

Wolf-watching in Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

23rd – 27th October 2023



Griffon Vultures



Scanning for European Wildcat



Landscape of La Montana Palentina



Group watching Iberian Wolf

Tour report and images by Taea Romagnuolo



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Tour participants: Tino Garcia & Taea Romagnuolo (leaders) with seven Naturetrek clients.

Summary

Situated in the province of Palencia, within the region of Castilla y Leon, the natural park of La Montana Palentina is a haven for wildlife. The undiscovered mountains were the perfect place to host our group of wildlife enthusiasts this week, to search for the elusive Iberian Wolf. We had a wonderful week in beautiful surroundings, with warm hospitality and great food prepared by Rosa, and the expertise of Tino to guide us in this magical place. We were unbelievably lucky to sight Iberian Wolves two days in a row, with one day watching the pack for over 2.5 hours! We also spotted European Wildcat and some group members caught a glimpse of a Cantabrian Brown Bear moving up the hillside after feeding on a suspected wolf kill in the valley. Alongside these magnificent mammals, Golden Eagles and Griffon Vultures, Common Buzzards and Eurasian Kestrels made an appearance, to name but a few species.

Day 1

Monday 23rd October

Stansted Airport to Santander – Cordovilla de Aguilar

The group arrived into Santander airport late morning, so we headed off to our base, in the tiny village of Cordovilla de Aguilar. Our 'Casas Rurales', managed by Tino and Rosa, would be our home for the week ahead. After a quick settle in, we headed to a nearby patch of oak forest (mainly *Quercus Pyrenaieca*) and had a delicious first lunch of hot Gazpacho (which was appreciated as it was a bit rainy and chilly), as well Rosa's famous homemade 'Tortilla Espanola' and local cheese. When everyone was suitably full, we headed up the track for a walk further into the forest. We came across the scat of Pine Marten, Beech Marten, Red Fox, Red Deer and Badger. There were Common Firecrest and Crested Tits heard, and Coal Tits seen flitting around. We also managed to hear a Middle-Spotted Woodpecker and when we arrived back to the houses, an Iberian Green Woodpecker. We then headed back to the houses for a rest, before a lovely first dinner together, prepared by the fabulous Rosa. After a long day of travelling for most, it was time to retire to bed, to get ready for the following morning of searching for the Iberian Wolf.

Day 2

Tuesday 24th October

La Montana Palentina – Cervera de Pisuerga – Verdeña

We set off early to make it up to our viewing spot before sunrise. When we arrived, it was still dark, but soon through the clouds (and a bit of rain), the sun rose. We patiently scanned the mountainside for wolves, and watched the behaviour of Red Deer, to see if they were alert and nervous to a potential predator. After around an hour, an adult wolf was spotted on the hillside. Then, to our delight, two young wolves joined and started playing. Finally, another adult joined. The whole group watched in awe as the wolves moved in and out of the trees, magnificent

sightings for our first full day in the field. Furthermore, we heard a wolf howl- not usual for Iberian wolves, which made the experience even more special.

After a wonderful morning, we headed into the village of Cervera de Pisuerga for a well-earned 'café con leche', or hot chocolate to warm us up!

The rain was persistent into the afternoon, so we decided to head up to a church to shelter and have our lunch, in the village of Verdena. We scanned for Wildcats in the prairies on our drive up, but they were also seeking shelter from the rain and proved elusive. A superb hot lunch of bean stew was enjoyed by all. As we were driving back, again through the prairies, we hit the jackpot with a male Wildcat. Tino's van in front must have alerted the cat, and we all had spectacular views of the individual running through the field and later stopping before reaching the forest edge. His behaviour indicated he was on to some prey. We watched the male until he retreated into the forest- another marvelous and unexpected sighting!

Then, it was time to head back to the Casa Rurales and rest before enjoying another lovely dinner together and reminiscing on a fantastic day.

