

Navarra in Winter – Realm of the Wildcat

Naturetrek Tour Report

5th March – 10th March 2020



Report and images compiled by Javi Elorriaga



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Participants: Javi Elorriaga and Pablo Pérez (Leaders) with 12 Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Thursday 5th March

The group reached the airport of Zaragoza at 16:30 after an uneventful flight from Stansted. Javi and Pablo, ready with the minibuses, welcomed the group at the arrival's terminal, and soon after 17:00 we hit the road towards Navarra. As we approached the pre-Pyrenean mountain range, we enjoyed a nice rainbow. Along the road, we came across several groups of migrant Black Kites, many of which were gathering in large kettles about to enter their night roosts. Two White Storks were another welcome find. We reached our accommodation in Burgi around 20:00. Yolanda, the manager of El Almadiero Rural Hotel, welcomed the group and we were rapidly allocated in rooms. We had a nice dinner, introduced ourselves and discussed the programme for the forthcoming days, exploring the Roncal Valley and the adjacent regions.

Day 2

Friday 6th March

The day dawned with light rain and a rather chilly temperature. We had breakfast at 7:30 and one hour later the whole group was ready in the minibuses. We drove north up the valley in the direction of the border with France. Much to our surprise, soon after passing the village of Isaba, a Wildcat jumped into the road and ran for some 50 metres before disappearing into the dense forest. It was just a glimpse and unfortunately not everyone in the group managed to see it. We all agreed however that it was a promising start!

As we reached the Belagua area (1,000 metres above sea level), the light rain turned into snowfall. Initially we had a general scan across the fields where we normally find the cats. A European Hare ran across a meadow and kept us alert. Song Thrushes, Redwings, Black Kites and Red Kites were all well represented in the area. Given the impossibility to safely park in the roadsides or use the walking trails, we got out of the vehicles to scan the area at the only available parking place. In doing so, a striking adult Bearded Vulture flew above us showing its characteristic rusty colour.

Soon after we parked, the snowfall increased and it started to fully cover the fields and the road. We decided therefore to drive back towards Isaba, where we had a nice coffee before visiting the church, the most reliable site to observe Wallcreepers at close range in winter. The snow progressively covered the street and we found no sign of the Wallcreeper, so we decided to walk back to the vehicles and drive back to a lower altitude in Burgi. We made a couple of additional stops along the road to observe a pair of Golden Eagles and several groups of Griffons. Remarkably, some of the vultures were perched atop electric poles with their wings fully extended to dry in the sun in a cormorant fashion. We had a warm meal in Burgi including Spanish Omelette and "Txistorra" (a fast-cure sausage typical of Navarra).

After lunch, it continued snowing so we decided to visit a factory and exhibition of "roncalés" cheese, which is among the most well-known cheeses in Spain and the foremost culinary product of the region. Here, we were offered local wine and different varieties of cheese while watching an illustrative video about cheese-making. Next, taking advantage of a slight weather improvement, we visited the Gorge of Burgi ("Foz de Burgi") where we got additional views of Griffons. Unfortunately, it started raining again, so we decided to call it a day and

return to our accommodation by 15:30. Some in the group chose to relax and enjoy the comfort of the accommodation, while others decided to explore the outskirts of the village and the Esca River banks under the rain, which produced Dipper, Kingfisher and Bullfinch, among others.

At 19:30 we re-grouped in the living room to work on the day list before enjoying another nice dinner offered by our host Yolanda.

Day 3

Saturday 7th March

After a night of continuous rain in Burgi, and snow at higher altitudes, the day dawned dry in a primarily clear sky. As usual on this trip, we had a relaxed breakfast at 7:30 and left the accommodation punctually by 8:30. With Wildcats as our main target, we reached the “hot” area around 09:00. Here we found the fields and roadsides totally covered by the snow, which notably hampered our search. The same as with the day before, we found a notable presence of migrant Black Kites held up by the weather conditions in the head of the valley.

