

Wolf-watching in Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 27 October 2017



Las Tuerces. Scanning cereal crops



Las Loras Geopark and world heritage



Oak forest Mata Corba

Report and images by Gloria Lana



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Tour participants: Gloria Lana (Tour leader), Tino García & Toño Ruiz de Gopegui (Local Guides) together with 10 Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Monday 23rd October

London - Santander Airport - Cordovilla de Aguilar

The flight from Stansted arrived at Santander airport just a few minutes late. Tino, Toño and I were waiting for the group. When we were all together and the luggage loaded in the cars, we began our trip to Cordovilla de Aguilar; it was a 90-minute drive to reach this nice village in the North of Palencia province (just in the south-east of the Cantabrian Range). This would be our base to discover the Montaña Palentina Natural Park during the next four days.

We arrived around 5.30pm at the Casas Rurales El Mayorazgo, the Rural Houses where we allocated the rooms and had dinner at 7.30pm.

We enjoyed a nice dinner homemade by Rosa, planned the next days and went to sleep waiting for an early morning of surprises in the Palentina Mountains.

Day 2

Tuesday 24th October

Cordovilla – Montes de Valberzoso – Montes de Brañosera

A Roe Deer greeted me as I arrived at 7.:30am at Cordovilla to meet the group. We took the cars and drove, still in the dark, to arrive at the viewpoint for watching the Wolves before dawn. It was a nice morning, not too cool and really clear with no cloud in the sky.

We kept silent and scanned; suddenly Toño saw the first Wolf, moving so quickly that we hardly had time to watch it. We put our scopes and binoculars on the area, and soon we saw some Red Deer grazing among the broom shrubs. Tino noticed them become alert and located another Wolf. It was lying close to the deer and we could see its dark head, which meant it was not an adult but a young Wolf. We were able to watch this Wolf for about 10 minutes and then it moved; although it was perfectly camouflaged it could be seen by the entire group.

Some minutes after, another one was located in an area without bushes; this one was clearer, and we could see it was an adult. It was moving very quickly to the right side of the mountain. We watched it for some minutes and, soon after, someone located a big Fox crossing to the left.

Very pleased with watching our first Wolves, we went for a coffee in Barruelo, an old coal-mining village with not much activity nowadays.

After having a nice coffee, we continued driving to Brañosera Mountains to walk through its forests. These nice mountains are covered by Oak forests in the lower parts and by Beech forests on the upper slopes. We saw many different footprints, some of them from Wolves, and also two scats (droppings) of them; apart from that, we also saw signs of Pine Marten, Beech Marten, Genet, Stoat, Badger and Fox. We also watched and heard

different birds: Griffon Vulture, Buzzard, Chaffinch, Coal Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Long-tailed Tit, amongst others.

We had a nice picnic in this Oak forest drove up and continued walking to the higher parts. The flora was also very interesting: different species of oaks, some of them really old (more than 400 years), Beeches, heather, lichen, etc. The day was really sunny and hot, and we could appreciate how the dryness affects the flora: some of the oak trees are drying, the lichen and moss is not soft and some of the heather has been attacked and is turning black.

After a spectacular day it was time to go back to the hotel, have some rest and wait for another nice dinner made by Rosa. After dinner we did the checklist.

Day 3

Wednesday 25th October

Cordovilla – Valberzoso – Las Tuerces – Las Loras Geopark – Pisuerga River

At 7.30am we took the cars again and, just coming out of the village, we could see a Hare crossing the road. We drove again to Valberzoso to the Wolf viewpoint in the mountain, to try our luck again.

We hadn't even put up our scopes when Tino saw the first Wolves: this time, one adult feeding three young ones. The pups looked as though they were playing because they were moving around the adult and touching its mouth, to get some food regurgitated by the parent. Some minutes after, a young one crossed between the bushes and went close to a fence in the mountain, and we lost it. Then another adult crossed on the opposite side of the mountain between bushes and close to a firebreak, then we also lost it. We also saw two big Foxes crossing the mountain; they moved quickly.

It was another nice morning to remember, and when the sun was up we went for a coffee in Barruelo again.

