

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

2 - 12 September 2014



Great Bustard



Dawn watch



Wild Cat



Iberian Wolf

Report compiled by Gerald Broddez
Images courtesy of Wendy Schmitt



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leaders: Gerald Broddelez
Julian Gayarre

Participants: Angela How
Tony Norris
Clive Godbold
David Briggs
Elizabeth Briggs
Andrew Rann
Steven Holland
Siegfried Schmitt
Wendy Schmitt
Julie Read
Martin Dinnage
Debra Dinnage
David Ruffle

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, especially the Brown Bears which were seen extremely well on several occasions! Seeing a Wild Cat at close range, hunting mouse/voles for over two hours was an unexpected bonus. On the ferry we had excellent views of several pods of Dolphins, Shearwaters and Sabine's Gulls, and Cuvier' Beaked Whales.

Day 1

Tuesday 2nd 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 3rd 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. Birds seen were good numbers of Great and Cory's Shearwater, Gannets and a few smart Sabine's Gulls.

As we progressed deeper, we encountered more acrobatic groups of Common Dolphins. Cetacean sightings continued as we passed over the plateau ahead of the Santander Canyon. With a mother and calf Cuvier's Beaked Whale surfacing next to the ship. We also found a nice flock of shearwaters containing Balearic, Sooty and Great Shearwaters. When we arrived in Santander we checked into our beautiful hotel and had a great dinner.

Day 3

Thursday 4th 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 during our picnic.

Soon we were in the Spanish steppes proper, counting numerous Buzzards, Kestrels and a few Lesser 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 three groups allowing great telescope views. They were closely watched by a group of Red-legged Partridge, Greater Short-toed Lark, Red-backed Shrike and Montagu's Harrier overhead. A brief stop by the Rio Esla added Western Osprey, Cormorant, Subalpine Warbler, Mallard, Kingfisher and an American Mink to the list.

We then continued to our hotel in Zamora, a Posada rural, newly renovated and our base for the next three nights. En-route we had a large group of Griffon Vultures with two Black Vultures and several Red Kites. After settling into our rooms and an espresso we went for a first exploration of the area.

Day 4/5

Friday 5th / Saturday 6th 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 afford 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 one occasion! On one morning the Wolves decided to show themselves at last to the whole group! A single mammal appeared on a firebreak just ahead of us and walked slowly into the vegetation. Just long enough for most of us to see it through the telescope. A nice solitary male... We had a few more brief sightings a long way away, with the Wolves only showing briefly among the heather so not everybody got on them. We also found a good selection of birds and mammals over the next two days, including Red and Roe Deer and Wild Boar. Birds of prey were much in evidence and included good views of Griffon and 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 and 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 water's edge. The wet meadows held several species of butterfly including Common and Great Banded Grayling and the magnificent Queen of Spain Fritillary. A group of Red-rumped Swallows were seen, as well as Long-tailed Tits, 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 such as, the uncommon Purple Hairstreak, Small Copper, Great Banded Grayling and Small White.

Day 6

Sunday 7th September

Today we drove north-west to Pola de Somiedo in Cantabria. Due to the rain we could not stop at our usual place for our picnic lunch so we stopped at a local bar and asked for permission to use the shelter outside. We were promptly taken inside and a bit of reorganising of the tables and chairs in the bar took care of the rest. We had a wonderful picnic inside, being closely watched by the locals who were certainly as amused as we were!

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 spent the remainder of the late afternoon and evening at one of the viewpoints. Here the open mountain slopes provide the best scanning opportunities. It was cool and windy, but we quickly found several groups of Izards, and a large group of Griffon Vultures. No Bears were spotted today but we still all enjoyed the great local dinner and excellent local wine!

Day 7

Monday 8th September

The early morning was spent looking for bears in a different area as yesterday. Fortunately the clouds had lifted giving us an unobstructed view of the whole area. We didn't have to wait long before the first bears were spotted. A female with three cubs was feeding on the berries of some small trees and gave us exceptional views over the next two and a half hours. We had lots of time to study every detail of their behaviour and only the promise of a great breakfast and hot coffee waiting for us at the hotel could drag us away from one of the best and most exceptional sightings we have ever had on a Naturetrek trip!

