

Wolves & Bustards in Rural Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 – 12 July 2014



Iberian Wolf



European Nightjar



Rock Bunting

Report & images compiled by Byron Palacios



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Day 1

Tuesday 8th July

London Stansted – Asturias – Villardeciervos – Cional & Roman track.

Weather: Sunny & nice.

The flight from Stansted arrived on time at Asturias where the group assembled and was welcomed by Byron at the gate. We soon loaded our bags into the vehicle and started our three-hour drive to Villardeciervos, crossing the lovely Cantabrian mountains and drifting from the Atlantic slope to the Mediterranean side where the landscape changed dramatically. After a coffee stop to split the journey, we continued along the Ruta de la Plata motorway, soon to divert onto the road which led to Sierra de la Culebra. We arrived at our hotel in time to check in, relax in our comfortable rooms, enjoy the village and take a quick stroll around before our first delicious dinner. After enjoying the local food, we set off on our first evening expedition. We drove around the small tracks through the village of Cional where a female Red Deer and fawn made a few of us jump when crossed the road right in front of our vehicle! We then made a stop to scan the scrub and heath land along the Roman track, looking intensively and getting great views of more Red Deer which were very relaxed and grazing. The light was getting poor so we began our drive back to our hotel, getting great close views of a female Wild Boar and her piglets crossing the road in front of our vehicle.

Once back at the hotel, we retired to our rooms in order to have a good restful night's sleep and prepare ourselves for our exciting early start the next day.

Day 2

Wednesday 9th July

Ferreras road – Cional (Valparaíso Dam) – Ferreras road.

Weather: Sunny and hot. Windy in the afternoon.

We started very early this morning, setting off to a wolf territory located along the Ferreras de Arriba road, and arriving there just after sunrise. The morning was great; ideal weather conditions for any wildlife as the sun began to rise above the horizon. Amongst the songs and calls of a chorus of birds were Dartford Warbler, Tree Pipit, Stonechat, European Bee-eater, and even Golden Oriole calling in the distance. Some Red Deer were spotted in the distance and a single Roe Deer was grazing in the closer meadow. They looked relaxed but were constantly watching their backs in case a predator was nearby. We were enjoying watching them when all of a sudden, an Iberian Wolf was found by Byron in his spotting scope...and there she was, a beautiful healthy female standing by a bush and giving us full views when she stepped out onto the yellow field, staring at us as though she knew we were there watching her! We enjoyed this lovely animal for nearly ten minutes till she started to move along the yellow field, and then suddenly she was chased away by two fully grown Red Deer, making her run at an

incredible speed towards the adjacent pine woodland. It was a superb sighting and we all enjoyed watching our target mammal on our very first morning here! We then happily retired to our hotel to have breakfast and a little break, getting great views of Short-toed Snake Eagle perched on an electric post by the road.

After breakfast and a little rest, we drove a short distance to the Valparaiso Dam where we had a very nice walk on a wonderful sunny morning which produced an amazing amount of butterflies which we enjoyed watching. We also saw more Red Deer trotting along the scrub and by the water. We found a very nice spot to enjoy our picnic by the lake, and then took a drive around it in order to explore the other side of the bridge. The activity in the woods and scrubland slowed down and it was very windy; a good time for us to drive back to our hotel in Villardeciervos for a break.

We went out again in the late afternoon but the temperature was a bit hot for wildlife, keeping things quiet most of the time. We returned to our hotel for dinner and a rest as we had a very early start the following morning.

Day 3

Thursday 10th July

Ferreras road – Villafafila area – River Esla – Ferreras road.

Weather: Sunny and warm

Once again we had an early start in order to be in the field at first light and then drive to the plains afterwards. We drove back to the Ferreras road area once again in order to scan this already familiar landscape formed of large patches of European Pines and Ericca scrub. It was a beautiful morning and again the birds of the area kept us distracted. Whilst scanning the whole valley we had the non-stop and continuous Tree Pipit's song in the background. Although this morning there were a few fellow 'wolf watchers', there were no signs of our most-wanted canine, however we did see Red and Roe Deer, and some raptors such as Red and Black Kites, and Hen Harrier were spotted around the area too. As the morning went by, it was time to continue our way to the plains, going through the beautiful basin of the river Esla, where we made a stop along the Roman bridge. From here we spotted some very interesting birds such as Nightingale, Black-headed Gull, Serin and White Wagtail amongst others. We also spotted a European Pond Terrapin, and we had very good views of an American Mink moving quite quickly along the shore.

