

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 September – 3 October 2019

---

Report compiled by Byron Palacios



Naturetrek   Wolfs Lane   Chawton   Alton   Hampshire   GU34 3HJ   England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour Participants: Byron Palacios (Leader) with eight Naturetrek clients.

## Introduction

The biodiversity of Northern Spain offers plenty of wildlife to the most demanding nature lover. Its different landscapes and mountain habitats, alongside its villages and gastronomy, gave us real taste of the rural and hidden Spain we don't normally hear about. The Cantabrian Mountains extend for about 180 miles across northern Spain, running almost parallel to the sea from the edge of the Basque Country to Galicia. They are home to two isolated populations of European Brown Bear, with over 400 in the wildest, steepest and most wooded parts of the little-visited western end of the range; of these about 100 live in the deep valleys and rugged terrain of Somiedo Biosphere Reserve, established in 1988. It 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.

We were very successful on this trip, seeing both species, Cantabrian Brown Bear and Iberian Wolf, being extremely lucky with the latter as we had amazing views two days in a row! On the ferry we had excellent views of several pods of Dolphins, Shearwaters and Gannets, alongside some migratory birds using the ferry as a resting point. A very good experience for all of us, exploring this fantastic and beautiful area of northern Spain!

## Day 1

**Tuesday 24th September**

### Ferry crossing Plymouth to Santander

Our holiday started with the overnight ferry from Plymouth to Santander. After settling in on board we had the evening at leisure, did a bit of sea-watching and explored the ship. The weather was not the best when we left Plymouth and it was quite windy, rough and wet once on board. In despite of that, we managed to see some birds such as Northern Gannets, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Manx and Cory's Shearwater, and Great Skua. The weather became unbearable towards the evening.

## Day 2

**Wednesday 25th September**

### Bay of Biscay - Santander

We had a full day crossing the Bay of Biscay in poor weather. It was much better when we arrived in Santander from where we set off towards the Cantabrian Mountains, straight to the village of Cordovilla de Aguilar, up on the south-east slope of the Montaña Palentina Natural Park. We met up with our hosts Tino & Rosa who kindly greeted us, allocated our rooms in their comfy lodge, followed by a delicious dinner cooked by the skilled hands of Rosa.

We enjoyed our dinner very much and retired to bed afterwards.

## Day 3

Thursday 26th September

### Montaña Palentina Natural Park (El Cebollar – Celada de Roblecedo – Peña Tejedo)

A very early start was necessary this morning to enhance our chances of seeing the very elusive Iberian Wolf, so we drove a good 40 minutes while it was still dark to the mountains, getting to our hotspot above the village of Resoba just in time for dawn. We had great views of Broom Hare and a Barn Owl along the access track. Once there we kept extremely quiet as we started scanning the valley very carefully for a good two hours, finding lots of Red Deer, and, to our surprise, four Iberian Wolves right above them...amazing!! We had great views of these lovely and elusive animals, enjoying their behaviour and the environment where these beautiful canines live! After having a fantastic time watching Iberian Wolves, we decided to drive to Cervera de Pisuerga for a very nice and welcome coffee and grilled croissants as our elevenses!

After this pleasant break, we continued to explore along the river Pisuerga basin making a diversion towards the area of Celada de Roblecedo, driving our 4x4's up to the top of the mountain to the spot known as Peña Tejedo, located at just under 2,000 metres above sea level. We had fantastic views of Griffon Vultures, Northern Raven and plenty of Red-billed Choughs.

We then drove down to the ancient oak woodland of Celada where we enjoyed our delicious picnic lunch surrounded by a breathtaking landscape, taking a nice stroll along this wonderful woodland which produced Crested Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper, Coal, Great, Blue and Long-tailed Tits, European Nuthatch and Firecrest, amongst others. After exploring these lovely woods, we drove back to our lodge to take a break followed by a delicious dinner!

