

Wolves & Bustards in Rural Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 27 December 2011



Wolf-watching



Iberian Wolf



Red Deer stag



Villanueva de Valrojo

Images & Report compiled by Malcolm & Ailsa Stott



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Introduction

The Sierra de la Culebra is located at the southern fringes of the much broader Cantabrian Mountains and stretch for 95km along the border with Portugal on its western flank. Its slopes are wooded and the outcrop peaks on its summits are often covered with snow in winter. Its highest point, Peña Mira reaches 1,243 metres (4,078 ft) and is located near Flechas. These mountains are one of the few remaining strongholds of the Iberian Wolf and the principle reason for the 65,000ha 'Reserva de Caza de la Sierra de la Culebra' designation. There is a healthy population Red and Roe Deer as well as Wild Boar in the reserve; the main prey species of the wolf.

In the Sierra de la Culebra reserve wolves may occasionally be observed when attracted to a 'bait-station', known as a Muladar, where the remains of dead horses and donkeys are put out for them. Spain is one of the last remaining refuges of the Wolf in Europe, where populations are slowly recovering from a 1970 low of just 400-500 individuals. Current estimates indicate around 2,000-3,500 animals, almost 30% of the Western European population, and one of the largest concentrations, perhaps one of the highest densities in the world (6-7 wolves/km²) is found in the Sierra de la Culebra.

The ideal habitat of the Iberian wolf is diverse, encompassing a low human population density, (less than 10 inhabitants/km²) areas of woodland for cover and a high density of prey species such as deer and wild boar. That said, perhaps the most important single fact is man's tolerance and his willingness to overcome old prejudices; the symbolic nature of the species often unleashes deep, ingrained abhorrence in some rural societies, enough to bring strong emotions to the surface that bestow a high degree of irrationality to the debate on wolf conservation. Politics aside, the Sierra de la Culebra still offers the best opportunity of experiencing encounters with 'wolf in the wild' in Europe.

Day 1

Thursday 23rd December

Weather details: foggy temperature 3°C

Stansted and the 'Great Christmas Escape' was in full-swing and the frenzied check-in hall wasn't favourable for 'meeting and greeting' group participants! It wasn't until we actually arrived in the much quieter surrounding of Valladolid airport that we caught up with each other. As we flew across the northern Spanish coastline the day was just dawning. The snow-covered peaks of the Cordillera Mountain range looked stunningly beautiful in the early morning sun, weather that quickly changed once we descended into a foggy Valladolid airport. Cars sorted, lunch bought and we were soon driving through the flat, rural landscape before arriving at the village of Otero de Saregos where we had lunch and an opportunity to stretch our legs. Although the fog severely restricted any bird-watching, we did however manage to see many Red Kites and Buzzards hunting close to the road and a small group of Great Bustards in a nearby field. A Little Owl was seen on the derelict dovecote and just before departing a group of 5 Great Bustards appeared in flight out of the fog only to disappear equally as fast. As we retraced our way back down the track we saw a Peregrine Falcon causing panic amongst the local feral pigeons. Corn Buntings hung like 'strings of pearls' on the overhead wires as flocks Goldfinches fed off the roadside vegetation.

By mid-afternoon we had arrived at Villanueva de Valrojo and the posada, our base for the next 4-nights. After unpacking some warm clothes we set-off for our first wolf-watching experience. We left the village, in its misty cocoon, at 4:00pm and Malcolm managed to find a location at Peña Castillo which was fog-free. With the added advantage of high ground and a clear view across the valley we settled down for our first evening wolf-vigil.

This was our first opportunity to appreciate The Sierra de la Culebra, which is 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 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 and 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.

The low, evening sun cast the landscapes in golden-hues before wisps of mist drifted down the valley. Although the scene was very atmospheric, with the vista obscured it did little to improve our chance of seeing Wolf! With the light and visibility fast diminishing we decided to retreat back to the warmth of the posada and a welcomed evening meal before retiring for a well-earned early-night full of anticipation of the coming days ahead.

Day 2

Friday 24th December

Weather details; foggy am, less so pm with temperatures of 9°C

Despite the lingering fog we left the posada at 8:00am, with a good supply of hot water for tea/coffee, to revisit the previous night's wolf-watching location. By dawn the fog still persisted and with the landscape completely obscured, and little evidence it would lift, we reluctantly returned to the posada for breakfast at 9:30am.

Given the current weather conditions we needed a change of tactics if we stood any chance of seeing Wolf this morning. So, to maximise our chances and make ourselves more familiar with this remarkable area we set off after breakfast to explore and seek evidence of the Wolf's presence. We took the cars and combined a slow drive with a walk through 'wolf-country' in the hope of a close encounter. We found many signs of the Wolf's presence in terms of numerous fresh paw-prints and occasional scats before returning to the cars...while some continued to walk the track back towards the posada. This turned out to be good fortune for at least one member who did manage to get close views of a Wolf crossing the track. Ann's two companions, Mike and Moria, were less fortunate, because the incident happened while they were preoccupied watching the antics of a group of Long-tailed Tits high in the tree-tops!