Day 3

Wednesday 25th October

La Montana Palentina – Cervera de Pisuerga – Camasobres

We once again headed up to our usual scanning spot early. The weather was slightly better today, but still chilly. We were extremely fortunate to spot first one white adult Wolf, then followed by two young wolves, then another two young wolves, and finally another adult. We watched the pack for around 2.5 hours- absolutely mesmerizing! The youngsters were playing amongst themselves and with the adults. During this time, we saw over 30 Griffon Vultures start to congregate close by over the valley, likely a fresh kill. As we watched them circle, some members of the group spotted a Cantabrian Brown Bear walking up the hillside, after obviously finishing feeding on the kill. Although we only managed to watch the bear for a few seconds, it was a fantastic and unexpected sighting. Other great sightings were Golden Eagles which flew over our heads. After a brilliant morning, we headed to our coffee spot in Cervera de Pisuerga for refreshments.

Once refuelled, we headed higher, through the Montana Palentina Natural Park, scanning for Wildcats as we drove, although they proved elusive today. We enjoyed our lunch at a church in the tiny village of Camasobres and were lucky enough to witness a Golden Eagle trying to take a domestic cat in the nearby field! The cat escaped, and Ravens began mobbing the eagle. Again, what a great sighting!

We started heading back for home, but not without stopping at a beautiful viewpoint, "Mirador de Piedrasluengas", to appreciate the stunning views over La Montana Palentina, and further towards the Picos de Europa. After a well-earned rest, we enjoyed Rosa's lovely food together in the evening, and made a toast to another excellent day.

Day 4

Thursday 26th October

La Montana Palentina – Cervera de Pisuerga –

We started off the day heading towards our usual spot. However, the weather was heavy rain and very misty, so the visibility wasn't good. We headed up to a 'Cabana' close by (shepherds hut), to see if the rain and mist would ease. However, after a while, we decided to give up and head for a coffee. We also checked out a local artists work in Cervera de Pisuerga, as she designs wonderful souvenirs with a nature inspired theme. Some of the group bought some souvenirs, before we headed up to a different area of the La Montana Palentina to have our lunch.

We set up the picnic in a church overlooking the 'Embalse de Aguilar', which once had populations living in the area, before the dam was created, and people moved elsewhere. Now, you can see the remnants of old houses surrounding the dam edges. We enjoyed our final lunch in the field before heading back to the houses in the rain. Some guests enjoyed a walk around the village and surrounding countryside in the afternoon when the rain eased slightly, spotting Cirl Buntings, Blackcaps, Buzzards, Kestrels and Great Tits.

In the evening, we enjoyed our final meal together, thanked Tino and Rosa for their wonderful hospitality and expertise, and looked back over a fantastic week together.

Day 5

Friday 27th October

Cordovilla de Aguilar – Santander Airport

Our time in the beautiful La Montana Palentina had come to an end, so we reluctantly headed to the airport for the morning group flight back to Stansted. However, we were leaving having appreciated great wildlife, food, and stunning landscapes, and having made some unforgettable memories.

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Species lists

Mammals

		October 2023			
Common name	Scientific name	23	24	25	26
Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus lupus</i>		4	7	
European Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris silvestris</i>		1		
Cantabrian Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos pyrenaicus</i>			1	
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>				
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓	✓	
Broom Hare	<i>Lepus castroviejoi</i>		2		

Birds (H = Heard only)

		October 2023			
Common Name	Scientific Name	23	24	25	26
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓			
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓			
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓			
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>			✓	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓	✓
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>	H		✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		H	✓	
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>	H			✓

Common Name	Scientific Name	October 2023			
		23	24	25	26
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓		
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>				H
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>				H
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓		
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓		
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	✓		✓
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	H	✓		
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	H			
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓		
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	H	✓		✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓	✓
Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓		
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓	✓
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓
Yellow Wagtail (Iberian)	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>		✓		
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	H	✓	✓	✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓		
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				✓
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓	
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓	
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓		✓