## Day 4

Friday 27th September

### Montaña Palentina Natural Park (El Cebollar – Rabanal – Perapertú)

This morning was again exceptional! We started really early again, getting to our hotspot at dawn - perfect to start our Iberian Wolf search. We scanned the valleys thoroughly, until we spotted a large Wild Boar male with three young piglets and one young adult, which we enjoyed watching foraging amongst the scrub, with the early morning sunshine lighting them beautifully!

Soon after this we spotted a group of six Iberian Wolves. First we saw an adult female that was exploring amongst the Spanish broom and heather and soon after this, four youngsters and the Alpha male came right out into the open meadow, while the young ones were playing with each other non stop! Later on, they moved along through the broom, going on top of the boulders at times and basking in the sun, while some of the young ones kept playing in the broom, going out into the clearings at times. All these sightings lasted over an hour; it was fascinating to watch a very elusive and poorly known mammal in such an amazing way! We also had great views of plenty of Red Deer and Griffon Vultures.

After this successful early morning, we drove to Cervera de Pisuerga where we had a yummy elevenses which went down very well. We then continued our excursion with a short drive to Rabanal where we

had a good stroll which produced plenty of Serin, European Stonechat, Carrion Crow, more Griffon Vultures, and a very nice Iberian Grey Shrike.

We found a lovely spot to enjoy our picnic lunch nearby which produced interesting invertebrates and lizards, plus great tracks of Iberian Wolves. We then drove following a back track through the woods and remote meadows which lead us to Perapertú where we found some European Bison grazing in the meadows nearby; we also found lots of butterflies and flowers in one of the adjacent meadows while taking a short walk.

We then drove back to our lodge in order to take a break followed by another delicious supper!

## Day 5

Saturday 28th September

### Cilla Mayor – Monte Royale – Las Tuerces Geological Reserve

We started today by visiting the village of Cillamayor where we had a quick stop to collect some fresh bread from the village's bakery, and we took a quick look at the Romanesque church which was very interesting too. We then explored the village's open meadows and fields which were very productive as we saw lots of different birds such as Northern Wheatears, Spotless Starlings, Common Stonechat, Black Redstarts, Dunnocks, Serin, Linnets, Rock Sparrow, Wood Lark, Mistle Thrush and also very fresh tracks of Wild Boar and Roe Deer. We then drove a short distance into the pine woods where we had great views of Griffon Vultures, Common Buzzard, Kestrel, Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper and Firecrest, amongst others. We called for a coffee in Monte Royale in the pine woodland located in the outskirts of Aguilar de Campoo. We had great views of Crested Tit here, plus Short-toed Treecreeper, Coal Tit, and White Wagtails.

After this enjoyable coffee stop, we drove a short distance to the village of Villaescusa de las Torres, where we enjoyed having our picnic lunch whilst looking the wildlife nearby which included White-throated Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Common Sandpiper, loud Cetti's Warblers, Common Chiffchaffs, and a very quick Kingfisher. After lunch, we drove up to Las Tuerces Geological Reserve. Considered one of the most important geological areas in Western Europe, Las Tuerces (which means 'twisted rocks') are erected on the top of a massive plateau which turns into a labyrinth as you walk through its trails, which were the home of Neanderthal man 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. We took a nice walk through the narrow trails of the rock formations watching some interesting butterflies and birds such as Serins, Eurasian Kestrels, Goldfinch, Black Redstart and others.

After this, we made our way back to the 'casas rurales' in order to take a break followed by some drinks and another delicious supper!

## Day 6

Sunday 29th September

### Brañosera – Saja Besaya Natural Park – Somiedo Biosphere Reserve

We started today leaving our lovely lodge in Cordovilla de Aguilar and started our journey towards Somiedo. We made our first stop in the Brañosera forest where we had great views of Firecrest, Coal Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Woodlark, and a lovely Iberian Chiffchaff. We then left the area and drove over the ridge hitting the very lush Saja-Besaya Natural Park where we enjoy making a stop at a very picturesque view point from where we had beautiful views of the whole valley under the sunshine, alongside Griffon Vultures, Common Buzzard, and some lizards and butterflies. We continued our journey drifting down the valley finding a lovely spot by the river Saja where we had our picnic lunch. We had great views of Western Green Lizard and Common Wall Lizard. After this stop, we hit the Cantabrian Coastal motorway for nearly two hours, diverting onto the valley road of Belmonte and towards the village of Pola de Somiedo, arriving at our hotel in the late afternoon.

