

Navarra in Winter - Realm of the Wildcat

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 – 13 March 2015



Wildcat



Snow scene



Snow shoes!

Report and images compiled by Julian Gayarre



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Day 1

Sunday 8th March

Biarritz Airport – Aren – Isaba: Bright & sunny

Our flight arrived on time and we were soon on our way towards Isaba. After an hour's drive we visited an area at Aren before continuing our journey. Although there had been much snow melt in the previous two weeks, when we crossed the Pyrenees by the Pass of St Martin there were banks of snow at the roadside 15 feet high.

As the day ended we had lovely views of the Pyrenees from the French side: especially impressive was the Pic d'Anie. We settled in at our comfortable apartments and enjoyed our evening meal at a local restaurant which provided all our meals.

Day 2

Monday 9th March

Isaba – Belabarce Valley – Linza Valley – Laza: Bright & sunny

One of our special species came to us because Wallcreeper was very visible on Isaba Romanesque church, built like a fortress. Besides watching this beautiful bird we were able to take great photos.

After crossing the Belabarce Valley we spent the main part of the morning in the limestone gorge of the River Anso. It was a lovely warm day and the first raptor was Lammergeier. We spent a couple of hours watching migrating Black Kite, Common Crane, Red Kite, Golden Eagle and Griffon Vulture. It was a treat to have prolonged view of the Lammergeier and learn its flight pattern. Other bird species seen in the gorge were Marsh Tit, Crested Tit, Long-tailed Tit and Blue Tit. We also enjoyed seeing the endemic Saxifraga Longifolia and the Snow Crocus that were just coming into flower.

We continued our route towards Linza Mountaineers Refuge where some foraging signs of Black Woodpecker were spotted behind the refuge, in the very top of huge Fir trees.

The day ended as spectacularly as it had started. After an hour of searching a steep, sunny bank a male Wildcat came over the ridge. We first spotted his head. Just before seeing the cat a group of ten thrushes had taken off, alarmed by a predator. The Wildcat started to scan his territory and after that he made several hunting attempts for mice. We watched him for one and a half hours during which time he caught at least two Water Voles and we were lucky to see the Wildcat walking, seated, lying on the ground, marking his territory, hunting and eating.

Day 3

Tuesday 10th March

Irati – Ariztokia – Garaioa – Remendia: Sunny

We had an early start and headed to the Irati forest entrance in Orbaizeta. The first mammal we saw was a Red Squirrel on the edge of the road. From the village of Abaurrea Alta we had incredible views of the snowy Pyrenees. In Arive we stopped at a petrol station where a couple of active and territorial Firecrests welcomed us.

Once we had arrived at the park site in the Irati forest, a Black Woodpecker welcomed us with his characteristic drumming. We continued walking on the track and spotted birds like Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, Crested Tit and Marsh Tit. The plateau was full of signs of woodpeckers. We waited quietly for several minutes trying to hear the sound of White-backed Woodpecker and finally we were able to hear it but it wasn't in sight. We tried a second place close to the dam of Irabia but again we couldn't spot it but were lucky to see a Goldcrest.

On our route we visited one of the best Oak forests in this part of the Pyrenees, all *Quercus Petraea*, at a place called Ariztokia. Our main goal in this forest was Middle Spotted Woodpecker. We used the same strategy as before and finally we heard it. On our return journey we saw a different male Wildcat on a sunny bank not far from the road and we had very good views.

We continued our way to Remendia. The road leading to this agricultural research station is a dead end. There was still plenty of melting snow along this quiet road. We had close views of loafing Red Kites and Griffon Vultures near to a roost. Here the place of the Wildcat in the hunt for voles was taken by at least four Red Foxes. An unusual sight on this tour was migrating Fieldfares. The lack of woodpecker sightings before lunch was put right in the afternoon when we saw Black, Great Spotted and Green Woodpeckers.

Day 4

Wednesday 11th March

Eraiz – Latras – Sainte Engrace – Belagua – Belebance: Sunny

It was another still clear and sunny day. We collected snow shoes and drove up to the col de San Martin. We stopped at the pass of Eraiz, a classic viewpoint from where we saw more than 20 Chamois at the edge between the forest and the fields with fresh grass after the snow melt.

We spent the morning on an alpine walk. Walking on firm deep snow, we moved in the direction of a viewpoint overlooking a valley linking Spain and France. A wide range of migrants were pouring through, this being the easiest route north in this part of the Pyrenees. The most numerous bird was the Chaffinch and it was no coincidence that they were being followed by Sparrowhawks! We saw large groups of Black Kites and Wood Pigeons, and a fine ring-tailed harrier lit by the reflection of the snow. Where we had parked the vehicle we saw Crossbills and Citric Finches in the pines.

Later in the day there was a Föhn wind effect with air rising on the French side, and as it cooled the valleys filled with mist. When we descended with the Föhn wind into Spain, the air which had lost its moisture was warm and dry - sunny Spain!

We ended the day at the Zuriza Pass watching a displaying Golden Eagle, a couple of adult Lammergeier, and a group of Chamois. Seeing two Lammergeier flying together was an ominous sight as it indicated these early breeders had probably abandoned their nest.

