

Spain's 'Big Three': In search of Whales, Wolves & Bears

Naturetrek Tour Report

3 - 12 September 2013



Bear spotting



Striped Dolphin



Dawn



A Naturetrek lunch

Report compiled by Gerald Broddelez
Images courtesy of Reg Redmore



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Introduction

Northern Spain has a great deal to offer the naturalist. The Cantabrian Mountains extend for about 180 miles across northern Spain, running almost parallel to the sea from the Pyrenees to Galicia. They are home to two isolated populations of European Brown Bear, with the majority, about 100, living in the wildest, steepest and most wooded parts of the little-visited western end of the range; of these about 20 live in the deep valleys and rugged terrain of Somiedo Natural Park. Somiedo Natural Park was established in 1988 and protects almost 30,000 hectares of some of the highest and most scenic peaks and valleys of the region, and is regarded as the best-preserved montane environment in the Iberian Peninsula.

The Cantabrian Mountains and their outlying ranges also hold the vast majority of Spain's 2,500 to 3,000 Wolves and are the stronghold of the species in Europe. This is a population that has increased markedly since an estimated all-time low of just 500 individuals in 1970. The depopulation of Spain's rural regions, as Spaniards have increasingly migrated to the cities, has benefited both the wolf and the bear, as has a changing attitude towards two species which were once viciously persecuted. We were very successful on this trip, seeing both species extremely well on several occasions! On the ferry we had excellent views of several Fin and Humpback Whales at close range in near perfect conditions!

Day 1

Tuesday 3rd September

Our holiday started with the overnight ferry from Portsmouth to Santander. After settling in on board we had the evening at leisure, did a bit of sea-watching and explored the ship.

Day 2

Wednesday 4th September

A full day crossing the western English Channel and Bay of Biscay lay ahead of us. We were up on deck bright and early at first light, keen and eager for our first bird and mammal sightings. We didn't have to wait long, soon we had our first group of Common and Striped Dolphins coming in alongside the vessel – we all got great views of these exuberant dolphins and the successive groups which continued for the next hours. Soon after we had our first sighting of a whale, causing some confusion as it only surfaced for a short while, most probably a Beaked Whale! We then spotted a large Whale, it breached in front of the ship, and luckily it surfaced a few minutes later just alongside the ship allowing fantastic looks at this adult Humpback Whale, a rare species in these waters!

As we progressed deeper, we encountered one small pod of Pilot Whales, and more acrobatic groups of Common Dolphins. A large Sunfish was also spotted. Birds also continued to be encountered a few Sabine's Gulls gave good looks and land birds as Yellow Wagtail and a Redstart actually landing on the ship. Cetacean sightings continued as we passed over the plateau ahead of the Santander Canyon. When we arrived in Santander we checked into our beautiful hotel and had a great dinner.

Day 3

Thursday 5th September

After a good night's sleep in Santander we drove south today, deep into Zamora province, to a small village near to the Portuguese border. For our picnic we stopped near a patch of forest near Villafavilla. Here we were joined by many Pied Flycatchers and Golden Oriole during our picnic.

Soon we were in the Spanish Steppes proper, counting numerous Buzzards and Kestrels before arriving in the core Great Bustard area. It took a bit of searching as this time of the year they are not to be found in large groups yet, but we soon found one group allowing great telescope views. They were closely watched by a Montagu's Harrier and a Greenshank overhead. A few km further we came to a quick halt as we spotted a large group of Bustards flying towards us. More than 50 were counted in this one group, a spectacular sight!

A brief stop by the Rio Esla added Cormorant, Subalpine Warbler, Mallard, Kingfisher and several finches to the list. A Serotine Bat was found in a crag in the bridge. We then continued to our hotel in Zamora, a Posada rural, newly renovated and our base for the next three nights. After settling into our rooms and after an espresso we went for a first exploration of the area.

Day 4/5

Friday 6th/ Saturday 7th September

The next two days our focus switched to finding an iconic mammal of these mountains' - the Wolf. This is a region of rolling hills and broad valleys which affords excellent opportunities to scan wide areas of open land. We spent a lot of time scanning from different viewpoints especially early morning and late afternoon and struck gold on a few occasions! Unfortunately the Wolves only showed for a brief moment so not everybody got on them each time. On the last morning the Wolves decided to show themselves at last to the whole group! A small pack of three wolves appeared first by a firebreak then disappeared and then showed up again minutes later in a large clearing. This time they stayed for over an hour playing and chasing each other allowing all in the party to have incredible views and study their behaviour in much detail! Whawww whaww whaww a TOP SIGHTING!

