

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



NORTHERN SPAIN: Wildcats, Wolves & Wallcreepers

Wednesday 24th - Sunday 28th August 2016

Tour Participants: Cheryl Antonucci, Sue Healey, Helen Booker, Peter Alfrey, Kevin Bryan & Sue French, Adrian & Diana Halliday

Leaders: Chris Townend & Bernard Canal Rubio

HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

European Wildcat: Recorded on three days with a minimum of four different animals.

Iberian Wolf: A wonderful morning & evening spent watching two animals at a distance of around 600M-1KM, typical of animals here that are still sadly hunted.

Wallcreeper: A moulting adult male was watched at very close range as it searched for food at the well known site of La Vueltona above Fuente Dé in the Picos de Europa.

Raptors: Excellent sightings of Honey Buzzard, Egyptian Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Booted Eagle, Hen Harrier, Short-toed Eagle and Golden Eagle.



This young European Wildcat was one of four Wildcats seen during the tour!

Videos of Wildcats from this and previous tours can be seen [HERE](#)

SUMMARY

The Cantabrian Mountains are a mountain chain extending approximately 300 km across northern Spain, almost parallel to the Bay of Biscay. This mountainous region holds an incredible diversity of large mammals with Wolves, Wildcats and Bears as well as some highly sought after alpine birds all of which can be found living in this wonderful habitat.

Our tour was based close to the small town of Riaño, located along the Esla River in the mountains of the province of León close to the foothills of the stunning Picos de Europa National Park and just 2-3 hours from Asturias / Santander Airports. Our focus was on both mammals and birds.

The dates of our visit were specifically timed when the numerous mountain meadows have been cut and an abundance of small mammals allow "easy pickings" for a healthy population of European Wildcats. It is also a good time for Wolves as young Wolf Pups tend to remain close to the den and can often be seen in the surrounding area. Finally, a visit to this part of Spain would not be complete without a trip to the Picos de Europa where one bird in particular is always high on people's wish lists, the beautiful Wallcreeper.

Wednesday 24th August

After a direct flight from London Stansted, we all arrived into the small and relaxing Asturias airport. Before long we were in our minibus and took a short detour to pick up Cheryl from a nearby hotel as she had arrived the day before. We were then on our way to the Cantabrian Mountains and the quiet village of Boca de Huergano which was to be our base for the next four nights.

The drive took around three hours with a short stop for coffee en route. On arrival we had lunch and then headed out birding surrounded by some impressive scenery and sunshine! Bird highlights during the afternoon included many raptors such as Egyptian Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Short-toed Eagle and a single Honey Buzzard. Other species included Crag Martin, Red-rumped Swallow, Black Redstart, Serin, Spotted Flycatcher and Pied Flycatcher.

During the last hours of daylight, our attention then focused on mammals as we slowly patrolled the quieter roads hoping for our first sighting of Wildcats. It didn't take long as we soon located a Wildcat hunting Voles in one of the recently cut meadows. We enjoyed great views and even managed to get out of the vehicle to use the scope. A second animal showed many Wildcat characteristics except for an obvious white muzzle and was therefore presumed to not be a pure Wildcat, but interesting to see regardless.

Thursday 25th August

Today our primary focus was to try and see Wolves.

In Spain, the so called Iberian Wolf is considered a subspecies of the nominate **Grey Wolf** *Canis lupus*. Wolves in Europe are considered to be of the subspecies *Canis lupus lupus* sometimes referred to as the **Eurasian Wolf**.

However, Wolves found in Spain are sometimes also considered a distinct subspecies again, *Canis lupus signatus* referred to as the **Iberian Wolf**. They are said to differ from Eurasian wolf by white marks on the upper lips, the dark marks on the tail and a pair of dark marks on the front legs that give it its subspecies name, *signatus* meaning "marked".