Day 5

Thursday 12th March

Lumbier Gorge – Liedena – Caseda – Arbaiun – Izalzu: Sunny

This fine spring day was one for rivers and gorges. We drove south via Burgi and Lumbier to Foz de Lumbier. As we entered the limestone gorge about 9.30am it was cold in the shade. We had excellent views of Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Sparrow. The further we went, the higher the sun rose and the temperature increased, as did the raptors. First to take to the sky were the Griffon Vultures. By the end of the gorge on the Irati river we also had Egyptian Vulture in the air above us, plus Raven, Jackdaw, Red-billed Chough, Red Kite and Black Kite. We also stood at one end of what remains of the arched bridge across the river which was destroyed by Napoleon in the peninsula war. The Irati joins the river Aragon below the gorge. One of our afternoon destinations was another remote bridge, this time on the Aragon. This wonderful unspoilt place seemed to be a very suitable location for the reintroduction programme for Bonelli's Eagle.

Some of the group saw a beautiful Kingfisher and we were all intrigued by the evidence of beavers who had been felling trees on the river bank. The beavers had chiselled away at the base and the bank was strewn with pencil shaped tree trunks from which the bark was being stripped. As we were leaving this site near Gallipienzo we saw two Short-toed Eagles and a Booted Eagle, both arriving migrants.

On the drive back we added another interesting species when we made a late afternoon check at our most productive Wildcat slope and found two Common Snipe hidden on the ground.

Day 6

Friday 13th March

Issaux Forest – Aren – Plaiaundi – Biarritz Airport: Rain

Our last day started with bad weather. We packed our luggage and started to drive towards the airport at Biarritz. Our route crossed the forest of Issaux, one of the wildest forests in the western Pyrenees.

We drove to the village of Aren looking for Black-shouldered Kites. It took to us a little bit of time, but we finally spotted four different Black-shouldered Kites, a male Hen Harrier and other species such as Greenfinch, Sardinian Warbler and Great Spotted Woodpecker.

As the weather was very bad, we drove to Plaiaundi estuary on the Spanish side of the border and only 25 minutes from the airport. The weather there was overcast but it wasn't raining. We couldn't believe how many new species we were adding to our trip list which included Bluethroat, Grey and Ringed Plovers, Turnstone, Curlew, Whimbrel, Sand Martin, Redshank, Willow Warbler and more. This helped us to reach a total of 111 bird species for the whole trip.

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	March					
			8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Eurasian Wild Cat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>		✓	✓			
2	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓		✓			✓
3	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓			✓		
4	Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			✓	✓	✓	
5	Water Vole	<i>Arvicola terrestris</i>			✓			
6	Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>				✓		
7	Bat sp.						✓	

Birds

1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>					✓	✓
2	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓					✓
3	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>						✓
4	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓					✓
5	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓					✓
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓
7	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓					✓
8	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓					✓
9	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				✓	✓	✓
10	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>						✓
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓				✓	✓
12	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>						✓
13	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>						✓
14	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>						✓
15	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>						✓
16	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		✓		✓		
19	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>					✓	
20	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
21	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>					✓	
22	Booted Eagle	<i>Aquila pennate</i>					✓	
23	Northern Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				✓		✓
24	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓		
25	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>					✓	
26	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		✓				
28	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓				✓	✓
29	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>					✓	
30	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>						✓
31	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>						✓
32	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		✓	✓			✓
33	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>						✓
34	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						✓
35	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						✓
36	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>						✓
37	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>						✓
38	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>						✓

	Common name	Scientific name	March					
			8	9	10	11	12	13
39	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>						✓
40	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					✓	
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>						✓
42	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>					✓	✓
43	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>						✓
44	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>					✓	
45	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓				✓	✓
47	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>					✓	✓
48	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>			H			
49	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>			H			
50	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓			
51	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>			✓			
52	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>					H	
53	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			✓			
54	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
55	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>					✓	
57	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>		✓		✓		
58	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>					✓	✓
59	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓
61	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>				✓		
62	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓				
63	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓	✓			
65	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
66	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>					✓	
67	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>						✓
68	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>						✓
69	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
70	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>					✓	
71	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>			✓		✓	
72	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓
73	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>						✓
74	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>					✓	✓
75	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>					✓	
76	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			✓		✓	
77	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			✓			
78	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓			✓	✓
79	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓	H		
80	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>		✓			✓	
81	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			✓		✓	
82	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			✓		✓	
83	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓
84	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓	✓		
87	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>			✓			
88	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>				✓		
89	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	March					
			8	9	10	11	12	13
90	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>						✓
91	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
92	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓		✓	
93	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>					✓	
94	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓	✓			
95	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>					✓	
97	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>				✓		
98	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
100	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>				✓		✓
101	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		✓	✓	✓		
102	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>					✓	
104	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					✓	✓
105	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
106	Citril Finch	<i>Carduelis citrinella</i>				✓		
107	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>				✓		
108	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			✓			
109	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>					✓	✓
110	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓	✓	✓		
111	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>					H	

Butterflies

	Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓	✓		
1	Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>			✓			
2	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>			✓			

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