

Wolf-Watching in Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 9 November 2017



Wild Cat hunting Water Vole by Javi Elorriaga



Searching for Wild Cat at Sunrise by Javi Elorriaga



Las Loras Geopark, Palenci by Javi Elorriaga

Report compiled by Javi Elorriaga
Images courtesy of Geoffrey Farquharson and Javi Elorriaga



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Tour participants: Javi Elorriaga, Tino García, Toño Ruiz de Gopegui, Eva Fernandez (leaders)
and 12 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Sunday 5th November

London – Santander – Cordovilla

The group timely reached Santander Airport where Javier, Tino and his team of local guides were waiting to welcome them. We got into the 4x4s and drove directly to the tiny village of Cordovilla, North of Palencia province, our base to explore the region. We reached the accommodation an hour and a half later, by the late afternoon, and went directly to rest and get ready for the wolf quest starting next morning!

Day 2

Monday 6th November

Valberzoso – Rebolledo De La Torre – Las Loras

As usual in this trip, the group left Cordovilla before sunrise and headed to Montaña Palentina Natural Park. We soon reached the advantage point from where we planned to look for the pack of wolves our local guide Tino had been monitoring in previous weeks. The day broke with rain and chilly temperatures so we waited some minutes in the vehicles for the light to improve. Next we mounted the scopes and it didn't take long until a wolf showed up in the opposite slope of the valley. We managed to relocate it several times as it progressed between the scrubs. Most of the group got reasonably good views through the scope. When this lone male disappeared in a nearby forest we decided to make a break and have a good cup of coffee. This was certainly a promising start which reinforced our expectations for the forthcoming attempts.

During the second half of the morning the weather did significantly improve and we visited Las Loras Uneso Global Geopark. We had a pleasant walk admiring the limestone cliffs where Griffon Vultures were numerous both perched and in flight. Red-billed Choughs, Ravens, Kestrels and a Red Kite joined in the scene. Two Cirl Buntings, a single Hawfinch and several Linnets were equally enjoyed before a striking Goshawk crossed the valley to disappear within the oak forest. Tino, Toño and Eva waited for us with the vehicles at the end of the trail and took us to the XII Century church of Rebolledo de la Torre. Here we enjoyed a nice picnic lunch and Tino gave us very interesting explanations on the significance of the carved Romanesque capitals. Not far a Common Redstart, an Iberian Green Woodpecker and a Golden Eagle showed up briefly. Next we drove to an adjacent valley offering a highly aesthetic scenery. Using the scopes we located two distant Golden Eagles performing aerial displays. All of sudden, while we were focusing on some Red-billed Choughs, one of the Eagles reappeared at very close range and chased a group of Griffons away from their ledge. We all got excited with the excellent views of the raptor which certainly made a good ending to the first day of the tour.

Back at Cordovilla we had some time to relax before an excellent dinner that our Chef Rosa prepared for us.

Day 3

Tuesday 7th November

Valberzoso – Brañosera – Valdecebollas

The group was ready for action before sunrise. Today sky was crisp, start-filled and temperatures dropped to -3°C in calm air. Without delay we headed to the same spot where we had the wolf the day before. This time it took us a little longer to meet our target. It was Tino again who first spotted it: an alpha male standing in an

open area! We could see that he was feeding on something and we followed it with the scopes as it walked and trotted across the hillside. Not far from him two Red Foxes were foraging but their presence came second in our concern. Then the wolf lay down for a nap in full view. The morning light was excellent and the whole group got prolonged and satisfactory sights of it for over one hour!

With a big smile on our faces, we drove down to the village for a well-deserved snack.

By mid-morning we moved to the nearby Sierra de Hajar Mountains, where we had a relaxed hike in a dense oak forest. As we followed a trail, Tino and Toño gave us a masterclass on animal track identification. In fact, we could reliably identify fresh footprints and excrements of two different Brown Bears, Red Fox, Beach Marten, Pine Marten and Wild Cat! Two Red Deer showed up well between the trees and we enjoyed a varied array of forest-dwelling species including: Middle-spotted Woodpecker, Crested Tit, Blue Tit, Firecrest, Short-toed Treecreeper, and Eurasian Nuthatch.

Taking advantage of the good weather, we had the picnic lunch outdoors around a wooden table by a mountain hut. In doing so, a Sparrowhawk flew by. Next we drove to the head of the valley where we found two Stags and a Golden Eagle glided across the valley with Griffon Vultures. We continued hiking between centenary oaks and a pristine creek in total tranquillity and peaceful environment. Next we slowly drove back to the hotel to rest before meeting again to comment the highlights of the day, work on the day list and enjoy our dinner and wine.

