

# Wolves & Bustards in Rural Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 26 March 2014

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Iberian Wolf



Great Bustards displaying



Subalpine Warbler

Report & images compiled by Byron Palacios



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## Introduction

The plains and mountains of western Castilla y Leon hosted another enjoyable trip once again. The remote and rural area of Sierra de La Culebra was where we saw the most elusive of the carnivores: the Iberian Wolf! The weather was good during this trip; chilly though bright and dry! We enjoyed all our wildlife moments throughout this tour as well as the dramatic landscapes, villages, people, the local gastronomy and drinks, and our comfy hotel. Our efforts in the field were rewarded with fantastic views of Iberian Wolf; and we also saw European Otter, an array of beautiful birds such as Rock Bunting, Crested Tit, and over two-hundred displaying Great Bustards!

## Day 1

Saturday 22nd March

London Heathrow – Madrid – Villardeciervos – Boya

The flight arrived in Madrid in time, and the group met me and other fellow travellers right outside the arrivals gate. We were soon driving along the A-6 towards the province of Zamora. After a three-and-a-half hour drive and a lunch stop on the way, we arrived at the village of Villardeciervos to check into our hotel and take a break before going out to our very first excursion to the point of Boya. The day was sunny, but the wind was lifting up a little bit making our wolf watching difficult, and cold, so we decided to move and explore a nearby point known as Via Romana (Roman track). As natural light was getting poor, we decided to drive back to our hotel in order to enjoy our very first meal and local Toro wine, after a long day of travel for some...

## Day 2

Sunday 23rd March

Ferreras de Arriba – Valparaiso Dam (El Cional) – Ferreras de Arriba

A dawn start was made to visit the viewing point at Ferreras de Arriba. It was cold but bright this morning. We stopped the van on a dirt track from where we scanned the surroundings, watching some interesting birds such as Woodlark, Eurasian Stonechat, Linnet, Meadow Pipit and Red-legged Partridge. We also spotted a few Red Deer grazing along a field not far from us; when suddenly, some of us gasped “Wolf!” and there it was...a good-sized young male was walking relaxed and checking the surroundings. The sunlight was directly on him, and we were able to take some photos of this lovely canine...we were very lucky indeed! After five minutes, the wolf crossed over the tarmac and disappeared amongst the thick *Erica* bushes heading to the pine woods up in the hill. We then walked along the road and got closer to the area the wolf was seen last, but he just vanished. After a while we continued doing some birding, getting some interesting birds such as Whinchat, Dartford Warbler, Linnet, Eurasian Stonechat, Skylark and Woodlark. Very happy with the result of our early pre-breakfast morning, we returned to our hotel to enjoy breakfast and a quick break.

In the mid-morning, we set off to the village of Cional in order to explore the Valparaiso Dam where we took a pleasant walk along the track which surrounds the lake. We spotted fantastic birds such as Crested Tit, Iberian Chiffchaff and Rock Bunting here, keeping our eyes always open in case of any mammal...and this certainly paid off as some of us spotted another Iberian Wolf trotting along one of the tracks across from where we were. They were quick views and we followed the muddy tracks to see if we could catch up with this wolf but he vanished in the woods. A truly unexpected surprise!

We continued driving along the dirt track which surrounds the dam; a Great Cormorant was spotted, and a good sized male European Otter was swimming and diving in the dam's waters giving us a good show - we all enjoyed this lovely mammal; he showed off well to us! We also had fantastic views of a very handsome male Subalpine Warbler. After all these exciting sightings, we drove to the western shore of the dam in order to set up our picnic lunch in sunny weather! After lunch, we drove back to our hotel for a break and to get ready for our late afternoon wolf excursion.

We set off to the point of Ferreras at around 17:45 to push our luck and to try again for Iberian Wolves. The late afternoon weather was still sunny, with a bit of wind blowing from the north, but still good! We kept scanning the area from where we saw the Iberian Wolf earlier on that morning, but we didn't see any wolves in spite of the efforts made by everybody in the party. More Woodlarks, European Stonechats, Black and Red Kites and others were seen from this point again. Once the light started to get poor, we decided to drive back to our hotel to do our checklist of the day over some drinks, followed by a delicious dinner!

## Day 3

Monday 24th March

### Villafafila region – River Esla (Roman Bridge)

After a relaxed breakfast, we started our journey heading east towards the region of Villafafila; we did some birding en route and made a quick stop over the Roman bridge by the River Esla but it was quiet due to the overcast and windy weather conditions. We continued with our drive making a second stop at the nearly abandoned hamlet of La Tabla where we had great views of Lesser Kestrels, Spotless Starlings, Crested Larks, Corn Buntings, and others. Driving through the farm roads produced lovely views of Red-legged Partridge, Black and Red Kites, Northern Raven and a beautiful Hen Harrier male drifting by. We continued our birding passing the village of Villafáfila itself and exploring more of the plains around the lakes which were full of water at this time of the year, and also populated by lots of wildfowl. A flock of birds diverted our attention - a large group of over 200 hundred Great Bustards were spotted in the distance. We drove towards them getting our vehicle really close to them. In fact, they were very obliging and we carefully got out of the van to get our scopes on them. They displayed beautifully, showing off their fantastic plumage and incredible rufous-and-white patterns to each other, superb breeding plumage! We were amused and impressed with the way they showed off! Superb views of this most-wanted target bird!

The rain was coming and a break was necessary in order to use facilities and have a hot drink. Next we continued our excursion by driving around in search of other target species, but the conditions were challenging. We managed to check a few ponds where we had great views of Pintail, Teal, Coot, Mallard, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler, alongside a Northern Wheatear, Water Pipit, White Wagtail, Northern Lapwing and Crested Larks.

