

Wolves & Bustards in Rural Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 - 29 October 2011



Wolf Tracks in sand – L. Morgan



Short-toed Treecreeper – Robert South



Long-tailed Blue – L. Morgan

Report compiled by Lee Morgan and James Andrews
Images courtesy of Robert South and Lee Morgan



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Day 1

Tuesday 25th October

London Stansted - Asturias Airport -Villaneuva de Valrojo –Ferrerias de Arriba

After an easy flight from Stansted, the group arrived in sunny Asturias. After gathering and collecting our luggage we soon met Lee, and loaded everyone up and started our journey south to our Hotel in the Sierra de la Culebra. As we travelled, the weather showed its full potential with rain showers, icy rain and high winds (and even some fresh snow on the mountain tops) but through this we spotted Buzzards and Red Kites throughout the trip.

After a couple of hours we arrived at our destination, the Posada El Tejar in Villanueva de Valrojo; our home for the next four nights. We were welcomed to our hotel by the sound of singing Cirl Buntings and, after quickly settling into our rooms, we headed for Ferreras de Arriba and our first wolf watch of the trip. We scanned until dusk during which time we listened to the calls of Dartford Warblers and Subalpine Warblers and we watched Red Deer walking through the valley, but there were no wolves to be found. As dusk fell we headed back for dinner, served by our wonderful hostess Maria.

Day 2

Wednesday 26th October

Ferrerias de Ariba (watch point) – Villafafila – Ferreras de Ariba (watch point)

After breakfast we headed back to Ferreras for our mornings wolf watch. The weather was ‘changeable’, with passing showers, high winds and a chilly six degrees. Nonetheless the site was buzzing with singing Woodlarks, Crossbills and the persistent growling of Dartford Warblers. Once again the Red Deer strutted their stuff in the valley below us and a Fox put in a brief show (providing a tantalizing taste of how well the wolves can be seen in the area) but, by the end of morning watch, we remained ‘wolfless’.

After a quick stop at the hotel to make ourselves a packed lunch, we headed off to spend the day around Villafafila. En route there was a quick stop at Rio Elsa where two Great White Egrets took flight and we had our first views of wildfowl including Shoveler and Gadwall. We also heard a brief burst of a Cetti's Warbler from the surrounding undergrowth and a few people watched a scattering of Crag Martins drifted around the valley in the distance. We continued onwards, stopping on the edge of Villafafila to take a closer look around the ruins of some 17th century dovecots where we welcomed by Lesser Kestrels and Cirl Buntings watching from the wires above us. The place was alive with the sound of birds and we watched as flocks of Serin passed over us, Crested Larks sang from every post and Barn Owls peered at us from the pigeon holes amidst the ruins.

We continued to explore the agricultural landscape of Villafafila, stopping occasionally to watch the Marsh and Hen Harriers and Red Kites that circled over every field. We even managed some enticing views of a Montagu's Harrier and some small flocks of Calandra Larks before we spotted the first Great Bustards of the trip and we ventured off onto a narrow farm track for a closer look. We found even more Bustards just over a hill and as we scanned the fields for more we spotted dozens of Common Cranes dotting the distant fields.

After such a good start we rolled round to the ruins at Otero de Sariegos for lunch; en route managing to pick up a Short-eared Owl that was being bugged by a group of Red Kites. As we pulled up for lunch we found ourselves being scowled at by a nearby Little Owl, whilst a scan across the marsh gave us drifting Harriers, strutting Cranes and large numbers of Greylag Geese. After lunch we headed to the visitor centre where we all headed off to the shelter of the hides. The lagoons held large numbers of wildfowl, which included a few goodies including Pochard, Garganey, a Pinkfoot and a family of Whitefronts. After this boost, we headed back to Villanueva de Valroja.

At Ferreras, a Southern Grey Shrike showed well 'just in front' of the group, providing everyone with some great views (eventually). Unfortunately though, our evening wolf watch once again proved unsuccessful and as the light slowly faded we retreated from the watch point and made our way back to the hotel for dinner.

Day 3

Thursday 27th October

Boja (watch point) – Cional – Boya (watch point)

We woke to a bright morning and after breakfast the decision was made to try Boja watch point which looks over a larger valley. On arrival at the watch point we were welcomed by a cacophony of bird song and, as the sun rose, Dartford and Subalpine Warblers scolded us from the bushes while Siskins, Crossbills and the occasional Rock Bunting called overhead and Iberian Green Woodpeckers could be heard laughing in the back ground. Some of the group were almost tripping over the oblivious local Dunnocks while Roe and Red Deer moved through the Valley feeding. Sadly our target eluded us once again. (although two locals gave us news that wolves had been seen in the area the morning before). This news lifted the groups' spirits a little, at least we now knew that there were wolves in the area! We remained optimistic and, with the persistent showers of the previous two days turning into sunshine, perhaps our luck was changing?

