

# Wolf-watching in Spain

Naturetrek Tour Report

6th – 10th November 2023



Wolf watching!



Wolf



Wolf watching



Griffon Vulture

Tour report and photos by Taea Romagnolo



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Tour participants: Tino Garcia & Taea Romagnuolo (leaders) with 8 Naturetrek clients.

## Summary

A wonderful week was had in La Montana Palentina, in the region of Palencia, Spain. We enjoyed rural hospitality, home-cooked food and incredible wildlife sightings. We watched Iberian Wolves three days in a row, as well as spotting Cantabrian Brown Bear, European Bison and Golden Eagle. Overall, this was a fantastic trip in idyllic surroundings.

## Day 1

**Monday 6th November**

### Stansted Airport to Santander – Cordovilla de Aguilar

The group arrived at Santander airport in the afternoon. We then began our journey to our ‘home’ for the upcoming days, whilst stopping off for a quick café con leche en route to refresh ourselves after a morning of travelling. The tiny village of Cordovilla de Aguilar is home to a mere 13 people and Tino and Rosa’s ‘Casas Rurales’ would provide the perfect base for our wolf-watching adventure. We took some time to settle in, before all gathering for our first evening meal together, and to outline the plan for the days ahead.

We enjoyed Rosa’s delicious cooking (as always!) and all retired to bed to rest before a bright and early morning start, in our quest to spot the elusive Iberian Wolf.

## Day 2

**Tuesday 7th November**

### La Montana Palentina – Cervera de Pisuerga – Verbena

We set out early this morning, up high into La Montana Palentina Natural Park, to around 1400m. To our surprise, as we were climbing, a sprinkling of snow soon turned into heavy snowfall and we reach our scanning spot, we were in at least a few inches. Luckily, the snowfall stopped for a while, giving us a good chance to scan for wolves. We saw a lone few Griffon Vultures soaring over, starting their day early. As the sun rose, Tino spotted the first wolves. Over time more appeared, and the group were moving in and out of the forest and the open land. In total, we watched six wolves over the course of 2½ hours, as they continued to appear and disappear through the heavy snow which intermittently fell! We had incredible sightings of the group sleeping, eating, and interacting. A fantastic first morning out in the field!

After all the excitement, it was time to head down for a coffee and hot chocolate (and a bit of de-thawing!) in Cervera de Pisuerga. This local spot is always buzzing with Spaniards grabbing a ‘café con leche’, and a ‘Pincho’ (tapas).

We then headed to a different area, and scanned the fields around the road, looking for European Wildcat. Unfortunately, today they were elusive. A lunch of hot gazpacho and tortilla was much enjoyed by the group

outside the local church in the tiny village of Verbena, where we also spotted a Goshawk, Buzzards, Spotless Starlings and numerous Jays, Ravens and Crows.

After lunch, we headed back towards home a different way, again scanning for Wildcats on our way. We stopped to have a good look at four European Bison, which are semi-wild in the area, as they were reintroduced from Poland around 10 years ago. Another great sighting! As we arrived back to the houses, two Red Kites flew over our heads, which was a perfect way to end a superb day of wildlife-watching.

We had time for a rest, before enjoying another delicious dinner together, prepared by Rosa.

## Day 3

Wednesday 8th November

### La Montana Palentina – Cervera de Pisuerga – Lores

We started early again, and headed to our usual wolf-scanning spot. Almost immediately after arriving, a Golden Eagle was spotted. Then, wolves were spotted in the same place as the day before. We watched four wolves over the course of two hours. We all had some mesmerising sightings and were extremely humbled that we had the pleasure of viewing these fantastic predators over such a length of time. Just as we were about to head off, a Cantabrian Brown Bear was spotted very close to where the wolves were. We all managed to catch a glimpse of the large male, before he headed into the forest. Once again, an incredible morning.