We visited two vantage points, one in the early morning and one during the late evening, escorted by our excellent local guide Bernardo who has studied the Wolves in this region for many years. The morning visit gave our best views of the day as we watched a single Wolf venture out from thick cover to the edge of a grassland area allowing good scope views. We also enjoyed views of Wild Boar and Red Deer. The evening vantage point produced two Wolves, slightly more distant than the morning and one of the animals was assumed to be the same animal from the morning. Despite our focus being on Wolves, we also enjoyed a number of bird highlights that included Alpine Swift, Golden Oriole, Tawny Pipit, Cirl Bunting, 50+ Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagle, Golden Eagle and Hen Harrier. A Seoane's Viper seen whilst birding a trail near the hotel during the afternoon was certainly the clear reptile highlight of the day.

Friday 26th August

We spent the first and last parts of the day searching for Wildcats and then focused on birding during the other times. We were successful with some fabulously close views of a young Wildcat seen hunting in the morning and the same animal was seen again during the early evening as it rested in the shade. An obvious hybrid domestic x Wildcat was seen near the village of Besande in the morning. A very old animal in poor condition was also seen in a meadow close to our hotel during the heat of the day. It was lying down and difficult to see the tail and other coat markings. It was thought to be either a very old Wildcat or a hybrid. Other mammal highlights included a very obliging Stoat in the morning and 40+ Cantabrian Chamois whilst we scanned a mountain slope unsuccessfully for Brown Bears in the evening.

Bird highlights today included, Short-toed Eagle, an adult and juvenile Wryneck, Common Redstart, White-throated Dipper, Red-backed Shrike, Red-billed Chough and Spotless Starling.

Saturday 27th August

Our focus returned to birds as we headed east to the Picos de Europa National Park and the famous Fuente Dé cable car. It was a fabulous journey as we drove through some very impressive mountainous scenery from lush alpine meadows to deep gorges. Cheryl's sharp eyes spotted a great looking Wildcat in a meadow en route to Fuente Dé, but frustratingly it did not remain in the open for very long before dashing for cover!

On arriving at Fuente Dé we enjoyed a coffee and some of the group had good flight views of a calling Black Woodpecker. We then ventured into the cable car and slowly ascended from an altitude of 1,070M to 1,823M in just a few minutes. With our feet firmly on solid ground, we took time to enjoy the

spectacular views before heading along the trail to find our target species. We were treated to excellent views of a moulting adult male Wallcreeper whilst having lunch as well as numerous Alpine Accentors. A single Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush was a good bird for some of the group as were Water Pipit, exceptionally close views of Yellow-billed Chough and a superb low flying Short-toed Eagle carrying a snake! We also took some time to explore a lake where we found 10+ Alpine Newts and Kevin had great views of a Seoane's Viper.

As we returned towards Boca de Huergano we stopped at narrow gorge where we were treated to another new mammal species for the tour with excellent scope views of a wonderful female Iberian Ibex with calf.

During the evening, once again we maximised our time to look for Wildcats. More views of the same young Wildcat from the previous day were much appreciated early on in the evening and two clear domestic cats or Wildcat hybrids were seen near the village of Besande. We spent the last hour of daylight scanning for Bears again with no success, but a Red Fox and a large male Wildcat were seen beside the road at dusk whilst returning to our hotel.

Sunday 28th August

Today we were up early for breakfast before making the return journey to the airport. We arrived in good time and even managed to add a mammal to the day list as a Wood Mouse gave close views in the middle of one of the numerous windy roads! We dropped Cheryl off at the hotel ready for her flight the following day as the rest of us returned to London. A great trip with Wildcats, Wolves and Wallcreepers firmly in our memories for a long time to come.

Conservation Donation – Following this tour to Northern Spain £239 was transferred to the Wise Birding Holiday's central conservation fund. This shall be used to support a conservation project in the future, yet to be determined.

For the last three years Wise Birding Holidays has been supporting a number of small conservation projects following the successful completion of a tour. However, we now believe that to make a bigger difference to conservation it seems best to pool the donations from most of our tours into one central fund. Once a target amount has been reached this money will then be used to support a single project in the hope of achieving more for species conservation. Some tours will still continue to donate money to help some of the smaller projects that we feel will still benefit from such smaller donations. Please visit our [Conservation News](#) and [Latest News](#) links to find out more.