We returned to the posada for a late picnic lunch before returning back in the field at 4:00pm. By now the fog had lifted sufficiently for us to scan distant landscapes looking for Wolf. Malcolm decided this evening we should try a watch from the forest track high above the village and we hadn't been there for very long before one of the Junta's Rangers arrived. The language barrier proved an initial stumbling block, but with perseverance, a combination of sign language and the knowledge of other international language we did manage to communicate and make some sense of his instructions. Malcolm left with Pedro (Ranger) to return a short-time after with instructions to board the cars for a short drive to where Pedro had placed a deer carcass earlier that week. Although we saw no wolves, our expectations had been lifted.

Back at the posada Maria and Alberto had been busy preparing a special 'Christmas' meal for us and it was delicious, all 5 courses! Vinto, Champagne and Schnapps all helped to make a wonderful evening despite the lack of Wolf sightings so far. Our grateful thanks to them!

Day 3

Saturday 25th December

Weather details; temperature down to -7°C , followed by fine sunny periods and 9°C

Feliz Navidad

The night-landscape sparkled in the car headlights on our drive to revisit the Pico ce las Carbajas site again this morning. There had been a severe overnight frost and dawn was an amazing experience; the first light casting pools of golden-hues across the heaths and the distant hills silhouetted against a cerise sunrise. The morning stillness only punctuated by the raucous calls of Ravens squabbling over the deer carcass and then, the spine-chilling howl of a single Wolf. It was a magical start to Christmas Day!

We returned to the posada at 9:30am for breakfast and a welcome cup of hot coffee and to make plans for the day ahead. The scenery had a real 'Christmassy' feel this morning, so we decided to take time out to enjoy its wondrous beauty before reassembling for lunch. During our various walks some managed to find a Short-toed Treecreeper others added Dartford Warbler to the increasing list of birds, while a lucky few had their first sighting of a Wolf; a single male asleep and enjoying the warmth of the morning sun! This proved an exceptionally memorable and rewarding morning in so many different ways for each and everyone.

After such an energizing walk and a generous lunch some decided on a spot of R & R, while the rest of us went in search of wolves.

We had only been out for an hour or so when a Wolf appeared on the track, about 120 metres ahead of us! I'm not sure who was the more surprised us or the Wolf; the latter eventually disappeared in to the scrubby heaths, but not before we had had some really good views!

We reassembled at 3:00pm, in confident mood and with great expectations for the short ride back to Pico ce las Carbajas and we were not disappointed when a Wolf suddenly appeared about 400 metres away! He was large in structure and seemed quite pale in colour, uncharacteristic of a Wolf. The quality of light was extraordinary good, so whether the 'blondness' was a 'trick-of-light' saturating the animal in intense colour cannot be ignored. He was indeed a splendid specimen and appeared to have just woken from a siesta in the warm sun, perhaps after gorging on the carcass earlier in the day? He stretched long and hard and sniffed the cold air before ambling a short distance to urinate. He walked a little further, stopped and posed before becoming obscured by vegetation. He soon reappeared and posed again before disappearing behind a tree, only to be seen briefly once more before vanishing in to the landscape. This was very obvious a Wolf with charisma, he oozed confidence and his whole demeanour suggested he was, perhaps the 'alpha' male.

As if this was not enough a Griffon Vulture suddenly appeared circling overhead, perhaps attracted by the smell of carrion? We watch this enormous bird for 5 -10 minutes, in perfect light, before it eventually drifted over the forest and disappeared out of our sight. Delighted with some extraordinary views of Wolf and Griffon Vulture we left to make a brief visit to the nearby '*corralas*', ancient archaeological structures used for housing sheep at night. There were plenty of wolf-signs here too, with fresh-prints as large as the palm of my hand.

The potential of more Wolf sightings soon drew us back down the hill for another evening vigil. After a short while four Red Deer stags, all supporting fine 'trophy' heads, appeared on the edge of the plantation below our watch-point. They looked majestic bathed in the glorious soft-evening sunlight. Only the sighting of a second Wolf feeding on the carcass broke the spell and preoccupied our attention towards the bait. This Wolf was quiet different from the previous encounter, it was much darker and less-confident its demeanour, appearing very submissive as it nervously fed on the carcass. We were extremely grateful to have the beast in view for some 30 minutes before it too vanished. Wow, what a great Christmas experience and now we all believe in Santa Claus!

Delighted with the day's events and following another delicious meal, helped along with several glasses of vinto, we all retired with a warm feeling this evening.

Day 4

Sunday 26th December

Weather details; temperatures -10°C overnight, followed by a lovely crisp sunny day and 7°C

Emotions still high with our Wolf encounters from the previous day, this morning we returned to try our luck again at the same site. The landscape was in the grip of the 'big freeze'; haw-frost making the scenery very picturesque, if a tad chilly! Although the raucous calls of Ravens announced daybreak, Red Kites were already at the breakfast table and feeding on the carcass! It was, perhaps no surprise that no lobo's came calling this morning, because the carcass would have been frozen hard! With increasingly numb digits and the thought of hot coffee we decided to return to the warmth of the posada for breakfast at 9:30am.