Day 4

Wednesday 8th November

Rebanal de Los Caballeros – La Pernía

The day dawned chilly and cloudless. Given that our Wolf expectation were fully satisfied we decided to change our target and focus on Wild Cat. We watched the sunrise while scanning the fields atop a hill in the outskirts of Rebanal de Los Caballeros. No cat showed up here but we have our reward with good scope views of an Iberian Grey Shrike and Rock Sparrows. Far from giving up we followed Tino and Toño's instinct and drove slowly through secondary roads. We first came through a Red Fox and, soon after, a striking Wild Cat! It was a large male sitting in full view at the edge of a meadow at medium distance. For the delight of the group the cat walked in our direction while patrolling the area in search of prey. During 45 minutes of continuous observation we observed its typical feline hunting behaviour creeping close to prey for a pounce-chase-catch-kill approach. We got it within 70 yards and saw it successfully preying on three Water Voles before it run into the forest with one in the jaws.

Following this moment of glory we had a well-deserved coffee in a nearby village. Next we birded the edges of a river which produced Marsh Tit, Bullfinch, Firecrest and Nuthatch. Back in the vehicles we drove to Celada de Roblecedo for another short hike in the woods. We found a nest of Garden Dormouse in the hollow of an oak, abundant *Lobaria pulmonaria* epiphytic lichens and a curious Hedgehog Mushroom before it started snowing.

We had our picnic lunch well sheltered in the village while the snowfall increased. Next we followed a mountain road in our for-wheel drive vehicles. We made strategic stops to take pictures of the snowy landscape and soon reached our accommodation.

After good rest we meet again in the living room to exchange impressions and had another excellent dinner.

Day 5

Thursday 9th November

Cordovilla – Santander

We had an early breakfast before departing directly to Santander. We reached the airport at nine o'clock where we bid farewell to a highly rewarding tour.

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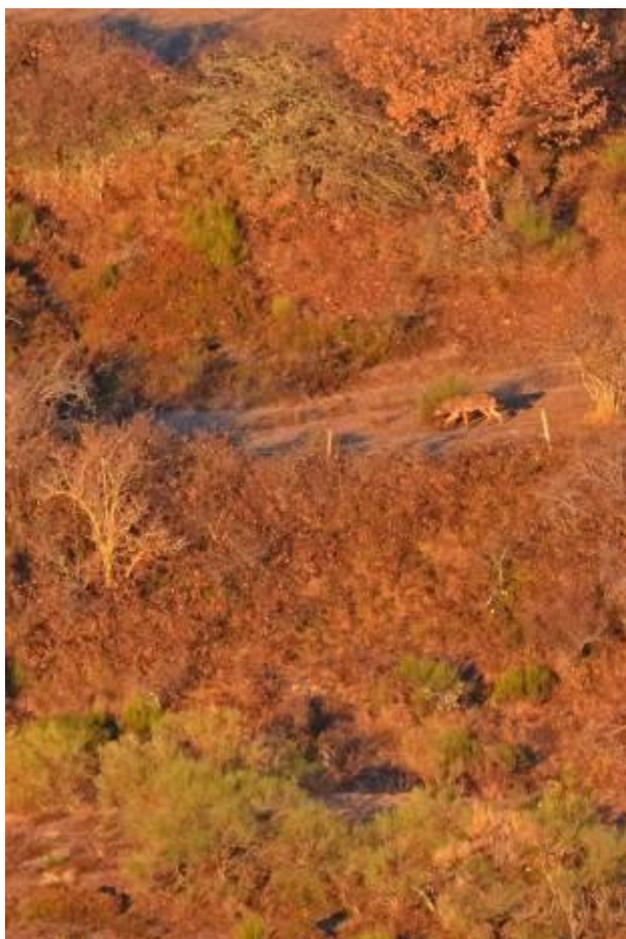
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Brown Bear footprint by Javi Elorriaga



Wolf by Geoffrey Farquharson

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	November				
			5	6	7	8	9
1	Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>		✓	✓		
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	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>			✓		
7	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>				S	
8	Beach Marten	<i>Martes foina</i>				S	
9	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>				S	
10	Garden Dormouse	<i>Eliomys quercinus</i>					S

Birds (H = heard only)

☐

1	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
2	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	✓		
3	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		✓			
4	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓			
5	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
6	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila Chrysaetos</i>		✓	☐	✓	
7	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	
8	Rock Dove	<i>Columba "feral"</i>		✓		✓	
9	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
10	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓	
11	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H			H
12	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>			✓		
13	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓	✓	
14	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>		✓			
15	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓			
16	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>					✓
17	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓	
18	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓	
19	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		✓			
20	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	
21	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	
22	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			✓		
23	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			✓		
24	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			✓	✓	
25	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	✓	
26	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	
27	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓			
28	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			✓	✓	
29	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓	✓	
30	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>				✓	
31	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>					
32	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				✓	
33	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓	✓	
34	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			✓		
35	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>				✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	November				
			5	6	7	8	9
36	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
37	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	
38	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			✓	✓	
39	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>				✓	
40	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
41	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>					
42	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
43	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓		✓	
44	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
45	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				✓	
46	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
47	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>				✓	
48	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓			
49	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓		✓	
50	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			✓	✓	
51	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		✓			
52	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		✓			
53	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓		✓	



Montaña Palentina, searching for Wolf by Javi Elorriaga