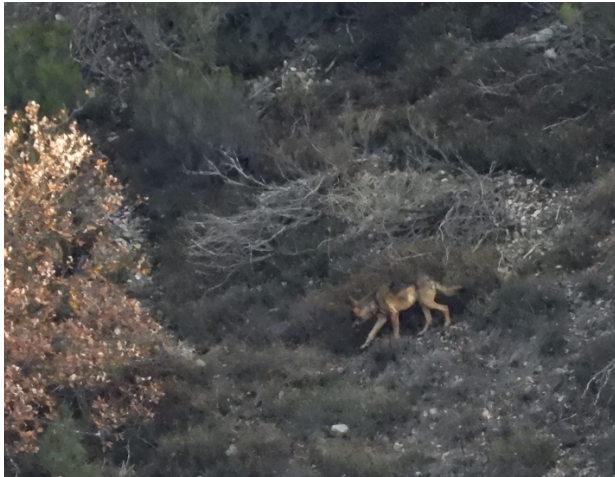


# Wolf-watching in Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

24th – 28th November 2022

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Iberian Wolf in Palencia



Wildcat watching us!



Griffon Vulture



Common Buzzard

Tour report and images by Pablo Perez

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Tour participants: Pablo Perez and Tino Garcia with nine Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Thursday 24th November

### UK to Santander to Cordovilla de Aguilar

Six visitors came from the UK and another three from Italy. With the last light of day, we went up to the rural house in Cordovilla de Aguilar in Palencia. On the way we saw a group of Cattle Egrets gathering to roost.

We enjoyed the first of many excellent dinners from Rosa, the wife of Tino, our local guide.

## Day 2

Friday 25th November

### Barruelo de Santullán

Today in the morning we went in the vicinity of Barruelo to look for the wolf and we certainly had an excellent observation of a young wolf with a large piece of food in its mouth. The wolf was seen walking through the bushes in the distance before hiding under a tree. Interestingly, first a Red Kite and then a Buzzard perched on the tree, waiting for the wolf to move to look for bits of food to feed on.

Likewise, we waited for it to move until it finally did and showed itself, well in the pleasant morning sunshine. As we watched, it calmly walked away with a large piece of meat in its mouth. We sensed that it was Red Deer meat, as it is a very abundant mammal in the area. It subsequently disappeared into the forest thicket; we assumed to join the rest of its pack.

As we were returning with the car, we noticed a large number of Griffon Vultures landing and so we thought we should investigate! After parking, we saw there was a dead cow and a farmer trying to cover the cow so that the large number of vultures (about fifty), could not feed. It was important to discover how the cow died first. It was quite a spectacle to see how the vultures flew and landed in large numbers to gather on the grass while taking the opportunity to open their large wings and dry them in the morning sun that warmed them, and then to take advantage of the thermal winds and fly.

We then continued through some meadows with forests of oak trees dotted among which we could see some amazing bear scratch marks on the bark of the tree. To our surprise we could hear a Middle-spotted Woodpecker, but unfortunately, we could not see it. In addition, we were able to find several fresh Badger and even marten droppings.

For lunch we followed the track near Barruelo de Santullán and drove up to a very nice hut in the mountain that uses a large stone as a wall. On this occasion despite the sun, it was a bit cool and so we were very grateful to be able to eat some nice hot soup to warm us. After lunch we continued walking in a mixed beech and oak forest to look for tracks and traces. Suddenly we could hear a group of birds in the forest and when Pablo looked right in front of him, he found a nice male Nuthatch, but another in the group who was a few meters to his left, saw a bird that he had been hoping to see - a Middle-spotted Woodpecker! This was a new bird for him and for the tour, which Pablo and other visitors could also observe.

After returning to the house at four in the afternoon, some of us continued on a pleasant walk close to the house and were lucky to see a Great-spotted Woodpecker and then an Iberian Green Woodpecker - three different woodpeckers in one day is not bad at all.

We returned to enjoy Rosa's excellent dinner and recharge our batteries for the next exciting day ahead.

## Day 3

**Saturday 26th November**

### Cervera de Pisuerga

Very early and under a cold starry night we began to drive for fifty minutes to a mountain village where we continued along a track to a high viewpoint where we stopped at dawn. We stood for a while watching and soon, we heard another group of Italians nearby who had seen something. We looked in the same direction and thanks to them, we were able to locate a group of wolves in the thick vegetation. They were in the valley in front of us, but it was really difficult to see them since they moved under the bushes and stopped to rest and sleep under them. Luckily, given time, we were able to see quite a few Iberian Wolves quite well thanks to the telescopes and binoculars. For the group of Italians, it was very exciting to be able to compare this type of Iberian wolf with the Italian one. To top it all off, we were also able to see a fantastic adult Golden Eagle soaring through the skies in the distance. It was difficult to know where to look.

Thanks to the excellent opportunity for the whole group to enjoy the wolves so well for so long, we decided to stay there watching them for a bit longer even went to enjoy more hot soup at a nearby cabin, and then return to see the amazing carnivores again. On this second occasion, in addition to the impressive Red Deer bucks we saw, we were fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of two Roe Deer in the thick forest. It is fascinating to see the number of animals that can be observed when one stands still simply looking through the binoculars and with such a beautiful landscape.

The truth is that, as we told the visitors, this was the best high-quality observation of this elusive predator during the last three years of these guided trips. Sometimes luck is with us, and this was undoubtedly the best day. We could also see three of this group of wolves pushing the carrion of the deer they had hunted shortly before we arrived. We could also observe a wolf vomiting some of the food it did not want and also several wolves interacting with each other while raising and lowering their tails or even nibbling on each other's backs to demonstrate their levels of dominance. In the group of wolves there were adults and some juveniles of this summer, which are already the same size as the adults themselves and are differentiated mainly by the type of fur and the playful behavior they have in front of the adults.

