

# Wolves & Bustards in Rural Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 27 December 2010

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Common Buzzard



White Storks



Great Bustard

Report compiled by Malcolm & Ailsa Stott

Images courtesy of Tony Sullivan



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Julie Smith  
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## Day 1

Thursday 23rd December

Weather details: light rain and snow with sunny periods later and temperature -5°

We left the weather-induced chaos, which severely affected most of the UK airports, with only a 25 minute delay, on our flight to Asturias! The plane landed at 1005hrs local time and we were greeted with some familiar grey and wet weather! We collected the cars (and Martin) and were soon beginning our long journey south, leaving the industrialised coastal-belt and heading towards the high Cantabria Mountains. The rain and snow flurries eventually stopped so we took the opportunity for lunch at a service station before continuing our drive on the motorway network; travelling through extensive plains of meadow grassland and oak woodlands, where the skies were speckled with soaring Red Kites and Buzzards. We finally arrived at the rural village of Villanueva de Valrojo at 1445hrs, where we checked into the posada (inn), which was to be our base for the next 4 nights.

We had just enough time to unpack some warm clothes and enjoy a hot drink before driving the short distance to the nearest wolf-watching point (Ferrerias de Arriba), which overlooked the village and much of the surrounding area. As we stood patiently on the edge of the forest the late afternoon sun was deceptive, the air having a definite Arctic chill! Although birds were only noticeable by their absence, around a dozen Red Deer quietly grazed on the heather below. As the sky darkened, we abandoned wolf-watching for the evening.

Back at the posada we had just enough time to thaw-out before familiarising ourselves with the bar and enjoying a delicious supper and some excellent vino tinto. After our day of travel, we were all happy to retire to our rooms full of anticipation of the coming days ahead.

## Day 2

Friday 24th December

Weather details; temperature overnight down to -6°C, followed by a clear sunny day

0815hrs and we returned to the previous evening's wolf-watching site to begin our dawn vigil. As daybreak arrived numerous Red Deer were revealed grazing on the heather below. The sunrise was amazing, casting a golden pool of warm-light across the landscape and a hint of pink falling on the distant snow-covered mountains; wonderful!

The forest remained eerily quiet, with no birds to be heard, a silence that was abruptly ended when Nigel announced the presence of a Wolf! Although the animal was quite distant, in the bright morning light it was unmistakably a Wolf. Its location, in a rather homogenous part of the landscape, made it very difficult for most in the group to pick-out before it disappeared almost as soon as it appeared! This provided evidence enough to boost our confidence that wolves were very active in the area and from our vantage point the group continuously scanned the landscape in hope of finding a second.

With no further sightings we returned to the posada for a late breakfast and to thaw-out! While Malcolm and Ailsa were productively engaged in shopping the rest of the group had time to explore the vicinity of our base and enjoy some local birds, including good views of a Southern-grey Shrike, Black Redstart and Rock Sparrow.

Although chilly, the weather was bright and crisp, so we decided to visit Villafafila, the second largest wetland complex in Spain after Coto Doñana. Much of this ancient wetland habitat has been lost to agricultural improvements and those areas that still survive are vital for some important farmland birds. Through EU funding these areas are now in pro-active management, through agri-environmental schemes, which should retain their conservation interest. It took about an hour to reach the site and we didn't have to wait long before seeing our first group of Bustards, very close to the road and providing some excellent views. Our first stop by a shallow laguna was not so inspiring, so we moved onto the dilapidated old village of Otero de Sariegos where hundreds of wildfowl had gathered. Over lunch we were entertained, first by a small group of White Storks over-head, then close views of a very determined Peregrine trying to catch an equally determined, and more agile, pigeon, while Fan-tailed Warblers put in brief appearances before vanishing back into rank vegetation, lovely views of a Marsh Harrier with the sun highlighting its creamy crown and not forgetting the Little Owl that look-on with a furrowed brow!

After a delicious lunch of local produce, bread, ham, cheese, and olives followed by biscuits and fruit, we resumed our search for large concentrations of Great Bustards known to be in the area. This quest involved driving down some dirt lanes where we eventually found several groups of Bustards feeding, however, they were very wary and difficult to approach; who could blame them after centuries of being hunted by man! On our return journey Malcolm noticed a pair of Storks at a nest on the church in Villafafila, so we detoured through the narrow streets to get closer views and take photographs of the birds as they 'bill-rattled' as if to confirm their nuptials.

We returned to Ferreras de Arriba in plenty of time for our evening vigil and even more optimistic of seeing wolf on this watch. We stood patiently full of excitement, scanning the landscape for any sign of movement while enjoying the sunset and some wonderful views of a Southern-grey Shrike perched on a nearby conifer tree. Before too long Malcolm spotted a Wolf and much closer than this morning's sighting. It appeared very pale, perhaps a young animal, as it casually walked up the track giving plenty of time for everyone to locate its whereabouts. It spent quite sometime below our observation area, walking across open ground, giving everyone the opportunity of really good views, before it was eventually lost in the fading light. We returned to the posada on a 'high', delighted with such good views of a Wolf!