We travelled back to Villanueva De Valrojo for a quick stop to pick up fresh picnic supplies, giving everyone a chance to explore the village. The little bit of sunshine meant the village had exploded in to life. The local Cirl Bunting was singing his heart out, small groups of Serins, and Gold finches flitted between the rough fields and even a few Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs had started to appear out of the woodwork.

But it wasn't just the birds that had woken up. A quick trip to the bakery and James stumbled across a lovely Boscas (Iberian) Newt, and the first Butterflies of the trip with Celia spotting a Queen of Spain Fritillary flitting down the valley. Even as we were all about to load up the vehicles and set off, a very showy, freshly emerged Long-tailed Blue posed for photographs in the car park. With our spirits raised, we headed to Cional for lunch.

A stroll along the lake edge, while our picnic was being set out, provided us with some nice views of Dartford Warblers darting in around the clumps of broom and a couple of Southern Grey Shrikes sitting out in the open, enjoying the sun. We even managed to spot the first Vultures of the trip, with three Griffons circling above the distant horizon. After lunch we took time to explore the area a little more. A closer look through a large flock of Long-tailed Tits provided some excellent views of Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Chiffchaffs and Nuthatches, whilst scanning from the bridge provided some nice views of a Kingfisher too.

After a while we travelled back to the village to search this great rural setting for more of the local wildlife. The village was still bursting with life with Black Redstarts bouncing round the vegetable patches, small groups of Tree sparrows and Linnets flitting between the gardens and Griffon Vultures circling over the nearby fields.

After a relaxed afternoon we loaded the vans once more and headed back to Boja, once again with the hope of spotting our elusive target. As we travelled, Lee had a tantalizing glimpse of a something wolf-like that resulted in a near emergency stop of both the vehicles and we span up onto a small agricultural track to investigate. Unfortunately we didn't see the animal again. Sadly it had disappeared never to be confirmed, but on our return to the main road we found ourselves being watched by a Black Vulture sitting on the floor in a field on the other side of the road. With this a great sighting and with this boost we headed on to Boja.

It was a wonderfully clear, sunny evening and the light across the valley was amazing. We watched as Roe and Red Deer moved through the fields and copses while, on the other side of the Valley, we spotted a family of Wild Boar feeding in a clearing. Well there was certainly plenty for the wolves to eat in the area! However, despite our best efforts watching, the wolves eluded us once again and as darkness fell we made our way back to the hotel for dinner.

After dinner a few brave souls ventured out into the frosty evening air in search of amphibians in the newly flooded meadows below the hotel. Unfortunately it was just too cold but we managed to find a few Marsh Frogs and, as we stared up at the crystal clear, starry skies, we listened to the Barn Owls screaming and the whistle of Redwings flying overhead. It was a fun way to end our wonderful day and we all trooped off to bed to prepare ourselves for the long day of wolf watching.

Day 4

Friday 28 October

Boja – Villafafila - Boja

Everyone got up early for breakfast, ever positive about the day to come. Once again we travelled back to the Boja watch point and waited for sun to rise over the valley. The watch point was cold (a chilly minus one), but as the sun came up over the mountains we were rewarded with some wonderful views of Roe and Red deer as they grazed peacefully in the valley (all too peacefully for our liking). As the temperature slowly rose, the Dartfords and Crested Tits started to wake up.

Then, out of nowhere, there was a movement in the valley as a fox slinked through a small copse and sat on a stone wall in the sun before disappearing into the undergrowth. We continued to scan as hopes were raised by a second fox that appeared and sat on another wall before dropping off to feed on something in cover nearby. As we watched we realized there was also a Griffon Vulture also sitting and feeding in the same area and, before it lifted off and perched in a nearby tree, our hopes were lifted with the knowledge that there may be the remains of a carcass (an easy meal for any passing wolf) in the area. We watched in earnest for the rest of the morning but sadly it was not to be and we left the watch point once again feeling ‘wolf-less’.

On arrival back at Posada El Tejar we dropped off Rue, Sarah and Rod Chapman (who had opted to spend a relaxed afternoon with a picnic enjoying the comings and goings of the sleepy rural village) while we grabbed our things and jumped back in the vans ready for an afternoon back at Villafafila. We stopped at the bridge over the Rio Elsa where we were graced with great views of a Golden Eagle soaring in the blue skies round the valley, while a Great White Egret dropped in alongside the bridge. Crag Martins buzzed round above us and we spotted a great selection of wildfowl on the river. With all these great views we headed on, looking all the time for wolves and Bustards.

It didn't take long, with Dave picking up on three Bustards close to the road, and we turned up the farm track to get closer. We pulled up and obtained great views of a group of seven Bustards strutting round in a field, while Marsh Harriers drifted round in the background. Whilst all this was going on a few of the groups attention was drawn to birds on the wires above a dried pool. There was a mixture of Linnets and Corn Buntings but more surprisingly a Moustached Warbler up on the lines too. On these great views, we headed to our picnic site where we watched Fan-tailed Warblers and Wheatears while Red Kites drifting around above us.