After coffee, we drove to another protected area, Las Loras Geopark and World Heritage Site, spectacular limestone mountains near Aguilar de Campoo with nice views above the flatlands of Palencia and the Pisuerga River. First, we walked in Las Tuerces Protected Area, between the cereal crops, looking for birds. We recorded Rock Bunting, Rock Nuthatch, Serin, Skylark and Woodlark, amongst other species; we even saw an old Golden Eagle's nest and, although we didn't see the birds themselves, we watched other birds of prey such as Red Kite, Northern Goshawk and Eurasian Sparrowhawk.

We took the cars and drove to the top of the mountain; this was a labyrinth walk so we had to go one after the other between the rocks. We watched many birds, even a Wallcreeper, although it was seen only by some people at the front of the group; we tried to watch it again, but it had gone. From here the views were fantastic and we took many pictures.

Then we drove close to the river Pisuerga, stopped the cars at the bridge and looked for aquatic birds. We watched many of them: Grey Heron in a branch overhanging the river, Cormorant, White-throated Dipper, Common Moorhen, Mallard, Grey and White Wagtail, Cetti's Warbler, and a Common Snipe, perfectly camouflaged between the reeds. It was really a very interesting place for watching birds, but it was time to go home; a small rest and the dinner was waiting for us.

The dinner was splendid again. After dinner we updated the checklist with the new discoveries of the day.

Day 4

Thursday 26th October

Cordovilla – Alto de la Remolina – Sierra de Híjar – Mata Corba

At 7.30am we were all ready to take the cars, but this time we decided to change to a new viewpoint in the mountains, Alto de la Remolina. The area was covered by oak forest, above the Requejada reservoir. This is a hidden valley surrounded by mountains where usually wolves and bears may be found. We took the scopes and binoculars and scanned the area. We saw many Red Deer, even one with a white patch on its left side. The mountain had some white marks from the griffon vulture droppings, and soon we began to watch many of them, some landing, others flying; it was a really nice birdwatching session.

After two hours we came down to near the reservoir and stopped for a moment, but the thermal inversion made the place rather cold, and so we came back to the cars and headed for a coffee. This time we went to Hotel El Roble in Cervera de la Pisuerga, one of the biggest villages in the area.

After recovering our energy, we drove up in the mountains to the higher parts of the Natural Park, along a steep track to a subalpine area with superb views of Alto Campoo Sky Station and the Picos de Europa, the mountains of Sierra de Híjar. From Peña Tejedo we could see the Tresmares Mountain from where a drop of water might travel to three different seas (as Tino explained to us):

- To the river Nansa that flows in the Cantabrian Sea.
- To the river Ebro that flows in the Mediterranean Sea.
- To the river Pisuerga that flows in the Atlantic Ocean.

We were admiring the views when suddenly three Golden Eagles (two adults and a young one) were flying over the mountain, with incredible manoeuvres and nosedives. One had a hare on its claws and was throwing and catching it again: probably the adults were teaching the young one how to hunt. It was a splendid sight and it could be seen through the scopes by the entire group. Some people also saw a Roe Deer going into the forest. Tino and Toño explained that this is a splendid area for endemic limestone and subalpine plants and it is really beautiful in spring and summer.

We had lunch at an old oak forest Mata Corba with beautiful views. After the picnic we walked into the forest and could admire its richness with many oak trees more than 300 years old, lichens such as *Lobaria pulmonaria* (all habitats where it is present are protected by European Directive), Hedgehog mushroom, etc. This forest managed by GEMPA, an association for environmental studies in Montaña Palentina. We also found a dropping of Brown Bear that had eaten Rose fruits. Tino and Toño explained how charcoal was made in some holes dug in the forest. Suddenly we heard a Middle Spotted Woodpecker, and saw it moving between the trunks of the oaks.

After walking for half an hour, we decided to take the cars back to the rural houses; it was time for a rest but on our way back, we had to stop because Tino noticed an impressive Wildcat in the fields close to the forest. We stopped the cars and put the scopes to enjoy this splendid sighting.

It was a day full of wild watching and we were all tired. We had dinner and updated the checklist again; we had seen many new things.