Being Christmas Eve this evening's meal was a gastronomic affair. One delicious course followed another and the vino tino flowed until everyone couldn't eat or drink any more! Mari and Alberto had worked a special magic to make a very memorable and enjoyable supper, all our thanks to them!

## Day 3

Saturday 25th December

Weather details; temperature down to  $-7^{\circ}\text{C}$ , followed by fine sunny periods

Feliz Navidad!

This morning we decided on a change of tact, we would take a dawn walk and chance our luck with a Wolf encounter. The morning air was cold and crisp and how appropriate that Robins should be the first to be heard singing on Christmas morning! Although there were many signs of Wolf present, with footprints along the edge of the village, it wasn't until we regrouped over breakfast that Nigel and Deborah made us feel very envious as they recalled their close-encounter! ...as they walked the main track a Wolf suddenly appeared behind them, giving excellent views (ca 250 metres) on open ground before disappearing into the landscape!

While the leaders shopped for lunch, the area behind the hotel proved a good place for birding with some excellent views of Rock Sparrow, Cirl & Rock Buntings and even a Firecrest. We left the posada late morning for a relaxing day bird-watching and enjoying the local scenery. At our first stop Malcolm showed us the ruinous architecture (corrala) that was once used to protect sheep at night from weather and wolves. We spent sometime looking for Dartford Warblers, eventually finding at least two individuals and having some excellent views of a Black Redstart and Cirl Bunting, before driving through an oak and chestnut-clad valley en-route to our picnic site by an inlet on the Embles de Valparaiso near the village of Coinal. Although signs of Otter were very evident none were seen, only the presence of White Wagtails foraging by the shore.

After lunch we set-off to explore more of the Sierra de la Culebra, which are a chain of old, and very eroded, hills hugging the top corner of Spain's border with Portugal. The sierra takes its name from its snake-like (culebra – snake) zigzag shape definition. The highest point in the range is Peña Maira at 1256m. The landscape is best described as a mixture of heather moorland with broadleaved and coniferous woodlands, forming a transitional zone between Atlantic and Mediterranean habitats with oak representing the former and Holm Oak the latter. However, this is a highly modified landscape. Although much of the Sierra de la Culebra has been replanted with pine or turned into heather moorland (*paramo*) by a combination of fire and grazing, there are still some areas of regenerating Pyrenean Oak *Quercus pyrenicus*. It is probably this mosaic of habitats along with a combination of abundant prey and low human densities which makes the area so wolf-friendly.

Following the ribbon of asphalt as it snaked its way through this amazing landscape we ascended the precipitous mountainside eventually reaching the remote and picturesque village of Santa Cruz de los Cuerragos, high on the Spanish/Portuguese border, where the road ended. We parked the vehicles in a grassy field with some wonderful views over the wooded hillsides and enjoyed a stroll through the narrow streets of this 'preserved village' with its traditional, often quaint, architecture.

This evening we changed venue and planned on visiting Boya, another well-known site where wolves are frequently seen, on our return. We turned off the metalled road at Linarejos and followed a sand-track, parallel to the railway-line, for some distance. The route took us through pine forests and open scrub with a typical assemblage of bird communities, including Crested Tits, which those of us in the second vehicle managed some excellent views. We eventually arrived at our destination, the landscape spread-out before us, mainly heather moorland interspersed with blocks of conifer and broadleaved woodlands. It would be a challenge, to spot a wolf in this terrain! There were quite a few Red Deer grazing, but despite intently scanning from our vantage point we saw nothing else and with the light fading quickly we headed back to Posada El Tejar and another delightful supper.

## Day 4

Sunday 26th December

Weather details; temperatures -11°C overnight, followed by a lovely crisp sunny day

We arrived at Ferreras view point for our final dawn vigil. It was very cold, frost particles started forming on my telescope and only the hot drinks and hope of seeing wolf again made it bearable! As daylight broke across the valley, pools of sunlight saturated the Red Deer in a blaze of intense colour making them look even more majestic than usual. The chance of seeing wolf this morning sadly decreased with the number of hunters driving out on to the moor for the traditional Boxing Day shoot. So, with the thought of breakfast on our minds it was decided an opportune moment to return to the warmth of the posada.

Although it was cold, the sky was bright and sunny so we decided to make another visit to the wetland plains at Villafafila. After crossing the old stone bridge over the Rio Esla we turned off the main road then took to a series of dirt roads in search of Black-shouldered Kites in a typical dehesa habitat. Although some had the briefest glimpse of a bird, which could only be a Black-shouldered Kite, not all managed to see even that! As we neared the wetlands we pulled-off down a track where we encountered a very large flock of Chaffinch, which also contained Linnets, Tree Sparrows and Goldfinches, and on the arable fields Crested Larks appeared more obvious than on our previous visit.

