

Wolves & Bustards in Rural Spain

Naturetrek Tour report

27 - 31 October 2012



male Wolf



Wolf watching



Common Cranes

Report compiled by Byron Palacios
Images by Julian Gayarre and Byron Palacios



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Day 1

Saturday 27th October

Satansted – Valladolid – Villafafila – Villardeciervos – Ferreras

Weather: Overcast & sunny

The group's flight to Valladolid arrived on time and we soon assembled in the airport, ready to start our adventure! We headed west via cross country roads spotting some birdlife on the way such as Common Kestrel, Red Kite, Carrion Crows, and others. After 45 minutes driving, we arrived to our first important location, the Lagunas de Villafafila Reserve. The 32,682 hectare reserve holds an incredible amount and variety of birdlife, and it was considered the largest extension of salty water lakes before a big chunk of it was drained for mainly agricultural purposes. We stopped here in order to look for Great Bustards, and having found them really quickly, we were also surprised to find large groups of Common Crane wintering in the area or simply on the way to the midlands. Other interesting bird species seen around here were Crested Lark, Black Redstart, White Wagtail, Common Buzzards, Carrion Crows, and a beautiful female Hen Harrier. It was sunny but cold...so we decided to make a move to one of the local bars in Villafafila where we had arranged a 'light' local lunch to warm up!

After lunch, we decided to check out those Great Bustards and Common Cranes from a closer spot, getting much better views of them this time, plus great views of Northern Lapwings, Spotless Starling, Sky Lark and a lovely Marsh Harrier. The cold put us off again, so we hit the road and drove straight to La Sierra de La Culebra, arriving to the village of Villardeciervos where our hotel is located, our base for the next four nights. After checking in and having a short break, we drove the short distance to the nearest wolf watching point (Ferreras), which overlooks a nice valley and happens to be one of the most active Iberian Wolf territories. It was quiet this evening and only a few Red Deer were soon obvious, with around four or five being seen in the distance.

We kept patiently scanning the area with no positive results wolf-wise; soon the light became gradually poor so we decided to drive back to our lodge in order to have our first of several splendid meals, accompanied by some equally splendid local vino tinto de Toro!

Day 2

Sunday 28th October

Ferreras – Valparaiso Dam – Ferreras

Weather: Frosty start, cold, followed by a clear sunny day

After a very early start (we faced the winter time hour change), some of us came down a bit earlier to get hot drinks courtesy of Julian and immediately got in our vans and drove towards Ferreras once again. It was a very cold morning, so we put on as many layers as we could in order to keep ourselves warm. After a nearly 2-hour wait and a couple of Red Deer, we decided to go back to our hotel for breakfast and a break, grabbing a good flock of Coal, Great, Blue and Crested Tits just before we boarded the vans!

After breakfast and a quick break, we drove 4km west of Villardeciervos to the village of Cional, where we enjoyed a nice walk around the Embalse de Valparaiso. Several Cormorants flew by or just perched on stumps on the water, while a Grey Heron flew by. There were some sections of the road which sounded quite busy by various ‘chips’ of little passersines - we picked a nice flock full of Coal Tits, Chaffinch, and two Firecrest that we all really enjoyed watching. A Short-toed Treecreeper was also seen here, fabulous birds! We continued our walk finding a nice Roe Deer along the track, plus loads of Red Deer tracks and some Iberian Wolf scat. Some Iberian Green Woodpecker, Red Kites and Southern Grey Shrike were also spotted around here. On the way back to the vans, we found an Iberian Chiffchaff and another pair of Firecrests; but an unexpected sighting kept us busy as an elusive European Mink was spotted by one of our tour participants, unfortunately just some of us had glimpses of it, but Julian saw it well enough to identify this scarce mammal correctly.

Lunch time was around the corner so we moved to a very nice picnic area on the other side of the dam in order to enjoy our meal, where the bright sun warmed us up! After lunch, we checked the opposite track of the dam hoping to find something exciting but it was slow apart from some Great Cormorants and Great-crested Grebes – so we drove back to the hotel to have a break and get ready for our late afternoon wolf excursion.

