

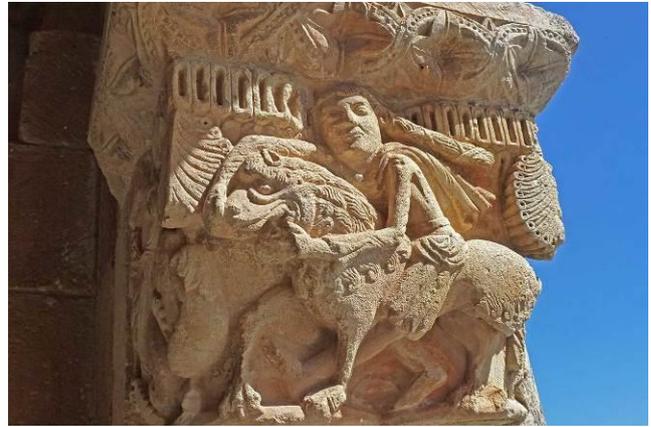
# Wild Spain - La Montana Palentina

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 – 24 September 2015



Las Loras Geological Reserve.



One of the beautiful carvings of the Romanesque!



Wildcat female on the hunt



Paying attention at Tino's explanation.

Report & images compiled by Byron Palacios



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Tour participants: Byron Palacios (leader) & Tino Garcia (local guide & host) with four Naturetrek clients

## Summary:

A remote and beautiful part of rural northern Spain was a great place to enjoy a week full of wildlife and learning Spanish. The camaraderie and dynamics of the group worked fantastically well with the leaders injecting the encouragement needed to learn this very useful language. We learned lots from each other, and it was a great opportunity to show a wild area of Spain from a very different perspective.

## Day 1

Thursday 17th September

London Stansted – Santander – Cordovilla de Aguilar – Monte Aguilar

The tour started with a flight from London Stansted Airport. We arrived on time at Santander Airport on a surprisingly misty and overcast morning. Once through the exit gate, we met our fellow travellers who were waiting for us as they were already in Northern Spain. We introduced ourselves in clear and fluent Spanish before being collected by our local guide and host Tino, who drove us to the village of Cordovilla de Aguilar. We headed south on the motorway, crossing through the heart of the Cantabrian Mountains, entering Palencia Province (Castilla y Leon County), and finally arriving at the village of Cordovilla de Aguilar, our base for the week. Here the lovely, charming rural Spanish-style cottages provided terrific accommodation in a stunning location, set in beautiful mountain countryside.

We settled in to our rooms and had our first delicious local lunch which we ate indoors as it was a bit windy and chilly outside. After lunch we had a short drive to a woodland area known as Monte Aguilar. Despite the rain we started our walk along the track, checking on the local flora, the nice landscape, and even spotting a Red Fox hunting in a distance field. Another shower struck during the walk but we continued through the lovely woodland.

By late afternoon the sky was a massive black cloud bringing more water to the area. It was a good time to drive back to the accommodation and get ready for the first of many delicious dinners, thanks to Rosa, Tino's wife.

## Day 2

Friday 18th September

Las Tuerces Geological Reserve

After a relaxing start, we headed to the south-east, making a quick stop in Aguilar de Campoo to get some fresh bread for our picnic lunch. We took the track through the village of Villallano and entered Las Tuerces Geological Reserve. A thick mist covered the crags and hilltops of this beautiful area. Despite this our visit was very productive as we saw lots of different birds such as Northern Wheatear, Spotless Starling, Common Stonechat, Black Redstart and Dunnock, and very fresh tracks of Iberian Wolf, Wild Boar and Roe Deer. We walked further up the track and had great views of Griffon Vultures standing on the edge of the rock face, waiting for a good thermal to come and help them take flight. We reached the end of the track where the ruins of Gama Castle are located. From here we had great views of the whole valley and the topography of this ancient reserve.

Considered one of the most important geological areas in Western Europe, Las Tuerces (which means ‘twisted rocks’) is located on the top of a massive plateau which turns into a labyrinth as you walk through its trails, which were home to Neanderthals millions of years ago. Some Woodlarks, butterflies and flowers were seen on the way to our picnic spot, from where we had wonderful views of Aguilar de Campoo and La Montaña Palentina itself. After an enjoyable lunch we had a nice walk through the narrow trails of the rock formations, watching some interesting birds such as Rock Bunting, Eurasian Kestrel, and Red-billed Chough.

