed by a clear, sunny day

At dawn we were in position at our Ferreras de Arriba watch point. A Wren welcomed the coming day with a burst of song, which was soon followed by the calls and sightings of other species including Jay, Crossbill, and a scolding Mistle Thrush. Further away a male Hen Harrier was buoyantly searching the open country for prey where quite a few Red Deer were grazing. The harrier wasn't the only thing searching. From our vantage point we were all intently scanning and just as the rising sun began to brighten the dull features of early light and virtually at the same time and place yesterday a Wolf was spotted. Quickly we established there were two. Again they showed briefly before disappearing by a clump of trees only to reappear shortly after for further glimpses. Whilst this was going on two Red Deer stags trotted into view from the right and entered the wood, just as Dave spotted a third Wolf approaching from the same direction. This was a bigger animal, an adult and it became clear that the other two were juveniles, not yet fully grown. The new arrival was almost certainly their mother and she padded off into the trees. Moments later she emerged from the wood, loping along a dirt track in our direction. By now everyone was able to locate and follow her. It was an exciting time and more drama was added when the patrolling male Hen Harrier began to mob the large carnivore. Eventually the wolf left the track and entered the rank heather to the left, heading slightly away from us, although we were still able to keep track of her for some time before being lost from view. We keep watch on the area for some time and although we obtained some very good views of a fox in the same general area, we didn't manage to relocate the much larger canine.

Before heading back for breakfast one of the buses diverted via the "corrales", where we searched unsuccessfully for Monica's lost camera case but found another Dartford Warbler. After the usual breakfast of toast and jams our afternoon drive took us to Villafila. We stopped en route to view and photograph one of the regions traditional dovecotes, before arriving at what should have been a large laguna by the dilapidated old village of Otero de Sariegos. As with the smaller laguna a little earlier, this one too was virtually dried up. Not only had the area experienced its normal hot and dry summer, the preceding winter must have been unusually dry. Consequently the expected wildfowl and waders were mainly absent. Despite this we enjoyed some splendid birdlife here during our picnic lunch, again in warm sunshine. Ten Great Bustards gave a wonderful fly past and two little troupes of Cranes did similar. Overhead at least five Red Kites were wheeling around plus our first 2 Ring-tail Hen Harriers of the trip, which soared around together. Closer at hand a Black Redstart was on the roof of the locked observation tower, whilst in the window frame of a ruined building what had appeared to have a stone, revealed itself into a rather cute Little Owl. Before leaving the deserted village entirely we stopped near where Jeremy had on the drive in spotted a Ring Ouzel. Although it was not relocated, a huge flock of excited Common Cranes feeding and calling presented a wonderful scene to the equally excited observers.

By around 6pm we had returned to the Ferreras de Arriba vantage point. We looked down on a couple, dog walking near where we had this morning's wolf sightings, and there was some cars and people by the approach road, which was perhaps the reason our first Red Deer were not seen until nearly 7.30.

As usual a male Hen Harrier was seen, but there was no repeat of the wolf mobbing on this occasion. With the light fading we headed back to the posada for a lovely evening meal which included seafood soup and chops with risotto.

## Day 4

Friday 29th October

Weather details; a dry dawn, with cloud and rain soon arriving

We experienced the first hour of our vigil at Ferreras view point in pleasant conditions, though the cloud to the west look ominous. As usual everyone was diligently scanning the vista before us. A Red Fox was below us during the first traces of light before disappearing, and soon a group of four Red Deer, both hinds and calves were seen, plus a solitary stag. A grey male Hen Harrier graced the scene and a Fox was again seen, this time its lovely coat was showing in the full daylight. Dominic had a glimpse of a Wolf around the same time as the previous two mornings. It was just one brief view and no one else saw it and very soon with the cloud and rain spilling in we were forced to retire for breakfast a little earlier than normal.

With the weather still inclement, just after midday we headed eastwards with the hope that we may out-run it. After crossing the old stone bridge over the Rio Esla we stopped during a lull in the rain and viewed the dammed waters. Over a hundred dabbling ducks were feeding, comprising of mainly Mallard, with around 20 Wigeon and eight Gadwall. A Grey Heron stalked along the edge of the river, and Cormorants were frequently flying over, whilst approximately 20 Crag Martins were hawking for insects. Hastened by the resumption of the rain we drove a little further and then took to a series of dirt roads in search of Black-shouldered Kites in a typical dehesa habitat. One had been glimpsed by a couple of members of the group yesterday but in the steady rain our efforts proved to be in vain. A Red Kite quartered the area at treetop level, its heading searching the ground below seemingly oblivious to the pouring rain and blustery wind. The group in one of the vehicles also managed to see three Wood Larks blending in by the furrows of a ploughed field before we eventually retreated all the way back to Villanueva de Valrojo and took our lunch in the posada.