After enjoying this lovely spot – and a brief chat with an Argentinean walking the Camino de Santiago – we continued to the plains of Villafáfila, making a stop in the hamlet of La Tabla where we enjoyed watching a colony of over a dozen pairs of Lesser Kestrels, especially a female with three fluffy chicks which were already out of their nest basking in the lovely sun! There were also two beautiful Little Owls which we enjoyed watching. They were roosting in one of the destroyed buildings, alongside a family group of Rock Sparrows, and we all saw them really well. We continued into Villafafila making another stop in one of the salty lakes where large groups of water birds and raptors were found: a big colony of Whiskered Terns and Pied Avocets were obvious patches in the water, alongside Black-winged Stilt, Northern Lapwing Gull-billed Tern, Mallard and Northern Shoveler amongst others. A few pairs of Marsh Harriers were spotted here too.

After a nice picnic lunch, we continued towards the river Esla where the activity was productive despite the sun and high temperature. We then drove back to Villardeciervos to take a break before going out again.

Our last outing today was to Ferreras de Arriba. We saw lots of Red Deer and other interesting birds but there was no sign of any wolves. We went back to the hotel to relax and enjoy the local food for supper.

Day 4

Friday 11th July

Roman track – Zamora (river Duero) – Villarin de Campos – Ferreras road

Weather: Sunny and hot

Very early in the morning we set off to the viewing point at the Roman track. The morning was nice and sunny on the valley making the visibility superb, and the light was great, especially for our purposes. More Red and Roe Deer were seen grazing and walking around the area, alongside more interesting local birds such as Dartford Warbler, Crested Tit, Coal Tit, Red Crossbill, European Siskin, Woodpigeon, Carrion Crow, Linnet, Tree Pipit, and Great Spotted Cuckoo. We returned to our hotel for a quick breakfast and then immediately set off towards the town of Zamora where we took a nice walk along the river Duero which produced a few interesting birds. We then all had some free time to either enjoy this historic and interesting medieval town, or simply to carry on walking and birding around the Duero River.

We drove straight back to the hotel in the mid afternoon to take a break as the temperature was hot for looking for wildlife in the field. We went out again before dinner and saw lots of Red Deer and Roe Deer, but no signs of Iberian Wolf. With poor light conditions, we returned to our lodge to have our final dinner.

Day 5

Saturday 12th July

Ferreras road – Villardeciervos – Asturias airport.

Weather: Nice and sunny

Another very early start and this time we were determined to try and find our wolf! We went to the viewing point at Ferreras once again, trusting to have another lucky morning as we had had on Day 2, and to give our wolf 'hunting' a very last go. The morning was beautiful and the weather conditions were perfect, but after a couple of hours of intensive scanning nothing turned up apart from Roe and Red Deer. With great regret we decided to give up and returned to our hotel.

We had a late breakfast then packed our belongings. Very happy and satisfied with our five-day experience in 'wolf country', we left our lovely hotel in Villardeciervos and headed north through the beautiful landscape produced by the impressive Cantabrian Mountains, finally arriving at the airport in time for our flight back to England.

Once back in Stansted we collected our luggage and got in the train towards London. The 'farewell' time had finally arrived and we all wished to each other all the best, and hoped to bump into one another on an adventure sometime in the future.

We had a very enjoyable and unforgettable time during this trip. We watched the mystic Iberian Wolf, and we were very lucky to have had such great views of a lovely female alongside its natural environment and habitat which we all enjoyed very much! Our hotel was lovely with wonderful local food, friendly staff and comfortable

rooms. A great asset which adding to the trip was sharing each other's company which was great! We all shared a very happy trip, experiencing an unknown corner of Spain where the mystical Iberian Wolf legacy will last forever...

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