We gathered together again to go through our checklist, followed by a delicious local dinner at Sidreria Carion restaurant!

## Day 7

Monday 30th September

### Somiedo Valley – Castro trail – La Peral

Today we had another very early start to explore the whole Somiedo Valley, scanning from various points along the road which produced great views of Cantabrian Chamois (Iziar), Common Buzzard, Griffon Vulture and Great Spotted Woodpecker, amongst others. We then drove back to the village in order to get ready for a nice trek along the Castro trail which produced fantastic butterflies, a kettles of two dozen Griffon Vultures, Red Squirrel and Coal Tits. We had our lovely picnic lunch at the bottom of the trail which was relaxing and very cool as the sun started to hit a bit – in late September!

We then took a break back in our hotel, setting off onto the Somiedo valley road once again in order to scan the meadows and clearings towards the early evening. We checked from top to bottom, from Llmardal to Gúa, but it was very quiet in terms of large carnivores, although we had great views of Stonechats, Jay and Rock Buntings. We then drove back to Pola de Somiedo in order to enjoy another delicious dinner at our local restaurant!

## Day 8

Tuesday 1st October

### Aguino view point – Saliencia Valley (1.750 m)

We started very early today once again heading to a different view point, this time at Aguino. The weather wasn't looking promising as it was an overcast early morning with some drops of light rain at times. This wasn't an impediment to us starting to scan the hills and this paid off really well! A male Cantabrian Brown Bear was spotted directly across the valley feeding on the acorns of a rather strong Portuguese Oak (*Q. faginea*) which handled the heavy 250 kg. beast! We watched this very active and lovely bear for nearly an hour, before he walked slowly over the ridge and vanished through the thick broom and evergreen oaks.

Happy and relieved at seeing this elusive animal, we drove along the Saliencia valley's narrow and bendy road over dramatic rocky landscapes, reaching the very top of the valley at 1,750 metres above sea level, where La Farrapona Pass is located, right on the border with León (Castilla y León). We took a good hike along the track overlooking the impressive limestone crags and the large glacier, getting great views of Crag Martins, Black Redstarts, Griffon Vultures, Red-billed Choughs, Alpine Choughs and Water Pipits. We also found a few butterflies and a nice pair of Rock Buntings, plenty of Linnets, Goldfinch and more Crag Martins. After this very enjoyable walk, we went back to our vehicle in order to enjoy a nice picnic lunch overlooking this gorgeous glacier and surrounding valleys, driving back to Pola de Somiedo in the mid-afternoon for a well-deserved break before our pre-dinner excursion back to the Aguino view point. We waited patiently, but no bears came into view, so we drove back to Pola in order to enjoy another delicious dinner!

## Day 9

Wednesday 2nd October

### Somiedo Valley – Santander ferry to Plymouth

Our very last day in the mountains was perfect for another very early exploration to the Somiedo valley, checking the areas of Gúa, Caunedo and finally the village of La Peral, where we had fantastic views of a herd of over 30 Cantabrian Chamois (Izias) grazing in the higher meadows of these impressive rocky crags. After this, we drove back to our hotel in Pola de Somiedo in order to take a break, pack our belongings and get ready for our last lunch together before setting off to Santander. We arrived at the coastal city in time to get our ferry, which was three hours delayed, giving us a good chance to enjoy some tapas and local drinks in this fashionable northern Spanish city.

## Day 10

Thursday 3rd October

### English Channel – Plymouth

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, Cory's and Great Shearwaters, Arctic and Great Skuas, and lots of great views of Short-beaked Common Dolphins. We docked at Plymouth in the evening and we gathered together in order to say our goodbyes and wishing all the best to each other after a varied and enjoyable trip.

## Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk) to sign up.



## Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	September/October									
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	1	2	3
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>					✓					
2	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓	✓						
3	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>		✓								✓
4	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>		✓								✓
5	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>	✓	✓								✓
6	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		✓								
7	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓				✓				
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓					✓			✓	
9	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓	✓							✓	✓
10	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓								
11	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					✓					
12	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓				✓			
14	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓	✓	✓			✓		
15	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			✓							
16	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					✓					
18	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					✓					
19	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓								
20	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>										✓
21	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓							✓	
22	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>									✓	
23	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓								✓
24	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>										✓
25	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	✓	✓								✓
26	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>										✓
27	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>						✓				
29	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>			✓	✓						
30	European Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>					✓					
31	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>			✓							
32	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				h	✓	✓	✓			
33	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>			h	h			h			
34	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
35	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			✓	✓	✓					
36	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
37	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
38	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>			✓	h			✓	✓	✓	
39	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>								✓		
40	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
41	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
42	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			✓		✓					
44	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>			✓							
45	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
46	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
47	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			h	✓	✓	✓				

	Common name	Scientific name	September/October											
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	1	2	3		
48	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					✓							
49	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>									✓			
50	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			✓					✓	✓			
51	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>								✓				
52	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>					✓							
53	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
54	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓		✓							✓
55	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>						✓						
56	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
57	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			✓									
58	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>					✓	✓						
59	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
60	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓	✓				✓	✓			
61	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			✓		✓			✓				
62	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
63	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
64	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>									✓			
65	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
66	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
68	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		
69	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					✓							
70	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
71	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
72	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				✓	✓	✓						
73	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
74	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>					✓			✓	✓	✓		
75	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
76	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>												✓
77	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>												✓
78	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>									✓	✓		
79	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
80	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓									
81	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					✓				✓	✓		
82	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>					h							
83	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓		✓				✓	✓		
84	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		
85	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			h						✓			
86	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>								✓	✓			

## Mammals

1	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>								1				
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			✓	✓						✓		
3	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>			1		2				1			
4	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>				6								
5	Chamois	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>								4	✓	✓		
6	Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>												✓
7	Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>			4	6								
8	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>									1			
9	Broom Hare	<i>Lepus castoviejoi</i>			1									

## Butterflies

Large White, *Pieris brassicae*  
Clouded Yellow, *Colias crocea*  
Cleopatra, *Gonepteryx cleopatra*  
Purple Hairstreak, *Quercusia quercus*  
Silver-studded Blue, *Plebejus argus*  
Adonis Blue, *Lysandra bellargus*  
Green-underside Blue, *Glaucopsyche alexis*  
Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*  
Cardinal, *Pandoriana pandora*  
Speckled Wood, *Pararge aegeria aegeria*  
Grizzled Skipper, *Pyrgus malvae*

Pale Clouded Yellow, *Colias hyale*  
Berger's Clouded Yellow, *Colias australis*  
Wood White, *Leptidea sinapis*  
Lang's Short-tailed Blue, *Leptotes pirithous*  
Turquoise Blue, *Plebicula dorylas*  
Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*  
Large Tortoiseshell, *Nymphalis polychloros*  
Painted Lady, *Vanessa cardui*  
Great Banded Grayling, *Kanetisa circe*  
Wall Brown, *Lasiommata megera*  
Mallow Skipper, *Carcharodus alceae*

## Other Wildlife

Blue-winged Grasshopper, *Oedipoda caerulescens*  
Common Green Grasshopper, *Omocestus viridulus*  
Field Cricket, *Gryllus campestris*  
Oil Beetle sp, *Meloe sp*  
Hummingbird Hawk-moth, *Macroglossum stellatarum*  
White-tailed Bumble Bee, *Bombus lucorum*  
Common Wall Lizard, *Podarcis muralis*

Red-winged Grasshopper, *Oedipoda germanica*  
Great Green Bush Cricket, *Tettigonia viridissima*  
Wood Cricket, *Nemobius sylvestris*  
Praying Mantis, *Mantis religiosa*  
Carpenter Bumble Bee sp, *Xylocopinae sp*  
Viviparous Lizard, *Zootoca vivipara*  
Western Green Lizard, *Lacerta bilineata*