By mid-morning, after a very welcome coffee-break, we visited the church of Isaba again. Despite the overcast conditions, the weather was notably better than the day before. In order to increase our chances of finding the Wallcreepers, Javi inspected the surrounding streets, while the group stayed with Pablo around the church. Unfortunately, no Wallcreepers showed up this time, but we fully enjoyed the presence of two obliging Alpine Accentors, which posed beautifully for the cameras.

Right after this, not one but three Bearded Vultures flew over Isaba offering a great show as they displayed and interacted. This was an excellent occasion for the group to familiarize themselves with the diagnostic silhouette of this iconic and endangered species of the Pyrenean mountains. Several groups of mostly Black Kites, with scattered Red Kites, filled the skies in large kettles. Much to our surprise, a group of seven Black Storks joined in the party! This rather unexpected and varied show of soaring birds was certainly one of the highlights of the day.

The weather worsened towards the middle part of the day. For this reason, we decided to move south, to a lower altitude, to the famous Arbayun and Lumbier Gorges, where no rain was to be expected. While driving down the valley we found a meadow with plenty of Red and Black Kites on the ground. Apparently, they were preying on earth worms pushed up to the surface by the recent rain. A few kilometres further on, a large group of Griffons were feeding on a dead cow and offered an impressive show too.

On our way to the gorges, we stopped for lunch at Burgi, at the same place as the day before. After lunch, we visited the observatory over the Gorge of Arbayun (Foz de Arbayun). From this impressive balcony hanging over large cliffs, we enjoyed good views of Griffons on their nests. A Goldcrest provided close views in the nearby trees. In addition, we found several Cowslips (*Primula veris*) in full bloom. However, the highlight here was impressive landscape. Next, we visited the neighbouring Lumbier Gorge (“Foz de Lumbier”). At the parking area of the Gorge, where our walking route started, we meet a large group of pilgrims celebrating the famous “Javierada” and marching to the Castle of Javier. Remarkably, this is one of the most famous celebrations in Navarra. We left the majority of the group pass before undertaking the 2.5 km route that crosses the gorge following a former railway over the Irati River. Good numbers of Crag Martins, Red-billed Choughs and Griffons delighted us. The two latter species offered great views as they entered their nests carrying nest

material in their bills. We had a pleasant walk, with no rain. On our way back to the minibuses, an adult Egyptian Vulture flew over the area, to the delight of the group.

After this, we returned directly to our accommodation in Burgi, for some rest before meeting up again to go through the day list and enjoy another great dinner.

Day 4

Sunday 8th March

According to the latest weather forecast, a notable improvement was to be expected this morning. We, therefore, changed our strategy and left the hotel at 7:00 in a pre-breakfast attempt for cats. We reached the hot area by 7:30. Unfortunately, the roadsides and the whole area were still chiefly covered in snow, limiting the accessibility to the area. As we were driving, we spotted a Red Fox hunting voles in the snow, and it ran into the forest as we stopped the vehicles. Our next stop was at “Venta de Juan Pito”, a vantage point offering great views over the Belagua Valley. The sky was clear and the morning light was excellent. Using the scope, we scanned the adjacent fields, slopes and the crests of the mountains. We found some very distant Chamois and Wild Boar tracks. The best show of the morning came in the form of a large group of Common Cranes in active migration over the snow-capped Pyrenean summits. Around 10:00 we returned to our accommodation for a full, and very welcome, breakfast.

At 11:30 we regrouped to go for a walk. We first crossed the medieval bridge of Burgi over the Esca River and continued our walk along the bank of the river. Here we got interesting insight on the ethnography of the Roncal region thanks to the excellent recreations of former crafts including an “almadía” (timber raft), lime kiln, coal bunker, etc. In terms of birding the walk produced White-throated Dipper, Kingfisher, Cirl Bunting, Firecrest and Marsh Tit, among others. Remarkably, we enjoyed a notable passage of large groups of Common Cranes on northbound migration. Here, we noticed that the large numbers of Black Kites we had found in previous days had disappeared. Obviously, they had resumed their migration to their breeding grounds, encouraged by the good weather.