Although the sun was shining, the temperature was deceptively cold and by the time we arrived at our lunch stop, as on our previous visit, the laguna was completely frozen-over! The few ducks that remained were all concentrated out in the middle of the ice and included lots of Mallards, Teal, with fewer Wigeon and lesser numbers of Gadwall and Shelduck. During our picnic small groups of Curlews flew overhead and we even managed to add a single Common Crane to the bird-list.

After lunch we set off in search of Bustards with temperatures still hovering around zero. Slowly driving the quiet roads, scanning the fields either side for flocks of Bustards, we had some amazing views of Red Kites, Hen Harrier and at least 4 Marsh Harriers. At one point we had a small group of Great Bustards fly low over the vehicles, which was simply an amazing sight! Although the really large concentrations of Bustards proved to be very elusive, we did eventually found a large flock of 250 birds feeding on distant fields. In order to gain better views we had to first negotiate some slippery tracks. On the edge of a small pool in the corner of one field we watched 3 Golden Plovers before continuing along even more slippery tracks but it was all worth it in the end, the views we had were amazing. And those in the second vehicle were very fortunate to witness a couple of Bustards in semi-display mode or was it a threat-posture? Returning to the main road was a great relief and along the way we inadvertently disturbed a Merlin which flew and perched on a post allowing good views.

This evening was our last wolf-watch before returning to the UK. Although some of the group decided to return to the posada, others ventured out for the final vigil. Although we were joined by a Dutch group also looking for wolves, on this occasion more eyes didn't necessarily produce any more sights of wolves and we had to be satisfied with another spectacular sunset and stunning views across the valley to the distant snow-cover peaks of Sierra de la Cabrera Baja.

After another delicious supper we all retired to our rooms to pack in readiness for an early departure the following morning.

## Day 5

Monday 27th December

Weather details; overnight temperature -6°C, cloudy with sunny intervals

It was a relatively early start for everyone this morning. After breakfast we loaded the vehicle and left Villanueva de Valrojo still slumbering in the cold, dark morning. As we departed the hamlet Sally felt certain she saw the shape of a Wolf by the roadside, but sadly with a long drive ahead of us we had no time to check it out.

Driving east along the A52 we were treated to an amazing dawn; the cerise clouds highlighted by the rising sun and turning north on to the A66 the snow-covered peaks of the distant Cordillera Cantadria assumed the look of a giant pink meringue and quite a spectacular sight! Our journey continued, tunnelling through some amazing mountain scenery where a group of horses, wearing collars with bells, appeared out of the wilderness as if by magic during a comfort stop at a service station!

By mid-day, and a 1000km since arrival, we arrived back at Asturias airport in good time for our flight. The flight was uneventful, arriving back at Stansted ahead of schedule. We collected our cases, said our farewells and melted in to the crowds for our onward journeys.

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## Species Lists

Birds (h = heard only; ✓ commonly recorded)

	Common name	Scientific name	December				
			23	24	25	26	27
1	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	6	2	2	2	
2	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		3		2	
3	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		8			
4	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		500		250	
5	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		2		7	
6	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		4		10	
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓		6	✓
8	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		2		8	
9	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				1	
10	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	40	30	12	45	7
11	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		3		4	
12	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1	4		4	
13	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1				
14	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		♂			
17	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1	
18	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		3		2	
19	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>				1	
20	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		40		250	
21	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				2	
22	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		24		50	
23	Curlew	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				7	
24	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				2	
25	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		✓		✓	
26	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>				2	
27	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	2	3	✓	✓	✓
28	Rock Dove/Feral Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Little Owl	<i>Anthene noctua</i>		1		1	
30	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		5		1	
31	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	1	12		120	
32	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		10	6	5	
34	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	12	5	6	3
35	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			4		
36	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2		3	
37	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		3	4	3	
38	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		8	3	4	
39	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	1	1	2	4	
40	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1		8	6	
41	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>				2	
42	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		2	1	2	
43	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		5		1	
44	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		4		6	
45	Firecrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			1	1	
46	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>			1		
47	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>		1	✓	6	
48	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		6	✓	2	

	Common name	Scientific name	December				
			23	24	25	26	27
49	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			✓		
50	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				1	
51	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	1	8	3	5	2
52	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		3			
53	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		4	2	3	3
55	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	6	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		3			
57	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	4	2	6	3	2
58	Crow Carrion	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			1	6	
60	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
61	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		✓	2		
62	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	30	✓	✓	
63	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>				h	
64	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		2		2	
65	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		15	1	3	
66	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		45		60	
67	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	✓	300		✓	
68	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		1	5	2	
69	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			5	1	

### Mammals

1	Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>		2	1		
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	10	20	24	14	
3	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus</i>				2	