After spending a productive time here, we made our way back through the village of Villescusa de la Torre where a stop by the bridge of the river Pisuerga produced wonderful views of White-throated Dipper and White Wagtail, amongst others. After this, we made our way back to the ‘casas rurales’ to take a break followed by drinks and another delicious supper.

## Day 3

Saturday 19th September

### Peña Tejedo – Celada de Roblecedo

A beautiful day gave us the green light to explore more of the mountain tops, and we were determined to go to areas for the best views of Montaña Palentina. A 40-minute drive took us to the point known as Peña Tejedo from where we had great views of Montaña Palentina’s main peaks: Curavacas (2,520 metres); Espigüete (2,450 metres); Peña Redonda (1,993 metres); and Pico Tres Mares (2,171 metres). We even had terrific views of the mighty Picos de Europa Mountains from this point. It was a beautiful day to enjoy this breathtaking landscape! We also had an array of beautiful and interesting flora of this high altitude area, especially a few endemics which were still showing, although a bit dry. We all enjoyed the experience, especially walking amongst some of the highland scrub and broom. We also saw some interesting birds such as Water Pipit, Northern Wheatear, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, and both Alpine and Red-billed Choughs flying and calling around the top of the crags.

After spending the whole morning walking in this beautiful environment, we descended to a slightly lower altitude to our picnic spot, once again overlooking spectacular crags. We enjoyed our picnic lunch and the wildlife we found at this spot. We then walked down the track, finding interesting butterflies, Short-toed Treecreeper, Marsh Tit and Eurasian Nuthatch, amongst others. We drove back to Cordovilla de Aguilar and took another stroll along the access track. Once back at our rural houses we had a break followed by another delicious supper.

## Day 4

Sunday 20th September

### Fuentes de la Nava (Tierra de Campos – the steppes)

After a breakfast of coffee/tea, cereal, toast and fruit we drove about 70 kilometres south towards Palencia and to Fuentes de la Nava. The weather was sunny and pleasant, and plains and marshes were in sight as we arrived at the riparian area of El Canal de Castilla. The channel was built during the 18th century to transport all the cereal production to Santander. It is now used solely as part as a water irrigation system. Our first stop by the canal was to see the old canal well and surroundings, followed by a second stop not far from the village of Fuentes de la Nava which produced some interesting birds such as Whinchat, Willow Warbler, Cetti’s Warbler and Stonechat. As we were driving to another spot we found a group of Great Bustards in the distance. We went

carefully onto a nearby track to get closer to them and had fantastic views of this beautiful bird species; the main target of our visit to the plains!

Next it was time for a coffee break in the village of Fuentes de la Nava. A flock of sheep (local breed called Churras) and their donkey and shepherd made us stop and give way while they crossed the road. After a revitalising break, we went back on a track heading to the village of Frechilla where we watched a few Lesser Kestrels along the way. They were getting ready to migrate south and leave their nest place behind; the main church in Frechilla. We then continued towards the village of Guaza where we found a pair of Little Owls, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers and Black Redstart, amongst others.

It was time to have lunch so we drove to the main 'laguna' and visited one of the hides overlooking the main marsh land, which remains waterless during this season. We enjoyed our lunch here while spotting some interesting birds such as Marsh Harrier, Northern Lapwing, Redshank, Common Sandpiper, Mallard, Northern Wheatear, Common Redstart, Willow Warbler, Spanish Yellow Wagtail, many White Storks, and some noisy Zitting Cisticola which were around the car park.

We then had a nice stroll around a ravine and sunflower crops but the bird activity was pretty quiet as the sun was beating down. Shortly after that we drove back to Cordovilla to enjoy a relaxing evening and another superb dinner.