By late morning, we returned to the minibuses and drove to the neighbouring Ansó Valley. On our way, we inspected the Belabarce pass, another hot spot for Wildcats. As happened in Belagua, Belabarce was fully covered in snow, notably limiting our possibilities to properly park and scan the area. We found an obliging Common Crossbill on the road. Thankfully, we managed to leave the minibuses to enjoy this bird and get some great photos. A little further on, we came across an unexpected Hoopoe. We kept driving to reach the Linza Mountain Refuge at the end of the road, at an altitude of 1,344 metres. This refuge at the head of a glacial valley offered a magnificent high mountain winter landscape. Here, we observed two groups of Chamois at closer range than in the morning and we had lunch and hot drinks in the very convenient refuge. Next, we returned to the Belagua area for yet another attempt for Wildcats. As we were driving, a Wildcat ran across a distant meadow on the opposite slope of the valley. Only a few people in each van got to see it. It did, however, encourage the group to persist in our quest and gave us the feeling that we were getting closer to our main target.

Once in Belagua, we made the usual circuit and found a Red Deer. This time, we noticed that much of the snow had melted, unveiling the presence of a remarkable density of Water Vole colonies. Considering that this is the main prey of the cats in the region, we took this as an additional promising factor. The weather worsened again and, by mid-afternoon, we returned to the hotel with a good feeling about the following day.

Day 5

Monday 9th March

Our last full day in the region dawned with cloud and with light rain. As usual, we left Burgi at 8:30 and today we headed directly to the spot near Isaba where we saw the cat the day before. We found no signs of the cat and, given the rain and chilly temperatures, we decided to keep going to the Belagua area. Here we had yet another nice group of Black Kites in migration, a Hawfinch, abundant Thrushes, and some Common Buzzards.

By mid-morning, we verified that the road from Belagua up the valley towards the Larra area and France was open to the traffic. Therefore, we decided to explore this new region and had lunch in the higher part of the valley. Unfortunately, as we gained some altitude, the snowfall increased and partially covered the road. For this reason, we had to adapt our plan and drive back to Isaba.

During the mid-morning break in Isaba, we found again the tame Alpine Accentors but no Wallcreepers, although we got news that they had been seen at the church the day before!

Today we had lunch in Roncal. The weather improved significantly and we enjoyed a nice sunshine while searching the river for Dippers, which did actually show up.

Looking for good weather, and a different landscape, after lunch we headed toward the Fago Gorge (Foz de Fago). We progressively changed to an environment with a notable Mediterranean influence.

A Golden Eagle was one of the first species we found at the fantastic observatory of Fago Gorge. Here again, Griffons offered great views both gliding around and perched in their breeding colonies. The group strolled around to enjoy the views over the gorge and looking for butterflies, plants and other wildlife in nice weather. A Green Hairstreak was one of the highlights. In addition, we found the Pyrenean endemic King's Crown (*Saxifraga longifolia*), also known as Long-leaved Saxifrage or Pyrenean Saxifrage.

In the early afternoon we returned to the Roncal Valley and decided to give it another try to find the cats in Belagua. As expected, most of the snow had melted in the meadows. Thanks to this, our ability to thoroughly scan the area notably increased. Knowing it was one of our last chances, we walked to a vantage point and Pablo and Javi started surveying the surrounding fields from different positions. Suddenly, Pablo informed the group he had a Wildcat in the scope! The cat was showing at about one kilometre distance from the group, thus proving hard to find and enjoy. Wasting no time, we decided to approach it in the minibuses, knowing that, with no snow, parking in the roadside would be possible. A few minutes later, the whole group was safely standing right in front of the cat. Initially the Wildcat walked some metres away from us. Fortunately, once he reached a safe distance, he relaxed and continued foraging around a Water Vole colony. Indeed, for some moments it walked back in our direction. We observed every detail of the cat including its green iris, thick white moustache, ginger ears and snout, dense fur, sharply defined black dorsal stripe, thick tail and the characteristic white flash on its chest.

