

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 – 10 September 2015



Female Wildcat



Brown Bear with cubs



Short-toed Snake-eagle



Great Bustard

Report compiled by Gerald Broddelez
Images courtesy of Josie and Dave Dimmock



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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 the Brown Bears extremely well on several occasions. Seeing a record four Wild Cats at close range, hunting mice/voles for hours, was a real bonus. On the ferry we had excellent views of several pods of dolphins, and flocks of shearwaters and Sabine's Gulls, with Fin and Minke Whales seen by the whole group.

Day 1

Tuesday 1st September

Our holiday started with the overnight ferry from Portsmouth to Santander. After boarding and settling in, we had the evening at leisure; sea-watching and exploring the ship.

Day 2

Wednesday 2nd September

A full day crossing the western English Channel and Bay of Biscay lay ahead of us.

We were 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 groups of Common Dolphins coming in alongside the vessel – we all got great views of these exuberant dolphins and the successive groups which continued for hours.

Birds seen were good numbers of Great and Cory's Shearwaters, Gannets and a few Sooty and Manx Shearwaters. A Little Shearwater passing by closely was unexpected.

Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin and Knot all attempted to land on the ship while we made our way south. As we progressed deeper, we encountered more acrobatic groups of Common Dolphins. We also found small flocks of shearwaters containing Balearic, Sooty and Great Shearwaters.

After arriving in Santander, we checked into our beautiful hotel and had a great dinner.

Day 3

Thursday 3rd September

Today we drove south-west to Pola de Somiedo in Cantabria. A few blocked roads and several detours later, we arrived at our base at lunch time, in time for some great Tortilla.

After checking in and a short obligatory siesta, 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!

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. It was foggy and windy, but we quickly found several groups of Izards (Chamois), a Red Fox, young Wild Boar, and some Griffon Vultures overhead.

Dinner was superb with a large choice of entrees, mains and desserts, and plenty of local white and red wine.

Day 4

Friday 4th September

The early morning was spent looking for bears in the same area as yesterday. Unfortunately the clouds had not lifted so we had an early breakfast before trying our luck elsewhere.

Driving to the north side of the park, we promptly came to a halt when Ian shouted "Wild Cat". We all got out of the vehicles and admired a female for the next hour or so while it was successfully hunting Mediterranean Pine Voles only a short distance away. We could study the behaviour of this rarely seen Cat in great detail through our telescopes, and we were delighted with this exceptional and unexpected sighting. A great start!

After a coffee stop, we arrived at the bear viewpoint and started scanning the slopes around us. We did not have to wait long before the first animals were spotted. A group of Izard was feeding on the slopes above us, allowing great views, while a Short-toed Snake Eagle and a Booted Eagle passed low overhead.

After another great picnic lunch we lowered our guards a bit, until Gabriella suddenly shouted "I've got them!" A female Bear with this year's cub was walking along the scree slope, climbing trees and feeding on the berries of some small trees. We had exceptional views over the next hour with lots of time to study every detail of their behaviour. It was the second highlight of the day and one of the best and most exceptional sightings on this Naturetrek trip!

Whilst driving back to the hotel another Wild Cat, this time a large male, was spotted in the meadows below us. It stayed long enough for all of us to see it well, working its way along the meadows looking for food. Sightings today had been exceptional, and it was one of the best days the guides had ever had in the Park. A celebration meal awaited us in Pola - complete with local music.

Day 5

Saturday 5th September

After yesterday's success, we all decided to have a lie in! As the weather was still foggy after breakfast we delayed our plans for the morning, giving everyone the chance to explore the town.

Late morning we drove to another area in the park for a gentle walk in the Lagos area. Soon we were on our way through one of the prettiest valleys of the Park. When we arrived at the top the fog was slowly disappearing, and soon we could see the whole valley appearing below and above us. It was certainly one of the prettiest sights in the Park.

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 including Black Redstart, Bullfinch, Serin and Chaffinch. A group of Crag Martins and House Martins was flying below us in front of one of the large caves. One of the smaller pools held Pyrenean Frog. On the more rocky areas we had great views of several Rock Buntings and Wall Lizards. Butterflies seen included Turquoise and Common Blues, and Berger's Clouded Yellow. We spend some time exploring the lake margins and the old mine shaft, closely watched by both Dunnock and Rock Thrush, before making our way back up to the car park.

We ate our picnic by the viewpoint watched by vultures, a melanistic Montagu's Harrier, a Short-toed Eagle and buzzards overhead.

The evening was spent at a favourite place in the Park. It did not take long before a male Bear was spotted working its way along the higher slopes of the valley. We followed it as it made its way from one side of the valley to the other, sometimes disappearing in one place and reappearing several hundred metres away.

Again this final sighting was duly celebrated in the evening with another great meal and a few carafes of wine.

Day 6

Sunday 6th September

After breakfast we drove south, deep into Zamora province, to a small village near to the Portuguese border. En route the drive was interrupted several times: first by a Golden Eagle being mobbed by a few crows, and then by a Wild Cat - followed by another!

It was midday when we arrived at the rural village of Villardeciervos, just in time for a local lunch at our Posada Rural, newly renovated and our base for the next three nights.

Late afternoon was spent by the lake at Cional. Here we took a short walk along the water's edge. The wet meadows held several species of butterfly including Rock, Tree and Great Banded Graylings, Long-tailed Blue and Wall Brown. In the lake we could see a Crayfish walking on the bottom, closely watched by many dragonflies, mainly Spreadwings and Emperors. A group of Long-tailed Tits, Crested Lark and Stonechat were added to the list.