It was dry, though with heavy clouds as we departed for the evening watch point at the Boya rail track site. There were already quite a few other would-be wolf watches there on our arrival, including one guy who had been there all day, though without any success. There were some distant Red Deer in view plus a single Roe Deer on the fringe of a small deciduous wood, but our vigil was cut short soon after the onset of more rain. Having taken shelter in the vehicles and with no sign of the rain abating we headed off earlier than planned. Having some time in hand before dinner we took in a more circuitous route along the valley which led through the village of Ferreras de Arriba. Despite the gloomy conditions, the fiery autumn colours of the oaks and especially the chestnuts wonderfully illuminated our passage through the valley. A troop Red-legged Partridges were the main wildlife observation of the drive before our final dinner back at the Posada El Tejar.

## Day 5

Saturday 30th October

Weather details; dry and sunny

It was an early start for everyone this morning. Jeremy and Philip departed first for their longer drive overland to France, whilst half an hour later at 7am the rest of the group in the two vehicles headed off too.

It was still dark on the approach to Villafafila when added a new species for the trip, an Iberian Hare leveret crossed the road in front of us, allowing good headlight views. As the dawn broke both Kestrels and Buzzards were seen by the roadside and as we neared the town of Medina de Rioseco we passed a stream of Red Kites, no-doubt just dispersing from a communal roost nearby.

After that we were soon at Valladolid airport. Here the remainder of the group said good bye to Alan and Monica who were going on to Madrid to visit family, whilst we all caught our flight back to the UK before heading our separate ways. It had been a wonderful experience of the real, rural Spain; of its villages and countryside and its exciting wildlife and of course seeing the mysterious Iberian Wolf, thanks to a great team effort!

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## Species Lists

Birds (h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	October				
			26	27	28	29	30
1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			1		
2	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		4	2	12	
3	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>				20	
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				80	
5	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>				8	
6	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			✓		
7	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	45	4	12	4	25
8	Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		4	1		
9	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gypus fulvus</i>		20	10		
10	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	4		3		
11	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1m	2m	1m 2f	1m	
12	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1				
13	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	50	5	12	6	10
14	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	5	1	2	2	3
15	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>	1				
16	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1m			
17	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				8	
18	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	200		300+		
19	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	6				
20	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	4		50		
21	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			1		
22	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Rock Dove/Feral Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decoto</i>	✓				
25	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			1		
26	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>			1		
27	Little Owl	<i>Anthene noctua</i>	h		1		
28	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	1	1	
29	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				3	
30	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓				
31	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓		✓	✓	
32	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓				1
33	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogene rupestris</i>		2		20	
34	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
35	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
36	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		!		✓	
37	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	h	h	1	h	
38	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
39	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		3	1		
40	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	2		1		
41	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>		1	1		
42	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
43	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelus</i>		✓			
44	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			2	✓	
45	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		1	2		
46	Chiffchaff Iberian	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		2	1		
47	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	1	1	h		

	Common name	Scientific name	October				
			26	27	28	29	30
48	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>	1	2	1		
49	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	✓		✓		
50	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓			
51	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓			
52	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓	h		
53	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	2	2	✓	✓	
54	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	*	250	✓	✓	
55	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	6	✓	✓	✓	
56	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓		✓		✓
58	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	12	✓	✓	✓	
59	Crow Carrion	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	2	10	10+		
62	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		1	H	1	
64	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓		
65	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			✓		
66	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		10	✓		
68	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		2	7	2	
69	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			1		
70	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓		

## Mammals (h = heard only)

1	Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>		2(3)	3	1	
2	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		8			
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	24	50	30+	12	
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	1	h		1	
5	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	1		1	1	
6	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus</i>		2			
7	Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>					1

## Butterflies

Lesser Clouded Yellow

Small Copper

Common Blue

Red Admiral

Large White

Painted Lady

Brimstone

Clouded Yellow

Small White

Wall Brown

Long-tailed Blue

## Other taxa (with help from David Anderson)

Praying Mantis (*Mantis religiosa*)Saddle-backed Bush Cricket (*Ephippiger ephippiger*)

Grasshopper

Migratory Locust (*Locusta migratoria*)

Common Darter Dragonfly

Lizard species