Although chilly, the weather was bright and crisp, so we decided to revisit the wetlands today. Villafila is the second largest wetland complex in Spain after Coto Doñana. Much of this ancient wetland habitat has been lost to agricultural improvements in post-war years and those areas that still survive are vital for some important farmland birds, especially Great Bustard. Through EU funding these areas are now in pro-active management, through agri-environmental schemes, which should retain their conservation interest.

Once we had reached the core reserve area Malcolm took a detour in search of Great Bustards and the possibility of Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Little Bustards. We passed a field where several Great Bustards could be seen, but we didn't linger for fear of disturbing these elegant birds, especially with so many hunters in the vicinity.

We stopped at Laguna de San Pedro, where many hundreds of Grey-lagged Geese had gathered and were accompanied by lesser numbers of Mallard and Teal. The strong-sunlight highlighted the speculum on the latter's wing making them luminescent, shining like huge emeralds.

We arrived at a site near Tapioles where we could see many Great Bustards in the distance. We stopped to watch Hen Harriers sweeping over the farmland before deciding the track looked rather dubious, and making a detour through Villalpando before returning to Otero de Sariegos for our picnic lunch. Scanning through the assembled waterfowl we managed to add new species, such as Shoveler, Shelduck and Dunlin to the bird-list and just before we left a Zitting Cisticola (Fan-tailed Warbler), normally a very shy and skulking bird of wetland, appeared perched at the top of a tree in the car park giving excellent views for all to appreciate this tiny enigmatic warbler.

We left the wetland area to retrace our journey back to Culebra via Villarrin de Campos. This happened to be an inspired choice of routes, giving the opportunity for some excellent views of Great Bustard close to the road and through the telescope. However, the stop will, perhaps be more memorable for the sighting of 3 Little Bustards that were also present. On the journey back we paused by the Rio Elsa in the hope of seeing Otter. Sadly this was not to be, but we did manage to add both Egret and Cormorant to our list.

We arrived back at Pico ce las Carbajas in high spirits, but alas only Buzzards and Ravens were seen feeding on the carcass this evening. With daylight fast diminishing we returned to the posada for warmth and to enjoy our last supper at the posada.

Day 5

Monday 27th December

Weather details; overnight temperature -8.5°C, frosty, warm & sunny 10°C pm

We had time for one last wolf-vigil this morning before it was time to pack and leave this remarkable area. We changed our strategy this morning and positioned ourselves on the wooded hillside, overlooking the village where we stood in the cold morning air intently scanning the landscape below. As the light improved we could see Red Kite and Raven scavenging on the deer carcass, but sadly no signs of lobo. All too soon it was time to return to the posada for breakfast and finish packing before embarking on our long drive north, but first we had an important celebration to mark - Dave's birthday!

With packed lunches to hand we departed the posada for the last time at 11:00am. The drive itself was uneventful and we reached the mountain service station by 12:50pm where we stopped for lunch. The huge, exposed granite peaks gave the scenery grandeur and for some the sight of a Golden Eagle gliding through the pass, its head gilded in the sunlight, was an added bonus.

The roads were fairly quiet and we made good progress, eventually reaching Asturias Airport by 3:00pm. Our flight was on time and we touched down at Stansted on schedule. With little time before catching our onward flight to Edinburgh we sadly didn't have the opportunity to say our farewells to all of you, so we would like to take this opportunity of wishing you health and happiness in 2012 along with many more great wildlife experiences!

Hasta luego, until next time!

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	December				
			23	24	25	26	27
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	600	800		500	
2	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				14	
3	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓			✓	
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓			✓	
5	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>				12	
6	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				2	
7	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	100			120	
8	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	1			1	
9	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				3	
10	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				2	
11	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				20	
12	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>				1	
14	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			1		
15	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				6	
16	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					1
18	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1				
20	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	9			80	
21	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				3	
22	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				2	
23	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				250	6
24	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	12				
25	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				15	
26	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	1				
27	Rock Dove/Feral Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	1		1		
29	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	1	2	H		
30	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	3	1		1	1
31	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	2	2	2	1	
32	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	6	3	2	12	2
35	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			2		
36	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			2		
37	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓		10	✓	✓
38	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		10	12		
39	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	4			1	
40	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		1	2		
41	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			2		
42	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	6	3	3		
43	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
44	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1	2	2	1	
45	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		2			
46	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1			
47	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	3	3	1	3	2

	Common name	Scientific name	December				
			23	24	25	26	27
48	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	1	2	2		
49	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	2		1		
51	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	3	1		2	2
52	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓			✓	
53	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	6	4	✓
54	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		3		5	
55	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	1				
56	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	100			150	5
57	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	✓	✓		✓	
58	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			H		
59	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	✓		30	250	✓
60	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>	6	10	1	2	
61	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	4	5			

Mammals

1	Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>		2	2	1	
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	9	7	12	7	
3	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	2	H			
4	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus</i>				1	



Zitting Cisticola



Griffon Vulture