Late morning was spent walking along the Valle trail. Here we had great sightings of Golden Eagle and Peregrine overhead, while the Butterfly people found no less than 20 species in an hour. Best were Berger's Clouded Yellow, Turquoise Blue, Spanish Chalkhill Blue, Large Wall Brown, Sooty Copper, Silver-spotted and Marbled Skipper and Brown Argus.

After a short siesta we were out again to another viewpoint in the higher regions of the park. Here we quickly spotted a Wild Cat in the meadows below us. It stayed long enough for all of us to see it well. Working its way along the meadows, it was looking for food and caught at least 7-8 Voles and Moles over the next two hours.

We could study the behaviour of this rarely seen cat in great detail through our scopes and were delighted with this exceptional and unexpected sighting! It was one of the best days the guides had ever had in the park, and a great celebratory meal awaited us in Pola....

Day 8

Tuesday 9th September

This morning was again exceptional! We quickly found yesterday's mother bear and her three cubs again, and as yesterday they gave us the whole show for the next couple of hours! Much to the joy of the ones that had decided to have a lie in yesterday!

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 and Wall Lizards. Butterflies seen here included Chalkhill and Common Blue, Tree Grayling, and Berger's Clouded Yellow. We spent some time exploring the lake margins and old mine shaft, closely watched by both Dunnock and Alpine Accentor before making our way back up to the car park. We ate our picnic by the viewpoint watched by Vultures and Buzzards overhead

The evening was spent at one of our favourite places in the park. No more bears were found, but the Wild Cat was seen again! 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 10th 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 amongst the many flowering autumn crocuses. After this we paid a visit to the Brown Bear visitor centre in Prozoa. We visited the centre itself and its large enclosures, where we could see two big females and a male Cantabrian Brown Bear feeding and resting. At the parking lot during our picnic lunch a rarely seen Aspice Viper 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 11th 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, Manx and Great Shearwaters, Great Skua and a group of ten Sabine's Gulls! A small detour along the Brittany coast gave us a few more pods of Common Dolphins and great views of some of the French lighthouses!

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. Muchas gracia y hasta luego!!!

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.

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 is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Species List

Mammals (19 species!)

WOLF	1 adult
Red Fox	2
Izard	common
Red Deer	common
Roe Deer	singles
WILD CAT	1 (3 evenings in a row!!)
European Rabbit	singles
European Hare	singles
Wild Boar	2 groups
BROWN BEAR	1 female with 3 cubs!! (2 mornings)
Cuvier's Beaked Whale	2
Common Dolphin	common
Striped Dolphin	few
Common Pipistrelle	several
Mediterranean Pine Vole	1
Lusitanian Pine Vole	few (incl 1 killed by the Wild Cat!)
Lesser White-toothed Shrew	1
American Mink	1
Spanish Mole	1 (killed by the Wild Cat)

Birds (95 species)

Common name	<i>Scientific name</i>
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>
Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>
Eur Black Vulture	<i>Aegyphus monachus</i>
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>

Common name	Scientific name
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>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</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	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>
Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis sharpei</i>
Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>
South Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>
Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>
European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegeolus</i>
Short-toed Lark	<i>Callendrella brachydactyla</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Spanish Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>

Butterflies (29 species)

Common name	Scientific name
Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>
Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias australis</i>
Cleopatra	<i>Gonepteryx cleopatra</i>
Purple Hairstreak	<i>Quercusia quercus</i>
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>
Sooty Copper	<i>Lycaena tityrus</i>
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>
Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>
Chalk-hill Blue	<i>Lysandra albicans</i>
Turquoise Blue	<i>Plebicula dorylas</i>
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>
Chapman's Blue	<i>Polyommatus thersites</i>
Cardinal	<i>Pandoriana pandora</i>
Rock Grayling	<i>Hipparchia alcyone</i>
Grayling	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>
Great Banded Grayling	<i>Kanetisa circe</i>
Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>
Large Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata maera</i>
Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus malvae</i>
Marbled Skipper	<i>Carcharodus lavatherae</i>
Small Skipper	<i>Thymelicus sylvestris</i>
Silver-spotted Skipper	<i>Hesperia comma</i>
Red-underwing Skipper	<i>Spialia sertorius</i>
Essex Skipper	<i>Thymelicus lineola</i>
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>

Other wildlife

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