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

Naturetrek Tour Report

17th – 26th September 2023







Short-beaked Common Dolphin



Iberian Wolf



Wildcat

Tour report by Byron Palacios, photos by Chris Griffin



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn

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Tour Participants: Byron Palacios and Chris Griffin (Leaders) with 10 Naturetrek clients.

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 breathtaking!

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, pelagic birds 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 for all of us, exploring the fantastic and beautiful landscape of northern Spain!

Day 1

Sunday 17th September

Ferry crossing Plymouth to Santander

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, which produced plenty of Northern Gannets, Manx Shearwaters, European Shag, Great Black-backed, European Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, amongst others. As darkness hit the boat, we retired 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 18th September

Bay of Biscay - Santander

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 two hours behind schedule, 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 enjoyed our dinner very much and retired to bed afterwards.

Day 3

Tuesday 19th September

Montaña Palentina Natural Park (Valdecebollas – Cervera de Pisuerga – Herreruela)

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 still in the dark to the mountains, getting to our hotspot above the village of Arroyo just in time for 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! Unfortunately, only Tino and myself managed to get great views of this lovely and elusive animal but he disappeared before we managed to put the rest of the group on him. We kept scanning but no signs of them were hinted so we finished this first morning scan and we drove 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 the Herreruela de Castillería area, driving our 4x4's to the village of Verdeña where we enjoyed our delicious picnic lunch surrounded by a breathtaking landscape, taking a nice stroll through this wonderful oak woodland which produced Short-toed Treecreeper, Coal, Great, Blue and Long-tailed Tits, European Nuthatch and Pied Flycatchers, amongst others. After exploring these lovely woods, we kept exploring the meadows along the valley of Perapertú where we found two beautiful European Wildcats. 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 20th September

Montaña Palentina Natural Park (Valdecebollas – Lores)

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 constantly, until we spotted a large Wild Boar male with three young piglets and one young adult, and we enjoyed watching them, very active amongst the scrub with good early sunshine hitting them directly! This sighting was shortly followed by us spotting three different Iberian Wolves – first an adult female that was exploring amongst the Spanish broom and heather; and soon after these two youngsters came right out into 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 elevenses 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, Northern Goshawk, 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.

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

Day 5

Thursday 21st September

Valdecebollas – Cervera de Pisuerga – Celada de Roblecedo

Another early start took us back to our usual hotspot. Once there, our hard work was well rewarded again with the sightings of three different Iberian Wolves. 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.

We continued exploring driving towards the upper valley of the River Pisuerga, diverting onto the road that took us to Celada de Roblecedo where we had our lunch enjoying the beautiful weather. After lunch, we took a stroll where we had interesting birds such as Blue, Long-tailed and Great Tits, Short-toed Treecreeper and White and Grey Wagtails, amongst others. There was a large group of Griffon Vultures kettling in the sky, perhaps waiting for their slot to land near a 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 22nd September

Cordovilla de Aguilar - Tierra de Campos - Somiedo Biosphere Reserve

We started today leaving our lovely lodge in Cordovilla de Aguilar in order to start our journey towards the lush Somiedo Biosphere Reserve. We 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 there were also some patches of blue sky which made things look promising. Our first great bird of the morning was a beautiful Hen Harrier which 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 at 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, and 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 was found - this time there were over a dozen. We also had great views of Zitting Cisticola, European Stonechat, Willow Warbler, 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 retiring 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 23rd September

Somiedo Valley – La Peral – La Farrapona – Saliencia

Today, another very early start took us to explore the whole Somiedo Valley, scanning from various points along the road. The weather was promising and the morning turned beautiful in the whole valley. We arrived at the first viewpoint in the village of La Peral from where we had great views of Cantabrian Chamois (Iziar), Red Deer, Common Buzzard, Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle, Great Spotted Woodpecker and European Jay, amongst others. We then drove back to our hotel to have breakfast, before going out again, this time towards the Valley of Saliencia, right to the top of La Farrapona Pass (1,700 metres above the sea level) where we had an very enjoyable walk that produced great wildlife such as Golden Eagle, Crag Martins, Water Pipit, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Alpine and Red-billed Choughs, Griffon Vultures, amongst others. We found a beautiful spot where we had our picnic lunch followed by more exploration in the area. In the mid and late afternoon we drove a couple of kilometres down the valley road where we started our scan in search for bears. It was not till the end of the afternoon that Chris managed to spot a female Brown Bear moving over the high meadows with her two cubs! They were at a fair distance but we all enjoyed watching them through the telescopes!