After our coffee break, we took a stroll along the river by Cervera de Pisuerga, in the hope of spotting an Iberian White-throated Dipper. Despite high water levels and a strong current, we watched an individual diving and ‘dipping’, as they do best. Groups of Eurasian Siskins were also spotted, whilst Cetti’s Warblers were heard: pleasant sightings for the group.

We then headed up to the area of Lores, again scanning for Wildcat on the way. We had our lunch in a ‘cabana’, in the company of many curious cows, who were very interested in our picnic! We ate and admired the beautiful autumn colours of the forests in La Montana Palentina at this time of year. As we were driving home after lunch, we stopped to watch a group of Griffon Vultures nearby, circling and then landing. Younger individuals as well as older birds had clearly just been eating carrion. A lovely group of Red-billed Chough also flew past.

After yet another successful day of wildlife watching, we headed home, before enjoying Rosa’s delicious paella in the evening, which was much enjoyed by all.

## Day 4

Thursday 9th November

### La Montana Palentina – Cervera de Pisuerga – Verdena

We started the day heading to our spot: a clear, starry night had heralded lovely weather as the sun rose. We scanned for wolf activity for a while in the same spot as the previous days; however, only Red Deer were seen. Then, on the other side of the road, overlooking the next valley, the alpha male and female of the wolf pack were sighted on

the hill, with a Wild Boar kill they had just made minutes before! The whole group watched in awe, the two wolves tussling over the carcass and eating. We watched the wolves for a good length of time before they headed into some bushes out of sight. This behaviour is very rare to witness, making it an even more unforgettable experience. We then took a short stroll through the forest nearby, to examine wolf prints, wolf scat and some endemic oak species.

After our coffee, we headed back to Verdena, scanning for Wildcat again. Although none were spotted, two Red Foxes were seen in nearby fields, which were great sightings. We had another hot lunch overlooking the countryside, before heading up into the forest for another short walk. We found the scat of Wildcat, European Badger and Pine Marten, learning about the other fascinating species found here, including lichens and endemic plants.

After a third day seeing Iberian wolves, we felt incredibly lucky and happy with our sightings. We headed back to Cordovilla to rest before our final dinner together.

## Day 5

Friday 10th November

### La Montana Palentina – Inglesia de San Andres – Embalse de Aguilar – Santander Airport

We headed off to a different area of the natural park this morning. The weather was crispy, and the sunrise over the mountain range was lovely, as usual. We scanned for a couple of hours and saw a group of Red Deer females and a stag; however, no wolves were spotted today. When it started to rain, we headed back to Cervera for our daily coffee stop. We also took the opportunity to visit a local shop which sells nature-inspired artwork and gifts from a local artist, Sonia. Some guests bought various trinkets.

Then, we went to the Inglesia de San Andres for our lunch, overlooking the dam, and where the former inhabitants of this severely-depopulated region used to live. We had our final lunch together before heading to the hydroelectric plant on the dam. We spotted a Great Cormorant, Iberian Yellow Wagtail, Great Crested Grebe, Iberian White-throated Dipper and a Sparrowhawk (a first for the week).

Unfortunately, the trip had come to an end, and we said our goodbyes to Tino and Rosa and headed to Santander airport for our flight to Stansted, with fond memories of a great week in La Montana Palentina, and many superb wildlife sightings.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	November 2023			
		7	8	9	10
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>				✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓		
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓			
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>	✓			
Eurasian Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</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>	✓	✓	✓	H
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓		✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓		H	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		✓		
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			✓	H
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓		H	
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓		✓
Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓		✓	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	✓		✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓		

Common name	Scientific name	November 2023			
		7	8	9	10
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓		
Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓		✓
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		H		
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓	✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓			
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓		
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	✓			
European Robin	<i>Erithacus Rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓		
Iberian White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus aquaticus</i>		✓		✓
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			✓	
Iberian Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava Iberiae</i>		✓		✓

## Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	November 2023			
		7	8	9	10
Cantabrian Brown Bear	<i>Iraís arctos pyrenaicus</i>		1		
Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>	6	4	3	
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			2	
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>	4			
Broom Hare	<i>Lepus castroviejo</i>	✓			