Day 5

Friday 27th October

Cordovilla – Rabanal de los Caballeros – Santander Airport

Our last day in Montaña Palentina was going to be a very long one; we decided to spend the day looking for Wildcats, although we had seen one very well the day before. So, we started at 8am, having loaded the luggage, and began to drive between the fields and cereal crops looking for them. We had no luck with Wildcats, but we saw other interesting things, including a Beech Marten running through a field near the trees, some latrine holes dug by Badgers where they put their droppings, a group of Rock Sparrow which landed on a wire, and many Carrion Crows.

We didn't bother with coffee this time, as we wanted to continue looking for fauna through the early morning hours. We drove to Rabanal de los Caballeros, to another viewpoint on the top of a hill, close to a nice Pre-Romanesque Church. This is one of the typical landscapes of Montaña Palentina: low mountains with oak forests and the fields in the valleys. We scanned all the fields around, but there was no Wildcat; suddenly, though, a new bird was feeding on the grass: an Iberian Green Woodpecker. A Fox crossed the field twice and we could see it very well.

Then we had a new experience of walking along the bottom of a dry reservoir to look for animal footprints - we found lots of them: Bear, Wolf, Grey Heron, Fox, Otter, Red Deer, Roe Deer, Wild Boar, etc. All the fauna in Montaña Palentina went to the small river that crossed the reservoir to drink at night. It was a fantastic walk!

It was picnic time and we went to another nice oak forest with a stable and a stone wall where they enclosed the cattle in the past. There were many horses were around us and people got close and patted them, although the male was not very friendly, and we had to be careful.

After lunch we decided to have coffee at El Roble Hotel in Cervera and, with the energy recovered, we drove to the riverside to look for more aquatic birds. We found a nice bridge from which to scan the river, finding a Redstart, some Little Grebe, White-throated Dipper and a Moorhen, and also a confused Bat that had changed the night for the day. Some people were fishing White-clawed Crayfish on the river. This is one of the last places where you can find them in Spanish rivers; although in the past were very common, because of the American Signal Crayfish, many of them have disappeared from our rivers. They invited us to have some grapes from their garden and to catch some Crayfish. It was really funny how they pinched our fingers with their claws, and we had a nice time with them.

The day was going very quickly, and it was time to have an early dinner with Rosa's *tortilla española* in a picnic area, before continuing the drive to the airport in Santander.

The farewell had arrived, and it was time to say goodbye, hoping to meet again, sometime, somewhere, and remembering the days we had spent in Montaña Palentina, a natural treasure rich in fauna and flora and where the Wolves can still be found.

Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; S – Signs of)

	Common name	Scientific name	October				
			23	24	25	26	27
1	Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>		✓	✓		S
2	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓	✓		✓
3	European Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris silvestris</i>				✓	
4	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓		✓	✓
5	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓		✓	
6	Beech Marten	<i>Martes foina</i>					✓
7	Iberian Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		✓			
8	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>				S	S

Birds

1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓		
2	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				✓	
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓		
4	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓		✓	
5	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓		
7	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓	✓	
8	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>			✓		
9	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓			
10	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	✓				
11	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓		✓	
13	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓		✓
14	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓		
15	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>				✓	
16	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>				✓	
17	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			✓	✓	
18	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>		✓		✓	
19	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓		✓		
20	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>					✓
21	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓		✓	
23	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		✓	✓	✓	
24	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>			✓	✓	✓
25	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
26	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓	
27	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓			
28	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>				✓	
29	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
30	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	
31	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			✓		
32	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			✓	✓	
33	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			✓		
34	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓		
35	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>			✓	✓	
36	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>			✓		
37	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓		

	Common name	Scientific name	October				
			23	24	25	26	27
38	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓			
39	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	
40	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓	✓		
41	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		✓		✓	
42	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	
43	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
44	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓			
45	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓		
46	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>				✓	✓
47	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓		
48	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			✓		✓
49	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
50	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>					✓
51	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓		✓	
52	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓	✓	✓
53	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	
54	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓		
55	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓			
56	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓		
57	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓		
58	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			✓		
59	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓		✓	

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The group