The stunning Picos D'Europa NP and a Short-toed Eagle with snake





We spent much of our time watching this obliging young Wildcat





The moulted adult male Wallcreeper (above)
and one of the many Alpine Accentors (below)





One of a number of Alpine Newts (above)
and the beautiful Seoane's Viper by Kevin Bryan





Yellow-billed Cough (above) and the cable car at Fuente Dé (below)





Wolf habitat and Wild Boar (above) and Wolf scat (below)





Wood Mouse (above) and Iberian Ibex by Peter Alfrey (below)





Fabulous scenery near our hotel (above)
and both Griffon and Egyptian Vulture (below)





Watching Cantabrian Chamois (above) and Brown Bear feeding habitat (below)





Silver-spotted Skipper by Peter Alfrey (above) and the group having seen Wolf (below)





**This male Wildcat was seen late on the 27th (above)
& this inquisitive Stoat was seen on the 26th (below)**





**Domestic / Hybrid Wildcat (above) Note “broomstick” tail
and the Real McCoy pure Wildcat (below)**



Bird, Mammal, Reptile & Butterfly Checklist for Northern Spain 24-28 August 2016

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	#	Notes
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	1	A single bird seen on the 27th
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2	Two birds recorded on the 26th
3	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	3	Recorded on four days
4	Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	4	Recorded on four days
5	European Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus europaeus</i>	5	At least two birds heard and seen at dusk after watching Wolves on the evening of the 25th
6	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>	6	Three birds seen whilst looking for Wolves on the 25th
7	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	7	Migrants seen on the 25th and 27th
8	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	8	A single bird heard on the 25th
9	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	9	Recorded on two days
10	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	10	Recorded on two days
11	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	11	A number of birds seen flying over whilst travelling to our accommodation on the 24th
12	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	12	Single birds heard near the hotel on the 24th and 27th
13	European Honey-buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	13	A single bird seen on our first afternoon soaring over the forest slopes
14	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	14	Four birds recorded on the 24th and excellent views of a single bird on the 27th
15	Short-toed Snake-eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	15	Seen very well including a bird carrying a snake! Recorded on three days - max. count of 3 birds on 27th
16	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	16	Recorded on four days with a max. count of at least 50 birds on the 25th
17	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	17	An adult was seen on the evening of the 25th whilst searching for Wolves
18	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	18	A single bird on the 25th
19	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	19	A ringtail hunting the higher slopes whilst scanning for Wolves on the evening of the 25th
20	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	20	Singles recorded on the 25th and 27th
21	Eurasian Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	21	Small numbers recorded on four days
22	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	22	Excellent views of an adult and a juvenile on the 26th whilst watching Wildcat!
23	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>	23	Heard on the 26th and 27th
24	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	24	A single bird seen whilst waiting for the cable car at Fuente Dé
25	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	25	A juvenile bird seen on the 26th
26	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	26	Recorded on four days

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	#	Notes
27	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	27	A single bird on the 25th
28	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	28	Recorded on two days around the higher grass slopes
29	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	29	Recorded on four days
30	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	30	Recorded on four days
31	Northern House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	31	Recorded on four days
32	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	32	Recorded on three days including great views near our hotel
33	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>	33	Up to 8 birds recorded on the high grassy slopes whilst returning from seeing Wolves!
34	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	34	Recorded on the 25th only
35	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>	35	Recorded on the 25th and 26th all as migrant fly-overs
36	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	36	Recorded on four days
37	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	37	Recorded on four days
38	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	38	A single bird feeding with cattle on the 26th
39	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	39	Recorded on three days
40	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	40	Recorded on two days close to our hotel with a max. count of 3 birds on the 25th
41	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>	41	Very close views above the cable car at Fuente Dé on the 27th with 20+ birds recorded
42	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	42	Recorded on two days
43	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	43	Recorded on four days
44	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	44	Recorded on two days
45	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	45	Recorded on four days
46	Common Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>	46	A single bird was seen briefly above the cable car at Fuente Dé on the 27th by some of the group
47	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	47	Recorded on two days
48	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	48	A common species recorded in small numbers on four days
49	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	49	Single birds were seen well on the 25th and 26th, presumably migrants
50	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>	50	Recorded on the 26th only
51	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	51	Recorded on the 27th only above the cable car at Fuente Dé
52	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	52	A common migrant or local breeder recorded on four days
53	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	53	A common migrant or local breeder recorded on four days