## Day 5

Monday 21st September

### Las Loras Geological Reserve

We had another sunny morning with a clear blue sky! After setting off from our houses and collecting some fresh bread in Aguilar de Campoo, we took the Burgos road, heading east to access the main table of the geological reserve of Las Loras, from where we had terrific views of all the impressive crag tables. We also saw some interesting birds such as Goshawk, Woodlark, Pied Flycatcher, and the first Griffon Vultures of the day. We continued into the heart of the reserve towards the ancient village of Amaya. We stopped on the way to admire a beautiful Short-toed Snake Eagle perched on one of the crags. It took to flight right in front of us and at eye level, and was mobbed by a group of Red-billed Choughs which were numerous in the area. We finally arrived at the top where Las Loras Geological Reserve emerged from the plateau at a stunning 1,400 metres above sea level. We started our walk along the ruins of the ancient village which was first built by the Los Cántabros tribe in the Iron Age, about 1,500 BC. It was then occupied by the Romans in the year 300, who founded the city of 'Amaia'. The Visigoths came later between the 4th and 5th centuries, and the Arabs turned it into a camp in the 8th century. From the 10th century, Amaya was re-conquered by the Christians. During the trek we saw some interesting birds such as Northern Wheatear, Red-billed Chough, Black Redstart and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush. The numerous Griffon Vultures were soaring very close to us and even perched on top of the rock tables. It was great habitat for House Martins and the resident Crag Martins and we saw lots of them. We also saw another beautiful Short-toed Snake Eagle soaring above our heads. Other raptors seen here were Eurasian Kestrel, Sparrowhawk and Common Buzzard, flying together at times. We also spotted some interesting butterflies and moths on the way back to the vehicles.

After enjoying this wonderful walk we drove towards the southern face of the geological reserve, to an abandoned village known as Fuentes; an ideal place to enjoy our delicious picnic. After lunch we continued our

drive to the village of Rebolledo de la Torre where we visited a very interesting Romanic church, one of the most important in the area. Tino explained about its wonderful Romanesque art. With the sun beating down it was time for a coffee break in a bar in the village where it was quite an experience to be amongst the locals. After enjoying the refreshments, we had a short walk towards the high rock faces where we saw some interesting butterflies and more Griffon Vultures. Soon it was time to head back to Cordovilla de Aguilar where we had a break before another of Rosa's delicious suppers

## Day 6

Tuesday 22nd September

### Fuentes Carrionas Natural Park – River Pisuerga basin – Aguilar de Campoo

A very early start was necessary today and we left in the dark. We had a drive of nearly an hour to get to the mountain tops to look for big carnivores. We entered Fuentes Carrionas Natural Park and drove to a viewpoint which overlooked the valley of Miranda. From here we found an amazing spot to experience the breathtaking sunrise, admired from nearly 2,000 metres above sea level. We were facing El Espigüete and El Curavacas, two of the most prominent mountains of Montaña Palentina, and we scanned the valleys for the mighty Iberian Wolf. Unfortunately a heavy mist covered the valleys for nearly an hour. Although some areas then cleared at times, most of the valley was completely covered; something not helpful for mammal spotting and out of our control. It was also a chilly morning. Although we missed seeing any wolves, we managed to see several Red Deer, and we also heard them calling constantly, a sign announcing the arrival of the rutting season. We then returned to our vehicle and drove out of this lovely area to the little town of Cervera de Pisuerga where we found a nice bar to enjoy a hot coffee and croissants which warmed us up.

Next we went to explore the River Pisuerga basin. We visited a very interesting Eremitorios (Hermitage) where Tino told us about the interesting buildings. We continued our drive along the river where we found some very interesting wildlife including day-flying moths, a few butterflies, plants, and birds such as Willow Warbler, European Kingfisher, Stonechat, Sparrowhawk and White-throated Dipper. A very beautiful Booted Eagle flew right in front of us and very close above our heads. We continued along the track parallel to the river and arrived at the beautiful village of Salinas de Pisuerga, where we had our picnic lunch by the river.

After lunch we had a relaxing walk along the river which produced interesting birds such as Cetti's Warbler, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Grey and White Wagtails, amongst others. We left the village behind and continued driving towards Aguilar de Campoo, stopping by Aguilar's Dam from where sightings included Osprey, Great Cormorant in the distance, Great Crested Grebe, Grey Heron, Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls, and Short-toed Treecreeper. We finished the excursion by visiting the picturesque little town of Aguilar de Campoo where we had the chance to buy souvenirs and even an ice cream!

Back at our rural houses, we enjoyed a drink and a break before gathering for a delicious dinner and enjoying a good time afterwards.

## Day 7

## Wednesday 23rd September

### Resoba – Monte Royal – Aguilar de Campoo

Today we went to explore some of the hill tops of Montaña Palentina. We set off from Cordovilla and made our compulsory stop in Cillamayor for some 'pan fresco' (fresh bread). We then followed the tracks which led us to wonderful meadows and edge-of-forest areas. We suddenly stopped when we saw some European Bison not far from our track. We walked down the track as the area is good Wildcat territory. After ten minutes we found a female hunting voles in a meadow not far from the track. We had superb prolonged views of a beautiful female and watched her hunting and exploring a corner of the meadow; just brilliant! We returned to our vehicle and continued but we hadn't gone far when a second Wildcat was spotted not far from where we saw the other one. Unfortunately we lost his track when we tried to find a suitable place to park our vehicle without disturbing him. We did have great views of some beautiful birds such as Marsh Tit, Whinchat and a very obliging Middle-spotted Woodpecker.