We also found a good selection of birds and mammals over the next two days. We found both Red and Roe Deer and groups of Wild Boar with youngsters. Birds of prey were much in evidence and included good views of several Black Vultures both perched and in flight, Honey Buzzard, Red Kite, Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Booted and Short-toed Eagle. In the conifer forests we found many Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Coal Tit and Crested Tit, Jays, while the heaths held Woodlark, Stonechat, Nightjars and Dartford Warbler.

One day before having our picnic at the lake at Cional, we took a short walk along the waters edge. The wet meadows held several species of butterfly including Tree and Great Banded Grayling and the magnificent Queen of Spain Fritillary. A Short-toed Treecreeper was heard and seen in the company of a group of Long-tailed Tits and a Woodlark and Stonechat were added to the list.

During some of the shorter walks we also focused on the other creatures of this area and found some good butterflies as the uncommon Purple Hairstreak, Small Copper, Great Banded Grayling and Small White.

Day 6

Sunday 8th September

Today we drove north-west to Pola de Somiedo in Cantabria. We stopped for our picnic lunch just south of the Cantabrian Mountains by a small stream, full of Trout and the occasional Dipper, Serin and Grey Wagtail. We arrived at our base early afternoon and after checking in we were all ready for our first exploration of this beautiful area. We began our Bear quest by driving high into the valley of the Rio Somiedo, a wonderland of steep slopes adorned with rugged rocky outcrops, Beech woodlands and lush alpine pastures – the land of Bears, brañas and vaqueiros!

We spend the remainder of the late afternoon and evening at one of the viewpoints. Here the open mountain slopes provide the best scanning opportunities. We quickly found several groups of Izards, and a large group of Griffon Vultures was seen cruising above the peaks that surrounded us. No Bears were spotted today but we still all enjoyed the great local dinner and excellent local wine!

Day 7

Monday 9th September

The early morning was spent looking for Bears in the same area as yesterday. Fortunately the clouds had lifted giving us an unobstructed view of the whole area. We did not however despite intense searching locate any Bear(s).

As the weather was still excellent the plan this morning was to make a gentle walk in the Lagos area. After buying all the picnic gear we were on our way through one of the prettiest valleys of the Park. When we arrived at the top we took a small track down to one of the lakes, birding and looking for wildlife en route. Good numbers of small birds were present in the low bushes and included Black Redstart, Bullfinch, Serin and Chaffinch. A large group of Swallows, including Crag Martins and House Martins was flying below us in front of one of the large caves. On the more rocky bits we had great looks at several Rock Buntings, Izards and loads of Wall Lizards. Butterflies seen included; Chalkhill and Common Blue, Tree Grayling, and Berger's Clouded Yellow.

We spent some time exploring the lake margins closely watched by both Chough and Alpine Chough before making our way back up to the car park. We ate our picnic by the viewpoint watched by Vultures and Buzzards overhead.

After a short siesta we were out again to our viewpoint in the higher regions of the Park. As yesterday we quickly found several groups of Izard and single Red and Roe Deer, but no Bears at first. Then one Bear was spotted on the opposite hillside! It stayed long enough for all of us to see it well. Working its way along the boulders looking for food and eating berries off small trees we could study its behaviour in great detail through our scopes and were delighted with this great sighting! Another great meal awaited us in Pola.

Day 8

Tuesday 10th September

Today we decided to take our chances and take the long drive to another area in the Park. After a scenic drive we arrived at the core area but despite intensive scanning we could not find any bears this morning. We took a short break at midday for lunch and coffee at the local coffee before spending the afternoon in the same area.

We did not have to wait long before a Bear appeared by the side of one of the rocky slopes but unfortunately it disappeared and could not be relocated. Still, it was a fitting finale to our stay in Northern Spain, duly celebrated in the evening with another great meal and a few carafes of wine.

