

Spain's 'Big Three' – In Search of Whales, Wolves & Bears

Naturetrek Tour Report

18th – 27th September 2022



Minke Whale



Great Bustard



European Wildcat

Tour report and images by Byron Palacios



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Summary

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, has given us the 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 outskirts of the Basque Country to Galicia. They are home to two isolated populations of European Brown Bear and also Iberian Wolves and European Wildcats, and we were lucky enough to visit these wonderful creatures' habitat, enjoying every second of them...truly breath-taking!

We enjoyed this tour throughout watching amazing wildlife such as Iberian Wolf, European Wildcat, Spanish Chamois, Red & Roe Deer and lots of beautiful birds! We also had several pods of Short-beaked Common Dolphins, blows from Fin and Minke Whales, Pelagius such as Sooty, Manx, Balearic, Great and Cory's Shearwaters, plenty of Northern Gannets, alongside some migratory birds using the ferry as a resting point. A very good experience to all of us, exploring the fantastic and beautiful lies of northern Spain.

Day 1

Sunday 18th September

Our tour started with the overnight ferry from Plymouth to Santander. After settling in on board, we made the most out of the daylight left sea watching from the top deck, this produced plenty of Northern Gannets, Manx Shearwaters, European Shag, Greater Black-backed, European Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, amongst others. As darkness hit the boat, we retire inside the vessel to have a chilled evening at leisure. The weather was nice when we left Plymouth getting very windy at night once on board.

Day 2

Monday 19th September

We had a full morning crossing the Bay of Biscay with fairly good weather, much better than we were expecting! We had lots of views of Great and Cory's Shearwaters, in fact lots of them! We also had several Sooty Shearwaters and a pair of Balearic Shearwaters later in the day. We also had a few pods of Short-beaked Common Dolphins at times, we also had several blows of cetaceans, mostly from Minke Whales with one breaching and a couple of Fin Whales too!

We then arrived in Santander with two hours delayed, from where we set off towards the Cantabrian Mountains, straight to the village of Cordovilla de Aguilar, right in the southeast slope of the Montaña Palentina Natural Park. We met up with our hosts Tino & Rosa who kindly greeted us, accommodated us in their comfy lodge, followed by a delicious dinner cooked by the skilled hands of Rosa.

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

Day 3

Tuesday 20th September

The very early morning start was necessary to enhance our chances to see the very elusive Iberian Wolf, so we drove a good 40 minutes and still in the dark to the mountains, getting to our hotspot above the village of Arroyo just in time to dawn. Some of us had great views of European Nightjar along the access track. Once at the spot, we started scanning the valley very carefully for a good two hours, finding lots of Red Deer, and, to our surprise, an Iberian Wolf right above them...Amazing!! We had great views of these lovely and elusive animal, right there, basking in the early morning sunshine, just fantastic! After this successful first morning, we decided to drive to Cervera de Pisuerga for a very nice and welcoming coffee break which we all enjoyed!

After this pleasant break, we continued to explore along the river Pisuerga basin making a diversion towards the area of Celada de Robledo, driving our 4x4's up to the top of the mountain to the spot known as Peña Tejado, located at just under 2,000 metres above the 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 oak woodland which produced Crested Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper, Coal, Great, Blue and Long-tailed Tits, European Nuthatch, Pied Flycatchers, amongst others. After exploring this lovely woods, we kept exploring the meadows along the valley of Castillería where we found a beautiful European Wildcat. We enjoyed watching this beautiful feline for a good 30 minutes, hunting and walking along its territory...simply amazing! After this nice event, we drove back to our lodge to take a break followed by a delicious dinner.

Day 4

Wednesday 21st September

This morning was again exceptional! We started very early again, getting to our hotspot at dawn, perfect to start our Iberian Wolf search. We scanned the valleys evenly, till we spotted a large Wildboar male with three young piglets and one young adult, we enjoyed watching them very active amongst the scrub with good early sunshine hitting them directly! This sighting shortly led us to spot 3 different individuals of Iberian Wolves, an adult female that was exploring amongst the Spanish broom and heather; soon after this, two youngsters came right to the open meadow.. All these sightings lasted over an hour; it was amazing 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 eleven's which suited everyone very well. We then continued our excursion with a short drive to the valley of Lores where we had a good stroll which produced plenty of Serin, European Stonechat, Northern Raven, Rock Bunting, more Griffon Vultures, tons of Common Buzzards, Willow Warblers and lots of very interesting butterflies!

We found a lovely spot to enjoy our picnic lunch nearby which produced interesting invertebrates and lizards. We then drove following a back track through the woods and remote meadows which lead us to Perapertú where we also found lots of butterflies and flowers in one of the adjacent meadows while taking a little walk along.

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

Day 5

Thursday 22nd September

Another early start took us back to our usual hotspot. Once there, our hard work was well paid off again with the sightings of three different Iberian Wolf individuals. Some of us were lucky to see all three very well, but we had fantastic and long views of one adult female which moved around the open heathland for good periods of time. These sightings were great to check out their behaviour and the way they actually perform in their own environment. This gave us an idea of their day-by-day morning activity which is priceless! Very happy and content, we drove back to Cervera de Pisuerga to have our usual coffee break and to visit a very interesting small archaeological site.