We then drove to the same point at Ferreras; this time, we managed to get a bit lower down and within the scrub in order to get clear views of the valley we were scanning. The sunlight was on our side and it was perfect as we were able to see every corner of the meadows, fields and forest edges. We were quietly and patiently scanning when a large male Wolf turned up and I saw it well in my scope!! I called out the finding and put the scopes on this beautiful Iberian Wolf so everyone could enjoy him - the light was just perfect and we all managed to see this individual really well, which made our day indeed! As the sunlight went and dusk came, we retired to our vans and drove back to our hotel in order to have a very well deserved dinner and celebrate our first Iberian Wolf sighting!

Day 3

Monday 29th October

Ferreras – Pedroso de la Carballeda – Boya

Weather: Frosty start, followed by a clear, sunny day

After some hot drinks, we set off to take positions at our Ferreras watch point once again. The morning temperature was down to -2°C...the day was sunny and bright though, with a lovely clear blue sky with a thin layer of mist drawn across the horizon, giving us a beautiful contrast in the early morning landscape! In spite of that, the area was quiet, and apart from some Red Deer walking across the distant meadows, nothing really happened. A few birds like Great Spotted Woodpecker, Dartford Warbler and Coal Tits kept us amused while we were there.

We drove back to our hotel in order to have breakfast and a little break. We then set off on our next excursion. This time, we went to the valley around Pedroso de la Carballeda, a vast and beautiful area located in one of the far west corners of the reserve; once here, we focused on a track which links two valleys, great for mammals and birdlife! As soon as we start walking along the main track, groups of Red Deer were spotted in the nearby meadows, so we put the scope on them, when suddenly an Iberian Wolf turned up in the background! We rushed to put the scopes on this single individual, which spent a bit of time moving along a large rock boulder, and despite the distance, we managed to see him well for a little while, then he just vanished amongst the broom!! It was certainly a very nice surprise which we welcomed with pleasure! After this nice wolf sighting, we drove a few hundred metres down the track in order to find a spot to set up our picnic lunch – we found a spot looking over the meadows and rocky boulders, perhaps hoping for more wolves, and certainly more Red Deer. We had a nice time enjoying our lunch, the sun and the lovely views of the area before driving back to our lodge to rest a little bit.

In the late afternoon, we decided to scan a different valley, so we moved to Boya in order to keep searching for more wolves; we didn't get more today but we certainly enjoyed watching Red Deer, including two fantastic and huge stags showing off their powerful rutting! With a bright moon, we enjoyed landscape at dusk and returned to our hotel for drinks and dinner.

Day 4

Friday 29th October

Villafafila – Ferreras

Weather: Wet and overcast

After breakfast, we noticed that a wet day ahead was hard to avoid; nevertheless, we kept going with our plans as the whole region was expecting rain throughout the day. Very positive and full of energy (for those who went to bed early!), we drove up out of Villardeciervos heading east towards the plains of Villafafila, in order to explore the area better. 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 a few Great-crested Grebe and a single Little Grebe in the distance. A Grey Heron stalked along the edge of the river, and Cormorants were frequently flying over, whilst a few Crag Martins were hawking for insects. The highlight here was a European Kingfisher posing for us by perching in a branch by the river for quite a long time, long enough to get great views of him through our scopes. We searched for otters or mink but we were not lucky this time; so we decided to carry on driving to the plains, where we stopped at the point known as La Tabla. The ruined village provides good habitat for some key species such as Rock Sparrow, Crested Larks, Spotless Starlings, Goldfinch, and others. We checked some bushes where Corn Buntings were sharing their perches with large flocks of Chaffinches (perhaps wintering species from northern Europe). Hastened by the resumption of the rain we drove a little further finding several Common Cranes in the adjacent fields; and then we took to a series of dirt roads in search of groups of Great Bustards and we had a few, but they were easily spooked and flew across the fields as soon as we were getting closer to them.