Day 9

Wednesday 11th September

After breakfast we drove the scenic route back to Santander. At our first stop we admired the spectacular scenery and found loads of tracks of Wild Boar. After this we paid a visit to Brown Bear visitor centre in Prozoa. We then visited the centre itself and its large enclosures where we could see two large Cantabrian Brown Bears feeding and resting. At the parking lot during our picnic lunch a Golden Eagle kept us entertained giving very good views. A short drive then took us to Santander, where we arrived in time for a short exploration of the town, a few drinks and/or bite before boarding our ferry.

Day 10

Thursday 12th September

Plymouth/Portsmouth

After a calm night, some of us were up early again in anticipation of things to come. We were rewarded with sightings of many Gannets, Sooty Shearwaters, Great Skua, Sunfish and several pods of Common Dolphins. A small detour along the Brittany coast was unfortunately covered in fog! Late afternoon we docked at Plymouth and said our goodbyes after what was surely a varied and enjoyable trip. There was a bus waiting for anybody who required a lift back to Portsmouth.

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Species Lists

Mammals (15 species)

WOLF	2 adults and 3 sub adults
Red Fox	2
Izard	common
Red Deer	common
Roe Deer	singles
Eur Rabbit	singles
Wild Boar	2 groups
BROWN BEAR	2
FIN WHALE	
Long-finned Pilot Whale	1 pod
Humpback Whale	1
Cuvier's Beaked Whale	1
Common Dolphin	common
Striped Dolphin	common
Serotine	1
Common Pipistrelle	several
Fat Dormouse	1 dead on road

Birds (C = common; P = present)

Red-legged Partridge, <i>Alectoris rufa</i>	Mallard, <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Teal, <i>Anas crecca</i>	Northern Fulmar, <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
Manx Shearwater, <i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	Sooty Shearwater, <i>Puffinus griseus</i>
Great Shearwater, <i>Puffinus gravis</i>	Black Stork, <i>Ciconia nigra</i>
White Stork, <i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	Grey Heron, <i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Little Egret, <i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Northern Gannet, <i>Morus bassanus</i>
Great Cormorant, <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	European Honey Buzzard, <i>Pernis apivorus</i>
Red Kite, <i>Milvus milvus</i>	Black Kite, <i>Milvus migrans</i>
Egyptian Vulture, <i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Griffon Vulture, <i>Gyps fulvus</i>
Eur Black Vulture, <i>Aegypius monachus</i>	Short-toed Snake Eagle, <i>Circus gallicus</i>
Western Marsh Harrier, <i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	Montagu's Harrier, <i>Circus pygargus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk, <i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Common Buzzard, <i>Buteo buteo</i>
Booted Eagle, <i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	Golden eagle, <i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Lesser Kestrel, <i>Falco naumanni</i>	Common Kestrel, <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Peregrine, <i>Falco peregrinus</i>	Great Bustard, <i>Otis tarda</i>
Common Moorhen, <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Eurasian Coot, <i>Fulica atra</i>
Common Sandpiper, <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	Greenshank, <i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Black-headed Gull, <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	Common Gull, <i>Larus canus</i>
Great Black-backed Gull, <i>Larus marinus</i>	European Herring Gull, <i>Larus argentatus</i>
Yellow-legged Gull, <i>Larus michahellis</i>	Lesser Black-backed Gull, <i>Larus fuscus</i>
Sabines Gull, <i>Xema sabina</i>	Common Tern, <i>Sterna hirundo</i>

Great Skua , *Stercorarius skua*
 Common Wood Pigeon , *Columba palumbus*
 Tawny Owl, *Strix aluco*
 Swift, *Apus apus*
 Great Spotted Woodpecker , *Dendrocopos major*
 Golden oriole, *Oiolus oriolus*
 Eurasian Magpie , *Pica pica*
 Alpine Chough , *Pyrrhocorax graculus*
 Northern Raven , *Corvus corax*
 Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis*
 European Crested Tit , *Lophophanes cristatus*
 Eurasian Blue Tit , *Cyanistes caeruleus*
 Firecrest ,
 Woodlark , *Lullula arborea*
 Eurasian Crag Martin , *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*
 Red-rumped Swallow , *Cecropis daurica*
 Willow Warbler , *Phylloscopus trochilus*
 Eurasian Blackcap , *Sylvia atricapilla*
 Common Whitethroat , *Sylvia communis*
 Sardinian Warbler , *Sylvia melanocephala*
 Eurasian Nuthatch , *Sitta europaea*
 Common Blackbird , *Turdus merula*
 European Robin , *Erithacus rubecula*
 European Stonechat , *Saxicola rubicola*
 Spotted Flycatcher , *Muscicapa striata*
 White-throated Dipper , *Cinclus cinclus*
 Alpine Accentor, *Prunella collaris*
 Spanish Yellow Wagtail, *Motacilla flava iberiae*
 White Wagtail , *Motacilla alba*
 Meadow Pipit , *Anthus pratensis*
 Water Pipit, *Anthus spinoletta*
 European Serin , *Serinus serinus*
 Common Linnet , *Carduelis cannabina*
 Eurasian Bullfinch , *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*
 Rock Bunting , *Emberiza cia*