Day 7/8

Monday 7th/Tuesday 8th September

For the next two days, our focus switched to looking for 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 found a good selection of birds and mammals.

Red and Roe Deer and Wild Boar were seen in good numbers. Birds of prey were much in evidence and included good views of Griffon Vulture, Cinereous (Black) Vulture, Honey Buzzard, Red Kite, Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Snake Eagle, and both Hen and Montagu's Harriers.

In the conifer forests we found many Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Coal and Crested Tits, and Jays, while the heaths held Woodlark, Stonechat, Western Bonelli's Warbler and Dartford Warbler.

On one of the days we drove to the Rio Esla for lunch. It was a sunny day and the wildlife was out in full force. At the river, sightings of Otter, Iberian Chiffchaff, large flocks of five species of hirundines, Kingfisher, Garden Warbler, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, and some Serotine Bats in a small crag, entertained us for a long time. At the lunch spot itself we had a good selection of butterflies including a Marbled Skipper, Bath White and several rare Striped Graylings.

Day 9

Wednesday 9th September

After breakfast we drove the 'steppe' route back to Santander. Soon we were in the Spanish steppes proper seeing numerous buzzards and kestrels, before arriving in the core area for Great Bustard. This time of the year they are not to be found in large groups, but with a bit of searching we soon found several groups and enjoyed great telescope views. They were closely watched by a single Little Owl and some distant waders.

From here we drove to Fuentes for lunch. Although this whole wetland area was very dry, we found a nice group of Spoonbills with a single White Stork.

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 a bite to eat before boarding our ferry.

Day 10

Thursday 10th September

After a calm night, some of us were up early in anticipation of things to come. We were rewarded with sightings of many Gannets, Manx and Great Shearwaters, Great Skua and a group of 20 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 a varied and enjoyable trip. There was a bus waiting for anybody who required a lift back to Portsmouth. A group of Sika Deer grazing next to the highway was a fitting finale to a fantastic trip!

Thank you all for being on the trip, and very much look forward to seeing you all again soon on another Naturetrek tour.

Muchas gracia y hasta luego!

Species Lists

Mammals

Red Fox	4
Izard	common
Red Deer	common
Roe Deer	singles
Wild Cat	4 (at very close range)
Wild Boar	common – many piglets
Brown Bear	1 female with a cub, and a single male
Fin Whale	10+
Common Dolphin	common
Striped Dolphin	few
Serotine Bat	2
Mediterranean Pine Vole	1
Otter	1
Sika Deer	5 near Dorchester on the way back to Portsmouth

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

Common name	Scientific name
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>
Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>
Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>
Little Shearwater	<i>Puffinus assimilis</i>
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus Ibis</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron pernix</i>
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>
Cinereous (Black) Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avocetta</i>
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Red Knot	<i>Clidris canutus</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</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>
Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</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>
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>
Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>
Little Owl	<i>Athena noctua</i>
Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</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>
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>
Carriion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Coal Tit	<i>Periparus 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>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
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>
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</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>
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus colibita</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>
Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</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>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</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>Linaria cannabina</i>
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>

Butterflies

Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>
Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia napi</i>
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidicea</i>
Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>
Wood White	<i>Leptidea sinapis</i>
Berger's Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias aurantis</i>
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>
Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>
Silver-studded Blue	<i>Plebejus argus</i>
Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>
Turquoise Blue	<i>Plebicula dorylas</i>
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>
Cardinal	<i>Pandoriana pandora</i>
Rock Grayling	<i>Hipparchia alcyone</i>

Common name

Grayling	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>
Tree Grayling	<i>Neohipparchia statilinus</i>
Great Banded Grayling	<i>Kanetisa circe</i>
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>
Spanish Heath	<i>Coenonympha iphioides</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>
Marbled Sipper	<i>Carcharodus lavatherae</i>
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>

Scientific name

Other Wildlife

Wall Lizard	Emperor Dragonfly	Broad Scarlet
Ruddy Darter	White-legged Damselfly	Green Emerald Damselfly
Spreadwing Sp.	Hawker Sp.	Blue-winged Cricket
Red-winged Cricket	Humming-bird Hawk-moth	

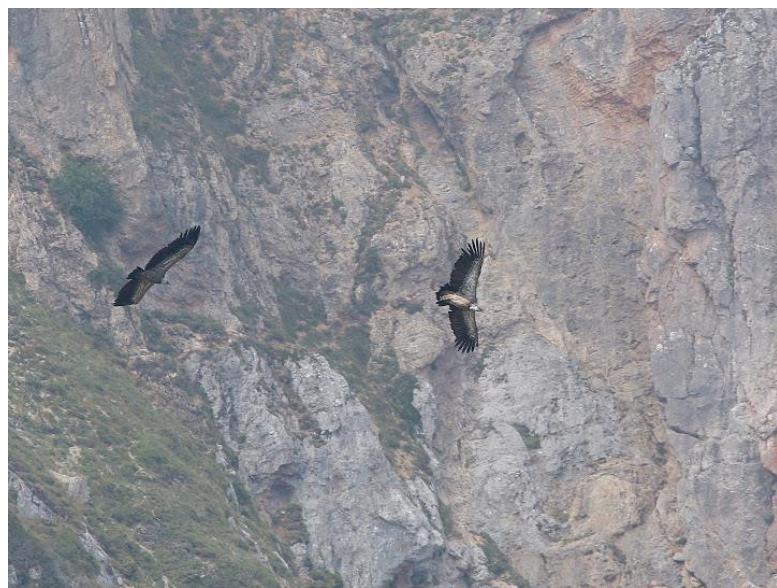
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Griffon Vultures