Lunch time had arrived but the weather conditions were not suitable for a picnic, thus we made the decision to drive back to Villafáfila's local pub and enjoy some good local tapas! After lunch, the weather improved and the sun started to brighten a bit, the wind was strong but at least it was dry. We drove to the abandoned village of Otero de Sarriegos where we scanned the salt pans finding a few interesting bird species, such as Marsh Harrier, Greylag Geese, Pied Avocet, Black-winged Stilts, Common Sandpiper, Black-headed and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and a pair of Greater Flamingos which were truly unexpected in this area; a good record indeed! We also spotted a single Iberian Hare running in one of the adjacent fields, getting much better views of this endemic mammal, than the pair spotted early in the morning. We the driving loop around the lakes of Villafáfila from the starting point of La Tabla where we ended up making a quick stop searching for Little Owls and Rock Sparrows which we sadly never found. Not to worry as we had wonderful views of other birds and wildlife, including the targeted Great Bustards!

We then started the drive back to Sierra de La Culebra, exploring the shores of the River Esla on the way. We took a diversion onto a lush dehesa area (holm oaks and meadow habitat) and stopped by the shore of the river and by the river jetties to scan the rocky crags in search of birds. We saw lots of Crag Martins flying around; and we were suddenly surprised by the presence of two European Minks, getting close views of one of them as he crossed right in front of us and along the rocky river shoreline fantastic! After these exciting sightings, we drove back to the main road making a last stop by the Roman bridge at the River Esla, getting interesting birds such as European Kingfisher, Black and Red Kites, Griffon Vultures, Northern Ravens, and beautiful views of a male Golden Eagle soaring over the bridge. We then returned to the hotel to relax before gathering together again for drinks, checklist and dinner.

## Day 4

Tuesday 25th March

Boya, Linarejos, Valparaíso Dam, Ferreras.

This morning, we again set off to the Boya viewpoint. We explored different areas searching for wildlife, but apart from a few Red and Roe Deer, there was little else. We drove back to the hotel for breakfast and a break before heading out again to different areas, but our attempts were frustrated by the windy and cold weather. We drove back to our hotel in order to enjoy our lunch indoors.

After lunch, some of us took a stroll around the village and, as the weather was improving, some of us jumped in the van to take a walk around the solitary pine woods and deciduous oak forests. We drove back to the hotel to pick up the rest of the group and drive to Ferreras once again in order to scan for more wildlife. The sun was up but the wind was still blowing. A few interesting birds such as Mistle Thrush, Wood Lark and Linnets were seen; Red and Roe Deer were also spotted nearby. We decided to walk back to the van and it was just in time as light snow flakes were falling, but luckily they turned into water drops as soon as they hit the ground.

We started our drive to our hotel in Villardeciervos, making few stops and scanning the surroundings in case of any potential mammals around, spotting two more Roe Deer crossing the meadows as the sun was disappearing in the horizon. We returned to our lodge to enjoy some drinks and our final dinner together which was special as we had one of our fellow traveller's birthdays to celebrate!

## Day 5

Wednesday 26th March

Villardecervos – Madrid –Barajas airport.

We had a relaxed breakfast, packed up and headed to Madrid to catch our flight to London Heathrow. A few birds were seen during our drive such as Common and Lesser Kestrels, Black and Red Kites, Griffon Vultures, Crested Larks, Crag Martin, Eurasian Magpies, White Stork, and more 'roadside birds' were that were easily visible while driving. We made a stop for facilities and coffee, continuing our drive and getting to Barajas airport in time to check in and catch our flight to London Heathrow. Once in Heathrow, we collected our bags and started the sad farewells, and hoped to bump into each other again in the future to share another exciting wildlife experience!

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## Species lists

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

	Common Name	Scientific Name	March				
			22	23	24	25	26
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	✓		✓		✓
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			✓		
3	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>			✓		
4	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>			✓		
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			✓		
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>			✓		
8	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			✓		
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			✓		
10	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>			✓		
11	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>			✓		
13	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓		✓	✓	
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	
15	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓		✓		✓
18	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			✓		
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓		✓		
20	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
21	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓		
22	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>					✓
23	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>			✓		✓
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
25	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>			200+		
26	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓		
27	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓		✓		
28	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>			✓		
29	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			✓		
30	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓		
31	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓		
32	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			✓		
33	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>			✓		
34	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			✓		
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓		
36	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
39	European Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓		✓		
40	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			✓		
41	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			✓		
42	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		h		✓	
43	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		h		✓	
44	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓	
45	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓		✓		
47	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common Name	Scientific Name	March				
			22	23	24	25	26
48	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
49	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓		h	
50	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓			
51	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓	
52	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓		✓	
53	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>			✓		
54	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓		✓		✓
55	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		✓		✓	
56	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓			
57	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			✓		✓
59	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓	✓		
60	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓			
61	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>		✓			
62	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			h		
63	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓		✓	
64	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	h	✓			
65	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>		✓			
66	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		h	h	h	
67	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓			
68	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓		✓	
71	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓	✓	
72	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓		✓	
73	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
74	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	✓				
75	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		✓			
77	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓		✓	
79	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓				
80	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓		
82	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>			✓		
83	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	
84	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	✓	✓		✓	
85	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓		
86	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓	
87	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		✓		h	
88	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			✓		
89	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		✓			

## Mammals

1	Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>		2			
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓		✓	
3	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	2	4		2	
4	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>					✓
5	Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>			3		
6	European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		1			
7	European Mink	<i>Mustel lutreola</i>			2		

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			22	23	24	25	26

## Reptiles

1	Iberian Rock Lizard	<i>Iberolacerta monticola</i>		✓			
2	Common Lizard	<i>Zootoca vivipara</i>		✓			