Other birds like Skylark, Marsh Harrier, Carrion Crow and a Peregrine Falcon were spotted around these tracks. At this point of the morning, we all agreed to take a coffee break in one of the typical bars of Villafafila, so we did, and it was also a good opportunity to buy some souvenirs from the area to take with us home! After the hot drink, we continued around the Villafafila lakes exploring, but the rain kept ruining our plans. We put our brains to work and, being hopeful, we improvised a shelter with one of our vans and had lunch at La Tabla. But even after lunch the rain was persistent so we drove back to Villardeciervos before going out again later in search of more Iberian Wolves.

The rain had stopped by the time we set off for our late afternoon excursion and we got to our usual point at Ferreras. We spotted two young male Red Deer grazing quite relaxed in the open field, but suddenly something was about, they let us know by their quick reaction, looking at the heather at all times and eventually running off! Unfortunately it was just me who found a nice alpha male walking along by the heath. Sadly, by the time I put the group on it, the animal lay down in the broom and went out of view...very frustrating!! We drove back to Villardeciervos in order to get ready for our final dinner, and hoped for more luck in the morning...

Day 5

Saturday 30th October

Ferreras – Villardeciervos to Madrid Barajas Airport

Weather: Cold, dry and sunny

It was an early start for nearly all of us this sunny and beautiful morning...we had a quick hot drink before we set off to Ferreras again. This time, we were all focused in finding our last Iberian Wolf as this would have been the best time to leave La Culebra with more sightings under our belt! The first wolf was soon spotted by some of us, the light was crucial as the first sunbeams were right on the heathland where it was found on the previous night. It disappeared for a bit, but was spotted again and it was then that we all got to enjoy wonderful and full views of it! It was the same male we had seen before around this spot - a very healthy and big 'chap' he was, gradually getting his winter coat...just gorgeous!! We also thought there was a second individual around moving side by side the heather and near the pine wood track! Julian and I were extremely excited and happy for the entire group, knowing that everyone had a great encounter with the most elusive of carnivores!

With big smiles on our faces, we needed to go back to our lodge to have brunch and grab our packed bags and head to Madrid airport. A nice farewell as we were about to leave Ferreras was a pair of Red Crossbills beautifully perched on the top of the pines by the vans, superb! After that, we left the hotel and headed to Madrid airport. We got to Barajas in time to catch our slightly delayed flight back to the UK before heading our separate ways. It had been a wonderful experience - thanks to a great team effort!

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Species List

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

	Common Name	Scientific Name	October				
			27	28	29	30	31
1	Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>		✓	✓		✓
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓		h	
4	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓			
5	Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>	✓				
6	European Mink	<i>Mustela lutreola</i>		✓			

Birds

1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓			✓	
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
3	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓			
4	Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>				✓	
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓		✓	✓
6	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓		✓
7	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓			✓	
9	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓		✓	✓	
10	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓			✓	✓
12	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				✓	
13	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	✓			✓	
14	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓			✓	
15	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓				
16	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓				
19	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	h				
20	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				✓	
21	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓		
22	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		✓			
23	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		✓	✓		
24	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>				✓	
27	Carrión Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
30	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓	h		
31	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓			✓	
34	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓			✓	
35	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				✓	
36	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	h	h	h
37	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓		
38	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>		✓			
39	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		✓	✓	h	

	Common Name	Scientific Name	October				
			27	28	29	30	31
40	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓			
41	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			h		
42	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		h			
43	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		✓			
44	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓			✓	✓
45	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
47	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓			
48	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓			✓
49	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓				
50	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>				✓	
51	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				✓	
53	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓		
54	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				✓	
55	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓				
57	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
58	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓			✓	✓
59	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		✓	h	h	✓
60	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>				✓	
61	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>				✓	

Reptiles & Amphibians

Fire Salamander, *Salamandra salamandra*

Marbled Newt, *Triturus marmoratus*

Common Toad, *Bufo bufo*

Common Tree Frog , *Hyla arborea*

Sharp-ribbed Salamander, *Pleurodeles waltl*

Boscas Newt, *Triturus boscai*

Natterjack Toad, *Bufo calamita*

Marsh Frog , *Rana ridibunda*

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