We continued exploring the basin of the river Pisuerga where we had our lunch enjoyed the beautiful weather...rather warm for the time of the day! After lunch, we took a stroll along the river where we had interesting birds such as Marsh, Long-tailed, Blue and Great Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper, White-throated Dipper, White and Great Wagtails, amongst others. After this walk, we took our vehicles driving to the fields that surround the village of Cillamayor where we found a large group of Griffon Vultures down on the ground feeding on a dead animal carcass, possibly a large male Red Deer. There were at least 30+ Griffons on the ground plus another 40+ kettling in the sky, perhaps waiting for their slot to land nearby the dead animal. We enjoyed watching this and also other birds and butterflies once we stopped nearby..

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

Friday 23rd September

We started today leaving our lovely lodge in Cordovilla de Aguilar in order to start our journey towards the lush Somiedo Biosphere Reserve. We then set off following the southern motorway heading towards the area of Tierra de Campos, a northern patch of plains and marshes with interesting landscapes. The sky looked variable with massive black clouds threatening to rain but it was also some patches of blue sky which made things look promising. Our first great bird of the morning was this beautiful Hen Harrier we spotted from the van, it flew right in front of us, very close so we had a detailed view of this wonderful raptor! We arrived to a nice spot within the area and soon after our first stop, we spotted our first Great Bustard, super cool! Then, not far from there, a trio of Great Bustards were also spotted, we enjoyed watching them and some other birds such as Corn Buntings, Linnets, Serins, Northern Wheatear, amongst others. We continued exploring the area and not far from our first stop, a second group of Great Bustards were found, this time they were over a dozen birds! We then drove for another short distance towards the marshes, we found an unusual Black Stork individual here, a youngster, possibly on migration. We also had great views of Zitting Cisticola, European Stonechat, Garden and Willow Warblers, Eurasian Blackcap, Common Chiffchaff, Northern Wheatear and beautiful views of Firecrest!

We found a nice spot nearby where we had our lunch, followed by a coffee stop in the village of Fuentes de Nava. After this, we hit the road heading north towards the county of Asturias, going through spectacular and varied landscapes as we were leaving the plateau into the foothills and eventually back in the heart of the Cantabrian Mountains. After two hours of driving, we left the motorway going into the Valle de Luna and then through the Babia Valley where we made a leg stretching stop. We continued our drive arriving to the village of

Pola de Somiedo, in the late afternoon. After checking in and retired to our rooms for a break, we gathered together again to go through our checklist, followed by a delicious local dinner at Casa Miño restaurant.

Day 7

Saturday 24th September

Today, another very early start took us to explore the whole Somiedo Valley, scanning from various points along the road. The weather wasn't promising at all as light rain and fog covered the whole valley. We arrived to the first viewpoint in the village of Caunedo but there was no luck as the weather was not improving. We then decided to try another spot not far from there, Aguino viewpoint. From here, we had great views of Cantabrian Chamois (Izias), Red Deer, Common Buzzard, Griffon Vulture, Great Spotted Woodpecker, European Jay, amongst others. The weather wasn't improving so we decided to drive back to our hotel in order to have lunch and a little break. In the afternoon we drove to the valley of Pineda from where we had more rain and poor views of a good Brown Bear passage area. Unfortunately the weather wasn't improving so we left the area and drove to the area of Caunedo where we ended up the day with no sightings of Brown Bear. We had though plenty of great views of more Chamois, Red Deer, Common Buzzards, European Jay, Red-billed Chough, Griffon Vultures, amongst others.

As the light faded away, we drove back to Pola de Somiedo in order to enjoy another delicious dinner at our local restaurant.

Day 8

Sunday 25th September

We started to a very early breakfast today, heading to the same view point of Caunedo. Once again, the weather wasn't the best, very drizzly and with showers at times. We scanned the slopes from the village for over two hours with no results other than more lovely views of Chamois. The lower valley looked better weather wise so we moved down the road to the village of Castro where we took a stroll up to the village's view point which offered great views of the surroundings. We had great views of Short-toed Snake Eagle soaring alongside some Griffon Vultures; we also had Spotted and Pied Flycatchers, Iberian Green Woodpecker, Firecrest, amongst others. A heavy rain hit the area again by lunch time so we decided to drive back to our lodge in order to enjoy a comforting hot local soup and wonderful bread for lunch!

After lunch and a short break, we hit the highest viewpoint of Aguino once again where more Red Deer were seen, some of them large stags bellowing and even engaging with other rival males! More Griffon Vultures were seen, some of them soaring very close and above our heads, some Red-billed Choughs and Northern Ravens were spotted nearby. Several showers hit the area again so we moved back to the village of Caunedo where we finished the day enjoying great views of Chamois, Red Deer and a beautiful Short-toed Snake Eagle perched on a post in nearby.