Butterflies

Swallow tail, *Papilio machaon*
 Green-veined White, *Artogeia napi*
 Pale clouded yellow, *Colias hyale*
 Berger's Clouded Yellow, *Colias australis*
 Purple Hairstreak, *Quercusia quercus*
 Scarce Copper, *Lycaena virgureae*

Rock Dove , *Columba livia*
 Eurasian Collared Dove , *Streptopelia decaocto*
 European Nightjar , *Caprimulgus europaeus*
 Hoopoe, *Upupa epops*
 Iberian Green Woodpecker, *Picus viridis sharpei*
 Eurasian Jay , *Garrulus glandarius*
 Red-billed Chough , *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*
 Carrion Crow , *Corvus corone*
 Rock Thrush, *Monticola*
 Coal Tit , *Periparus ater*
 Great Tit , *Parus major*
 Long-tailed Tit, *Aegolus*
 Crested Lark , *Galerida cristata*
 Barn Swallow , *Hirundo rustica*
 Common House Martin , *Delichon urbicum*
 Cetti's Warbler , *Cettia cetti*
 Common Chiffchaff , *Phylloscopus collybita*
 Garden Warbler , *Sylvia borin*
 Dartford Warbler , *Sylvia undata*
 Eurasian Wren , *Troglodytes troglodytes*
 Spotless Starling , *Sturnus unicolor*
 Mistle Thrush , *Turdus viscivorus*
 Black Redstart , *Phoenicurus ochruros*
 Northern Wheatear , *Oenanthe oenanthe*
 European Pied Flycatcher , *Ficedula hypoleuca*
 House Sparrow , *Passer domesticus*
 Dunnock , *Prunella modularis*
 Grey Wagtail , *Motacilla cinerea*
 Yellow Wagtail, *Montacilla flava*
 Tree Pipit , *Anthus trivialis*
 Common Chaffinch , *Fringilla coelebs*
 European Goldfinch , *Carduelis carduelis*
 Red Crossbill , *Loxia curvirostra*
 Yellowhammer , *Emberiza citrinella*
 Cirl Bunting , *Emberiza cirlus*

Small White, *Artogeia rapae*
 Bath White, *Pontia daplidice*
 Clouded Yellow, *Colias crocea*
 Brimstone, *Gonepteryx rhamni*
 Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*
 Holly Blue, *Celastrina argiolus*

Long-tailed Blue, *Lampides boeticus*
Brown Argus, *Aricia agestis*
Adonis Blue, *Lysandra bellargus*
Queen Of Spain Fritillary, *Issoria lathonia*
Tree Grayling, *Neobipparchia statilinus*
Great Banded Grayling, *Kanetisa circe*
Wall Brown, *Lasiommata megera*
Marbled Sipper, *Carcharodus lavatherae*
Silver-spotted Skipper, *Hesperia comma*
Meadow Brown, *Maniola jurtina*

Lang's Short-tailed Blue, *Leptotes pirithous*
Chalk-hill Blue, *Lysandra albicans*
Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*
Silver-washed fritillary, *Argynnis*
False Grayling, *Arethusana arethusa*
Small Heath, *Coenonympha pamphilus*
Grizzled Skipper, *Pyrgus malvae*
Dingy Skipper, *Erynnis tages*
Red-underwing Skipper, *Spialia sertorius*

Other taxa

Wall Lizard	Emperor Dragonfly	Blue-winged Cricket
Red-winged Cricket	Jersey Tiger	Hummingbird Hawk Moth
Blue Shark		

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