After this exciting sighting, we moved down the road towards the area we saw the bears but they walked into a ravine leaving no trace; the light started to fade away so we drove back to Pola de Somiedo in order to enjoy another delicious dinner and drinks at our local restaurant!

Day 8

Sunday 24th September

Somiedo Natural Park (Saliencia Valley)

We started with a very early breakfast today, heading to the same view point in the Saliencia Valley. We spent the whole morning scanning this area when suddenly one Brown Bear was spotted walking on the slope through the scattered trees. He moved quickly but some of us managed to see it well! The weather was amazing and we certainly enjoyed watching a pair of Golden Eagles flying and perching on top of the rocky crags. We also found some lovely Chamois; also, Sparrowhawk, Griffon Vultures, Iberian Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Firecrest, amongst others!

After lunch and a short break taken near our village, we hit the road again back to the Saliencia Valley to spend the rest of the day scanning the slopes. More Red-billed Choughs and Northern Ravens were spotted nearby as well as Chamois and Red Deer, amongst others.

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 25th September

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 viewpoint of Aguino. We had fantastic views of a herd of over 30 Cantabrian Chamois (Iziar) 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 at the coastal city in time to get our ferry which was delayed by two hours, giving us a good chance to buy some local goods to take home from this trendy northern Spanish city. Once on board, we took advantage of the last hour of daylight we had left before reaching the Bay of Biscay.

Day 10

Tuesday 26th September

English Channel - Plymouth

After a slightly choppy night, some of us were up early again on the upper deck from where we had plenty of great views of shearwaters and several pods of Short-beaked Common Dolphins, while 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+) of 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 a varied and very enjoyable trip.





Fin Whale and Griffon Vulture

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name			ı	ı	Se	eptem	ber 20	23	1		
	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos						✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa			✓							
Northern Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis	✓									✓
Cory's Shearwater	Calonectris borealis	✓	✓							✓	✓
Sooty Shearwater	Ardenna grisea	✓								✓	
Great Shearwater	Ardenna gravis	✓								✓	✓
Manx Shearwater	Puffinus puffinus	✓								✓	✓
Balearic Shearwater	Puffinus mauretanicus		✓							✓	✓
European Storm Petrel	Hydrobates pelagicus										✓
White Stork	Ciconia ciconia						✓				
Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis						✓			✓	
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea			✓	✓		✓				
Little Egret	Egretta garzetta		√	√						√	
Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus	√	√							√	√
European Shag	Gulosus aristotelis	√	√							√	√
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo			√	√	√					
Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus									√	
Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus			√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus				-		√	-	-	-	
Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus			√	√	√	√				
Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos			√	•	√			/		
White-tailed Eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla			•	√	_					
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus				_		√	√	√	√	
Northern Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis				√						
Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus				V		√				
Montagu's Harrier	Circus pygargus						√				
Red Kite	Milvus milvus					√	V				
Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo		√	√	√	✓ ✓	√	√	√	√	
			\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	V	V	V		\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	V	
Great Bustard	Otis tarda						18				
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago						√				
Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus		,				√			,	-
Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	,	✓							✓	-
Black-legged Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla	√									
Sabine's Gull	Xema sabini	,								,	√
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	√	√							√	√
Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus	,	✓							√	√
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	√								✓	√
European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	√	√								√
Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis		√	✓						√	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus	✓	√							✓	✓
Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis		√								✓
Common Tern	Sterna hirundo		✓								✓
Great Skua	Stercorarius skua		✓							✓	✓
Arctic Skua	Stercorarius parasiticus										✓
Long-tailed Skua	Stercorarius longicaudus										✓
Pomarine Skua	Stercorarius pomarinus										✓
Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Common name					September 2023						
	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto			✓		✓					
Tawny Owl	Strix aluco			Н	Н			Н	Н		
Common Swift	Apus apus		✓								
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocoptes medius			Н							
Great Spotted											
Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major			Н		✓	Н		✓	Н	
Iberian Green Woodpecker	Picus sharpei		✓		Н	✓		Н	Н		
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus						√	√			
Iberian Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis			√							
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius			√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax		-	✓	✓	✓	√	√	√	√	
Alpine Chough	Pyrrhocorax graculus			,				√			
Carrion Crow	Corvus corone		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Northern Raven	Corvus corax		V	√	√	√	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	
Coal Tit	Periparus ater			\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	√	√	V	√	\ _/	√	
European Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus				V	V		√	V	V	
Marsh Tit						Н		V			
	Poecile palustris			,	,		,	,	,	,	
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus			√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Great Tit	Parus major			√	√	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Woodlark	Lullula arborea			✓	✓	✓					
Crested Lark	Galerida cristata						√				
Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Eurasian Crag Martin	Ptyonoprogne rupestris			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti			Н	Н		✓				
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus			Н	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus			Н			✓				
Common Chiffchaff	Phylloscopus collybita			Н			✓	✓	✓		
Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis						✓				
Eurasian Blackcap	Sylvia atricapilla					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Dartford Warbler	Curruca undata			✓	✓	✓					
Common Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla							√			
Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes					√	Н	Н	Н	Н	
Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea			Н	Н	√					
Short-toed Treecreeper	Certhia brachydactyla				√					Н	
Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor		√	√	√	√	√	√	√		
Common Blackbird	Turdus merula			√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus					√	√	_			
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula			√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
European Pied	Entriacus rubecula			\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	V	· ·	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	
Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca			✓		✓					
Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
Rufous-tailed Rock											
Thrush	Monticola solitarius							√			
European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra			✓	✓						
Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe		✓				✓				
White-throated Dipper	Cinclus cinclus					✓		✓	✓		
House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