After spending some time getting fantastic views of the cat for the whole group, it disappeared into the forest.

Very happy with our main objective achieved, after considerable effort, we returned to the accommodation in the late afternoon.

Day 6

Tuesday 10th March

The last day of the tour dawned with a clear sky and mild temperatures. After breakfast we loaded the luggage into the minivans and said goodbye and thanks to Yolanda for the excellent stay. We didn't want to leave the valley before paying a last visit to the Wildcat, and so we did. At 8:30, still with the views of a magnificent Wildcat the evening before fresh in our minds, we headed up to Belagua for a last time. We made our first stop right at the same spot where we had the cat on the previous day. As soon as we parked, we saw a Wildcat trotting across a meadow towards the forest. It was at medium distance and provided good but brief views. The morning light was excellent and the temperature agreeable, so we decided to wait and keep searching from the same position. This proved to be the right decision as a few minutes later, the cat re-appeared, this time at the edge of a nearer meadow! We soon fixed our scopes on it to enjoy the show. Remarkably, we got 45 minutes of non-stop observation! During this wonderful period, the cat, probably the same male we saw the day before, walked around peacefully inspecting the Water Vole burrows. Every now and then he fixed his gaze at us, but he seemed to be relaxed. Indeed, at one point it lay down on the grass to enjoy the rays of the sun and lick its winter coat. Next, he resumed his foraging activity along the edge of the forest and sat down again for a long while. With perfect timing, at the very same moment that we decided to leave, the cat walked to a wooden pole for claw-sharpening and scent-marking. Next, it disappeared into the forest.

Suitably rewarded for our efforts, we drove to Isaba for a well-deserved coffee and a final attempt for the Wallcreepers at the church. Unfortunately, the alpine bird eluded us again. Some Crag Martins perched on the wall tower was a nice reward however. By mid-morning we left the Roncal valley heading towards the airport of Zaragoza.

This time, we followed a secondary route so we could admire the beautiful scenery of the Spanish countryside. We drove past the impressive cliffs of Riglos, one of the foremost natural landmarks in Spain. Along the way, we passed various groups of Griffons and White Storks, some of which were already standing on their nesting platforms. At noon, we stopped at the village of Ayerbe for lunch where we enjoyed yet more large groups of migrant Common Cranes with their characteristic arrow formation and trumpeting calls. As intended, we reached Zaragoza airport at 15:00. Here, the group bade farewell to Pablo and Javi. Despite the significant weather constraints, another successful tour to the Pyrenean Realm of the Wildcat came to its end.



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Eurasian Wild Cat

Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	March 2020					
			5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>					✓	
2	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			✓			
3	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓					
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓		✓	
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓					
6	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓				
7	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		✓	✓			
10	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>			✓			
11	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓			
13	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓			✓	
14	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		✓			✓	
15	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓		✓			
16	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>				✓	✓	✓
17	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓					
18	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓	✓		
19	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓		✓			
20	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓		✓			
21	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				✓		
22	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				✓		
23	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				✓		
24	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓			
25	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>	✓		✓			
26	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓			
27	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		170	✓		✓	
29	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓					
30	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
31	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓		✓	
32	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>				✓	✓	
33	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>				✓		
34	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
35	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				✓	✓	
36	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓	✓	✓		
37	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				✓	✓	
38	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓	✓	✓	
39	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			✓	✓	✓	
40	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>						✓
41	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>					✓	
42	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>			✓	✓	✓	
43	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			✓			
44	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓		✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	March 2020					
			5	6	7	8	9	10
48	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
49	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
50	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓			✓	
51	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				✓	✓	
53	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>			✓		✓	
55	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓			✓	
57	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓	✓	✓	
58	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓			✓	
59	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>				✓		
60	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓				✓
61	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				✓	✓	
62	Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			✓			
63	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>				✓		
64	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		✓			✓	
65	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				✓		
66	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>						✓
67	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				✓		

Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>		1				
2	Eurasian Wild Cat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>					1	1
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>				1		
4	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>				1		
5	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>				1		
6	Chamoix	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>				✓		