After lunch we trundled back down the track to Otero de Sariegos where we found even more Bustards. On pulling up to take a closer look, we were greeted by Rock Sparrows and Crested Larks on the lines above us and then everything was startled by an incoming Peregrine which thumped one of the local feral pigeons out of the sky in front of us! After some subtle stalking, we all positioned ourselves to watch the bird devour its prey. Moving on we found the local Little Owl (once again giving that disapproving look) while a large flock of Cranes rose from the salt pan circling round over our heads and trumpeting loudly. It was a magical sighting on which to end our day's exploration of the plains.

We travelled back to the hotel to pick up the Chapmans, and with the entire group together again, we headed back to Boja for our last night at the watch point. As always, the local Deer didn't disappoint and we watched them as the light slowly faded from the valley. Then, just as the sun started to disappear from the tops the rock slopes on the opposite side of the valley, the most magical and spine chilling noise carried through the air as three Wolves howled from the hill tops some distance away. We scanned frantically across the hillside hoping to catch a glimpse of the animals but that short, tantalizing teaser was all that the wolves were going to give us on this occasion. Nonetheless, the magical (and very rare) experience of hearing the wolf howl echo across the valley gave us all a real boost; a just reward for everyone's heroic efforts during some very arduous watching conditions.

We left the watch point on a high and returned to the hotel to discuss over a good meal and a couple of bottles of the local Torres wine that night...

Day 5

Saturday 29th October

Ferreras de Arriba – Asturias - London Stansted

We all woke up early and, knowing that we only had one last chance to see a wolf, we headed out to the Ferreras de Arriba watch point. We arrived in darkness and watched as the belts of low, thick cloud slowly lifted from the valley floor and the first of the morning sunshine appeared above the mountains. We watched patiently as a Red Deer stag trotted by and Crossbills flitted round over head. The clear skies overhead gave us great views of Jupiter and its four outer moons but, with the cloud not lifting from the valley below, we packed up and headed back to the hotel.

We had just enough time to quickly stop on a forest track (a known crossing point for the wolves) where we found a wonderful set of fresh wolf prints in the damp sand. It was another tantalizing taste of how close we had actually been to these amazingly elusive animals and which just added to our overall experience and magic of this rural corner of Spain.

On arrival back at the hotel everyone made a little packed lunch and we loaded up the bags and set off on our long journey home.

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Cirl Bunting - L. Morgan



Bosca's Newt – L. Morgan

Species Lists

Mammals (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	October				
			25	26	27	28	29
1	Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>				H	
2	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>			✓		
3	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
5	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓		✓	
6	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓		✓	

Birds

1	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Great White Egret	<i>Egretta alba</i>		✓		✓	
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	White Fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		3			
7	Pink Footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		1			
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓			
9	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓		✓	
10	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		✓		✓	
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		✓		✓	
13	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		✓		✓	
14	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓		✓	
15	Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>		1			
16	Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		1			
17	Black Kite	<i>Milvus nigra</i>		1			
18	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>			1		
20	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gypus fulvus</i>			✓	✓	
21	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓		✓	
22	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		✓			
24	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipter nisus</i>		✓		✓	
25	Goshawk	<i>Accipter gentilis</i>			✓	✓	
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
27	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				1	
28	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>		✓		✓	
30	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1	
31	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	✓	✓		✓	
32	Red legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓	✓	✓	
33	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓			
34	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓		✓	
35	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		40+		250+	
36	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>		30+		40+	
37	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓		✓	
38	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			H		
39	Black headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	October				
			25	26	27	28	29
40	Western Yellow Legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓				✓
41	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columbia livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Short eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>		1			
45	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>		2	H		
46	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		✓		✓	
47	Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1	H	
48	Green woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			✓	✓	✓
49	Great spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus brachydactyla</i>			H		
50	WoodLark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Sky Lark	<i>Alauda arevensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
53	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		2			
54	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogene rupestris</i>		✓		✓	
55	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓	✓	
58	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	
62	Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>			✓	✓	
64	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			H		
67	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓		
68	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			✓		
69	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>	✓		✓		
70	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Moustached Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus melanopogon</i>				1	
72	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
73	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H			
74	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓	✓		
75	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
77	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignacapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	
78	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
79	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓	✓	✓
81	Coal Tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Long tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓		
84	Short toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			✓	✓	
85	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓			
87	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
90	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	October				
			25	26	27	28	29
91	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>			✓		
94	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
95	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>			✓	✓	
96	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			✓		
98	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓	✓	
100	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	H		H		
101	Green finch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
102	Gold finch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
103	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
104	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
105	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		✓		✓	
106	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
107	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			✓	✓	
108	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓			

Amphibians

1	Boscas Newt	<i>Triturus boscai</i>			1		
2	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>			✓		
3	Marsh Frog	<i>Rana ridibunda</i>			✓	✓	

Butterflies

1	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>				1	
2	Southern Small White	<i>Pieris mannii</i>			1	2	
3	Long tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>			1		
4	Peacock	<i>Inachis io</i>				2	
5	Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>			1		
6	Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>				1	