We then drove higher in altitude to the point known as Panporquero, from where we had great views of the whole valley and the village of Brañosera. We had a walk around the high scrubland which produced a few interesting birds and plants. It was sunny but the northern wind became stronger so we drove down the track and entered a beautiful beech forest where we found a great spot for our picnic. After lunch we set off on a walk around this gorgeous, pristine woodland. We admired many species of tree, some over 800 years old, plants, mushrooms, and cute birds such as Firecrest and Nuthatch. There was clear evidence that Brown Bears had been there. We saw tracks, hair and droppings - very interesting indeed! We finished our walk through this wonderful forest and then made our way back to our lodge, stopping for a coffee break in the village of Barruelo de Santullán.

We arrived at our houses with time to start packing before our last, delicious supper together.

## Day 8

## Thursday 24th September

### Cordovilla de Aguilar – Santander Airport - UK

The time to say "Adios" (Goodbye) had come. We had a very early start and made our way to Santander Airport in time to catch our mid-morning flight back to the UK. Some of the group were staying in Spain so we all said our farewells after having been together in one of the most spectacular areas of Europe, sharing its beauty. Making new friends made this experience even better! HASTA SIEMPRE AMIGOS, HASTA SIEMPRE MONTAÑA PALENTINA, TE ECHAREMOS MUCHO DE MENOS!

## Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

## Species List

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = Heard Only)

	Common name	Scientific name	September								
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				✓	✓				
3	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				✓					
4	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>						✓			
5	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>				✓					
6	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>						✓			
7	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓						✓		
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				✓		✓			
9	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>						✓			
10	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
11	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>					✓	✓			
12	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>						✓			
13	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓			✓	✓		
14	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>						✓			
15	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				✓					
16	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			✓						
17	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>				✓					
18	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>				✓					
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
20	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>				✓					
21	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>				H					
22	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>						✓			
23	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>								✓	
24	Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oediconemus</i>				✓					
25	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				✓					
26	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>				✓					
27	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>				✓					
28	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				✓					
29	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓		✓		✓	
30	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>						✓		✓	
31	Rock Dove	<i>Columba "feral"</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
32	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
34	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		H	H				H	H	
35	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				✓		H			
36	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>		H			✓				
37	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓		
38	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>		H	H		H	H			
39	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>				✓					
40	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			
41	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				✓			✓		
42	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				✓					
43	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓		
44	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
45	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
46	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>				✓					
47	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	September							
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
48	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓		✓		✓		
49	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓					✓	
50	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓			✓	✓		
51	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓				✓		
52	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
53	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
54	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>				✓				
55	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	
56	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓					✓	
57	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>				✓				
58	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				✓		✓	✓	
59	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
60	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
61	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H		H	H	✓	H	
62	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	
63	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			✓	✓			✓	
64	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓		✓			✓	
65	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>							✓	
66	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>				✓				
67	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
68	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>					✓	✓	✓	
69	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>							✓	
70	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>							✓	
71	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
72	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	✓					✓	✓	
73	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓		✓			✓	
74	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓						
76	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	
77	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
78	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓		✓			✓	
79	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
80	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
81	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>				✓				
82	Common Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>					✓			
83	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
84	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
85	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	
86	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓				✓	✓	
87	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
88	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				✓				
89	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>			✓		✓		✓	
90	Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	
91	Spanish Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>				✓				
92	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓			✓	✓	
93	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
94	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>					✓			
95	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>						✓		
96	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
97	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓	
98	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	September							
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
99	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓		✓		
100	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓				✓	
101	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>				✓				
102	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>						✓		
103	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		✓				✓		
104	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		✓					✓	

### Mammals

1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓	
2	European Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris silvestris</i>							✓	
3	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓				✓		
4	European Rabbit	<i>Sylvilagus sylvilagus</i>				✓				
5	European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>					✓		✓	

### Butterflies & Moths

Large White, *Pieris brassicae*

Pale Clouded Yellow, *Colias hyale*

Brimstone, *Gonepteryx rhamni*

Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*

Geranium Bronze, *Cacyreus marshalli*

Small White, *Artogeia rapae*

Clouded Yellow, *Colias crocea*

Wood White, *Leptidea sinapis*

Turquoise Blue, *Plebicula dorylas*

1 Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*

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