					Se	eptem					
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus						✓				
Rock Sparrow	Petronia petronia				✓	✓	✓				
Dunnock	Prunella modularis				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava flava			Н	✓	✓					✓
Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
White Wagtail	Motacilla alba		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis							✓			
Water Pipit	Anthus spinoletta							✓			
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula								✓		
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina			✓	✓	✓					
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis					✓	✓				
European Serin	Serinus serinus			Н		✓	✓	✓			
Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra			✓			✓				
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella			✓							
Rock Bunting	Emberiza cia				✓	✓		✓	✓		

Mammals

					S	eptem					
Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Red Squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris										
Red Deer	Cervus elaphus			✓	✓	✓	√	√	✓	✓	
Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus				1	1		2	3		
Wild Boar	Sus scrofa			Н		✓					
Chamois	Rupicapra rupicapra				√		√	√	√	√	
Fin Whale	Balaenoptera physalus		✓								
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	Tursiops truncatus										
Short-beaked (Common) Dolphin	Delphinus delphis	√	✓								✓
Striped Dolphin	Stenella caeruleoalba		√								
Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes										
Iberian Wolf	Canis lupus signatus				2	2					
Beech Marten	Martes foina					1					
Brown Bear	Ursus arctos							3	1		
European Wildcat	Felix silvestris			2							
European Bison	Bison bonasus			3							
Broom Hare	Lepus castroviejoi				1						

Reptiles

Western Green Llzard Lacerta bilineata
Viviparous Lizard Zootoca vivipara

Invertebrates

Common name	Scientific name							
BUTTERFLIES								
Large White	Pieris brassicae							
Small White	Artogeia rapae							
Bath White	Pontia daplidice							
Pale Clouded Yellow	Colias hyale							
Clouded Yellow	Colias crocea							
Berger's Clouded Yellow	Colias australis							
Brimstone	Gonepteryx rhamni							
Wood White	Leptidea sinapis							
Brown Hairstreak	Thecla betulae							
Long-tailed Blue	Lampides boeticus							
Geranium Bronze	Cacyreus marshalli							
Adonis Blue	Lysandra bellargus							
Common Blue	Polyommatus icarus							
Peacock Butterfly	Inachis io							
Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta							
Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui							
Comma Butterfly	Polygonia c-album							
Rock Grayling	Hipparchia alcyone							
Grayling	Hipparchia semele							
Tree Grayling	Neohipparchia statilinus							
Great Banded Grayling	Kanetisa circe							
Ringlet	Aphantopus hyperantus							
Gatekeeper	Pyronia tithonus							
Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria							
Speckled Wood	Pararge aegeria aegeria							
Wall Brown	Lasiommata megera							
Large Wall Brown	Lasiommata maera							
Rosy Grizzled Skipper	Pyrgus onopordi							
Oberthür's Grizzled Skipper	Pyrgus armoricanus							
OTHER INVERTEBRATES								
Hummingbird Hawkmoth	Macroglossum stellatarum							
Red-winged Grasshopper	Oedipoda germanica							
Blue-winged Grasshopper	Oedipoda caerulescens							
European Katydid sp	Tettigoniidae sp							
Saddle-backed Cricket	Ephippiger ephippiger							
European Hornet	Vespa crabro							
Asian Hornet	Vespa velutina							