We waited patiently with no bears in view, so we drove back to Pola de Somiedo by dusk in order to enjoy another delicious dinner.

Day 9

Monday 26th September

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 viewpoint of Aguino. We had fantastic views of a herd of over 30 Cantabrian Chamois (Izias) grazing in the higher meadows of this 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 to our long drive towards Santander, making a stop for lunch along the way.

We arrived to the coastal city in time to get our ferry which was two hours delayed, that gave us a good chance to buy some local goods to take home in this trendy northern Spanish city. Once on board, we took advantage of the last hour of light we had left before reaching the Bay of Biscay.

Day 10

Tuesday 27th September

After a slightly choppy night, some of us were up early again at the upper deck from where we had plenty of great views of Shearwaters and several pods of Short-beak Common Dolphins, and that was all along the sailing in front of the French west coast and into the Channel. We were rewarded with sightings of many Northern Gannets, Sooty, Cory's, Manx and Great Shearwaters, Arctic and Great Skuas, Sunfish and lots of great views of a large pod (100+) Short-beaked Common Dolphins. We docked at Plymouth in the mid afternoon and we gathered together in order to said our goodbyes and wishing all the best to each other after surely a varied and enjoyable trip.

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Species lists

Plants

Birds (H = Heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	Date:									
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>					X	X				
2	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>						X				
3	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>										X
4	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>		X							X	X
5	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>		X								X
6	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>		X							X	X
7	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>		X							X	X
8	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>		X								X
9	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>						X				
10	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>									X	
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	X				X	X		X	X	
12	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	X								X	
13	Great Egret							X				
14	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	X	X							X	X
15	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	X									
16	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	X			X		X			X	
17	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
18	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>								X		
19	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>			X	X						
20	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>						X				
21	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				X						
22	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>			X							
23	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>					X	X				
24	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>						X				
25	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>					X					
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
27	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>						48+				
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>						H				
29	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	X									
30	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>						X				
31	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	X									
32	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	X									
33	Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>		X								
34	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>									X	
35	Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>									X	
36	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	X	X								
37	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	X	X								
38	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		X							X	
39	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	X									

	Common name	Scientific name	Date:									
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
40	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>									X	
41	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>										X
42	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>										X
43	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
44	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>					X	X				
45	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				H	H		H	H	H	
46	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>						X				
47	European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>			X		X					
48	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>		H	H							
49	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			H	H		X	H	H	H	
50	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>			X	X		X	H	X	H	
51	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			X	X	X	X	X		X	
52	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>		X					X	X		
53	Hobby					X						
54	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
55	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
56	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>			X	X			X	X	X	
57	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	X									
58	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
59	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X		
60	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>				X		X	H	H		
61	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			X							
62	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>					X					
63	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
64	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
65	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			X	X	X					
66	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					X	X				
67	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>						X				
68	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
69	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X		
70	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
71	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>					X	X				
72	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			X	X	X		X	X		
73	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>				X		X	X	X		
74	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>				X	X	X	X	X		
75	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>								X		
76	Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>						X				
77	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>						X				
78	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				X	X	X	X	X	X	
79	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>						X				
80	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			X	X	X					
81	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>						X	X	X		
82	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			H	H	H	H	X	X	X	
83	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			X	H	H					
84	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			X		H	H	H	H		
85	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X		

	Common name	Scientific name	Date:									
			18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
86	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
87	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>							X	X		
88	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
89	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			X				X	X	X	
90	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
91	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X		
92	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochrurus</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X		
93	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
94	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				X	X	X				
95	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X		
96	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
97	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>						X				
98	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				X	X	X				
99	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X		
100	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X		
101	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
102	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			X	X	X	X				
103	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
104	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				X						
105	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					H					
106	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X		
107	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
108	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			X		X	X	X	X	X	
109	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>						X				
110	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		X								
111	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			X	X		X				
112	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			X							
113	Reed Bunting							X				

Mammals

		Date:										
Common name	Scientific name	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			1								
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>				X							
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>				X							
Chamois	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>					X		X	X	X		
Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>		B									
Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>		B									
Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		X							X	X	
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			X								
Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>			1	3	3						
European Wildcat				X								

Other

Common name	Scientific name
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
Small White	<i>Artogeia rapae</i>
Pale Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias hyale</i>
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>
Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>
Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>
Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>
Turquoise Blue	<i>Plebicula dorylas</i>
Spanish Chalk-hill Blue	<i>Lysandra albicans</i>
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>
Green underside Blue	
Peacock Butterfly	<i>Inachis io</i>
Queen Of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>
Rock Grayling	<i>Hipparchia alcyone</i>
Grayling	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>
Southern Grayling	
Great Banded Grayling	<i>Kanetisa circe</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria aegeria</i>
Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>
Large Wallbrown	
Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus malvae</i>
Checkered Skipper	
Zygaena fausta	
Red Underwing Moth	
Common Darter	
Migrant Hawker	
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS:	
Iberian Rock Lizard	
Viviparous Lizard	
Common Wall Lizard	
Seoane's Viper	
Schreiber's Green Lizard	