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	#	Notes
54	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	54	Good views of a bird at Fuente Dé whilst waiting for the cable car
55	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	55	Recorded on the 26th only
56	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetta</i>	56	Heard on two days in suitable habitat
57	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	57	Recorded on the 25th only
58	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	58	Small numbers recorded on three days
59	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>	59	Single birds were heard and seen on two days
60	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	60	Recorded on two days
61	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	61	Recorded on two days
62	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>	62	A couple of birds heard and seen by some on the 25th whilst walking to our Wolf viewpoint
63	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	63	Good views on the 25th
64	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	64	Seen well on a number of occasions over three days
65	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	65	Recorded on the 27th only
66	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	66	Recorded on the 25th at least
67	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	67	Recorded on two days
68	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	68	A moulting adult male showed very well on the 27th at La Vueltona above Fuente Dé whilst having our lunch!
69	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	69	Heard on the 27th
70	Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	70	A male briefly on the 25th
71	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	71	Good views over two days with a max. count of 6 birds on the 26th
72	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	72	Recorded on two days
73	Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	73	Recorded on three days
74	Yellow-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>	74	Excellent views of small groups being hand fed above Fuente Dé
75	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	75	Recorded on two days in much smaller numbers than the above species
76	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	76	Recorded on three days
77	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	77	Recorded on three days
78	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	78	Recorded on two days allowing good comparison with Spotless Starling
79	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	79	Very good views on the 26th feeding in a cattle field with Common Starling
80	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	80	Recorded on four days

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	#	Notes
1	Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>	1	Minimum of 2 different animals on the 25th (1 in the morning & 2 evening) at a range of 600M - 1KM in the scope
2	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	2	A single animal at dusk near the village of Besande on the 27th
3	European Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>	3	A minimum of 4 different animals seen well plus a number of domestic / hybrid Wildcats
4	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	4	A single animal seen well whilst scanning for Wolves on the morning of the 25th
5	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	5	Recorded daily in small numbers with a max. count of seven on the 25th
6	"Cantabrian" Chamois	<i>Rupicapra pyrenaica parva</i>	6	Seen on the 26th and 27th whilst scanning unsuccessfully for Bears with a max. count of 40+
7	Spanish Iberian Ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica pyrenaica</i>	7	A female and calf were seen very well near the village of Llanaves de la Reina
8	Vole Sp	-	8	Seen on the 25th whilst walking to our vantage point to look for Wolves
9	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>	9	Great views of an animal in a meadow close to where the young Wildcat was hunting
10	Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	10	Single animals seen very well on the 25th and the 28th
1	"Common" Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis muralis</i>	1	Seen on the 26th at least
2	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>	2	One recorded on the 25th
3	Seonane's Viper	<i>Salamandra salamandra</i>	3	Two sightings: On the 25th above Boca de Huergano and the 27th above Fuente De
4	Alpine Newt	<i>Salamander Chioglossa lusitanica</i>	4	10+ individuals seen well in a lake above Fuente Dé

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	#	Notes
1	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>	1	Recorded on four days
2	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	2	Recorded on three days
3	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	3	Recorded on four days
4	Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>	4	Recorded on two days
5	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	5	Recorded on four days
6	Brown Argus	<i>Aricia agestis</i>	6	Recorded on the 27th only
7	Great Banded Grayling	<i>Kanetisa circe</i>	7	Recorded on three days
8	Grayling	<i>Hipparchia semele</i>	8	Recorded on the 24th only
9	Gatekeeper	<i>Pyronia tithonus</i>	9	Recorded on two days
10	Silver-spotted Skipper	<i>Hesperia comma</i>	10	Recorded on three days
11	Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>	11	Recorded on the 27th only

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