To our surprise we had to leave, some of the wolves we observed were still dozing under the bushes. It is incredible to experience how difficult it is to locate the wolves when they are lying on the ground, but how easy it is to see them when they move.

It was certainly a fantastic day of sightings and luckily for Tino's first car back to the house, his visitors were able to see the Southern Iberian Shrike, a jewel of an endemic bird that is possible to see in these latitudes during the winter in the north of Spain.

## Day 4

Sunday 27th November

### Barruelo de Santullan Verdeña Lores

Due to the fact that we had had an excellent wolf observation the day before, we decided to give more time to trying to find the famous Wildcat. We started the morning a little later than other days and headed to a hill near a beautiful Romanesque church in Palencia to look for animals at dawn. The first pleasant surprise of the day was to observe how a Tawny Owl returned from hunting at night and went into a hole in the church to rest during the day. After a short while Pablo spotted some Roe Deer in the distance and then a Red Fox crossing in the distance. After a short while the whole group enjoyed many sighting of Roe Deer closer to us, delighting us with their antics.

When it was lighter, we started to see other things – the first chirping sparrows on the roof of nearby houses in the village. We also saw the first Redstart of the trip, a bird that is usually abundant but so far, we had not been able to see. Just at that moment a group of Red-billed Choughs crossed our path.

Later we headed towards the charismatic village of Verdeña, where hardly any people live in the winter. We spent a long time looking for the elusive cat. No luck but we were fortunate to see another of the endemic Iberian birds, the Iberian Southern Grey Shrike, showing its pink breast when it turned towards us.

Afterwards we crossed the mountains in the all-terrain vehicle to reach Perapertu, where we saw in the distance the European Bison introduced in a private project. We continued our unsuccessful search for the cat up to the high mountain of Piedrasluengas, on the geographical boundary of Palencia with Cantabria. We were able to enjoy the impressive views of a sunny autumn day with the snow-capped Picos de Europa in the background. Also, the guides were looking for the Chamois on the top of the cliffs, but they could not find them, however they did locate a perched Golden Eagle.

On the way to our lunch in Lores and along the road, we could briefly see a large Wild Boar running through the meadows frightened by the abundant presence of hunters in the natural environment. When we arrived at the mountain hut where Tino prepared some nice hot lentils, we could see the second Goshawk in flight of the trip, a bird that is very hard to see in this environment, but that in this trip we saw very well. To our pleasant surprise we were also able to see in the distance a large group of Cantabrian Chamois, a high mountain species that is sometimes very difficult to find. When we were enjoying a pleasant afternoon sun, we were approached by a curious Tudanca cow of the autochthonous breed of cattle. While the group enjoyed with close view of this cow, we observed one of the European Buzzards that come to this area to spend the winter.

The day went by and soon it was time to return, but we still kept the hope of being able to see the longed-for cat. Just ten minutes before arriving at the rural house, we were finally able to find the longed-for wild feline. We stopped far away so as not to scare it, and we put ourselves at a good angle to observe it with the telescopes. It was only a short view, but enough to delight us with this impressive male Wildcat. After a short while he went into some bushes on the left side of the road and we couldn't see him anymore, so we decided to go back to the cars, but just when we were arriving to the cars, we saw him again in the bushes.

One of the very surprised Italian visitors told us that the cat had crossed the entire field in front of us without seeing it and had positioned itself on our side.

We were all stunned and saw how agile and big it was as it walked away showing a curious white spot on the tip of its tail, something very unusual in these cats. But to our good fortune, the cat stopped at the top of the meadow and returned to give us a few minutes of excellent observation to even look at us with his defiant yellow eyes before finally disappearing into the bushes.

That night we were able to enjoy a fantastic feast of Rosa's excellent food and make the final list. In the case of the mammals, it can be considered excellent, with a total of eight species - Wild Boar, Fox, Roe Deer, Red Deer, Iberian Wolf, Wildcat and Chamois.

## Day 5

Friday 13th July

### Cordovilla de Aguilar to Santander

Some of the visitors had to link that day the rest of the trip to the south of Spain, in Andalusia where they would join another Naturetrek Iberian Lynx watching group to which we wish them good luck to complete their excellent visit in Spain.

The rest of the group returned to Italy and the UK respectively. For most of them it was their first visit to Spain, and of course they could not have done better than this trip, as they were really lucky with the fantastic cold but sunny days they enjoyed and the great number of mammals and birds they could enjoy in a very quiet environment and with impressive wild landscapes, which give great peace in the landscape and of course in the mind of the observer.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022				
		24	25	26	27	28
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓			
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓				
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓		
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓	✓	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓		
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		✓		✓	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>			✓		
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>				✓	
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				✓	
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>		✓			
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓			
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓		
Southern (Iberian) Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			✓	✓	
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>			✓	✓	
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓	✓	
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓			
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓			
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		✓			
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				✓	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>				✓	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓		
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓		
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				✓	
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		✓			
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓			
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			✓	✓	
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		✓			
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			✓	✓	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓	✓	
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>				✓	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				✓	

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022				
		24	25	26	27	28
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>				✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓		
Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				✓	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓	✓	
Branbling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>				✓	
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓			
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>				✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓		
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			✓		

## Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022				
		24	25	26	27	28
Cantabrian Chamois	<i>Rupicapra pyrenaica parva</i>				✓	
Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>		✓	✓		
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>				✓	
European Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris silvestris</i>				✓	
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			✓		
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓	✓		
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>				✓	