

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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SPAIN

Iberian Lynx Quest

28 January – 4 February 2017

TOUR REPORT

Leader: Sergio González Asián

The Iberian lynx, considered by the IUCN to be the most threatened feline on the planet, still maintains some population nuclei in Andalucía, located to the south of the Iberian Peninsula. In 1999, scientist Miguel Delibes announced that the population of the Iberian lynx was at a historical low, with no more than 90 individuals between Sierra Morena and Doñana. Since then, much work has been done to preserve this species as the emblem of the Mediterranean forest.

Three Life projects and a captive breeding project have been carried out to implement different reintroductions of animals in historical sites where they had previously disappeared. The result of the effort to conserve this species has been that there are now 475 Iberian lynx living in freedom. Not bad, but we must continue working to get this species out of the red list of endangered species.

Day 1 Saturday 28 January 2017

Our meeting point was Seville Airport this morning. The day was sunny and temperature around 12° C.

After picking up our vehicle, we headed north towards the Andujar Natural Park. Along the way we saw several white storks, some red kites, common buzzards and cattle egrets. After two hours driving we arrived at our accommodation, where we checked in and then had a good lunch with typical and delicious products from the area.

At about 14.30, we went to our first observation point to try to see our favourite feline. Along the winding route, we were joined by some Iberian magpie families and also spotted some red deer, common magpies, chaffinches, robins and house sparrows. Our first observation point was a half-mountain path from where we could observe the great valley and set up our telescopes. After half an hour we observed the majestic flight of an adult golden eagle, and later griffon vultures and crag martins appeared, as well as deer in the valley. This was our first outing into lynx territory – unfortunately we had no luck but were happy to be there. Maybe tomorrow would be the day....



Our dinner was delicious and we went to sleep early; it had been a long day.

Day 2 Sunday 29 January 2017

The day started a little cloudy and cold. First we had a good breakfast and set off to another different place where the previous night we had been told by the hotel staff that a lynx had been observed near a river. We parked our vehicle near a large dam and walked parallel to the river for about 200 metres to a good observation point. From there we could observe circl buntings, Sardinian warblers, common magpies, Iberian magpies, crags martins, gray wagtails, white wagtails, cormorants, Iberian chifchafs, chaffinches, Iberian green woodpeckers, black redstarts, hoopoes, griffon vultures and red deer.

At about 11:00 we moved towards a viewpoint from where we could observe a great valley and enjoy our picnic lunch. Whilst we were having lunch, three black vulture couples flew past a low altitude, before a large group of griffon vultures appeared in another thermal stream. We also observed several ravens, groups of Iberian magpies and an Iberian green woodpecker in a tree nearby, however the lynx still didn't appear.

We decided to return to the place where we were the previous afternoon, where along the way we saw red deer, fallow deer, rabbits and two groups of mouflons, captained by two large males with immense horns. It was 15.30 when we reached the valley. We had just placed our telescopes when someone said: "A lynx!" Indeed, it was a beautiful male that was moving about 150 metres from us. We followed him and he stopped to lie down to rest. We watched him for almost 40 minutes; from time to time he would wake up, sit up, but then lie down to nap again. During this time a couple of black vultures and griffon vultures flew over, some other Iberian and common magpies appeared, and on the rocks we could see blue rock thrush and many other passerines.

We decided to change positions to find another lynx and we could hear the meow of one across the mountain. We waited a while for him to show up, but unfortunately he never did, so we returned to our hotel super happy to have seen our first Iberian lynx.

Over dinner, we talked about our experience with other visitors who were staying at the hotel and who had also seen the lynx.

Day 3 Monday 30 January 2017

After breakfast we headed to a different place to try and see another lynx. On the way we stopped to observe a couple of little owls who were perched on a great rock, from there we could also observe wood lark, hoopoe, serins and goldfinches. We continued on our way and observed several red legged partridges, white wagtails, serins, sky larks, crested larks, robins, Sardinian warblers, chaffinches, chifchafs, goldfinches, house sparrows, black redstarts, greenfinches and a common kestrel.

After several kilometres we reached an area where they are working to recover the rabbit, an important prey for many predators of the Iberian fauna. We were on our way to see the work they are doing, such as rabbit huts, summer drinking fountains, sowing alfalfa and oats, and suddenly two Spanish imperial eagles appeared. We observed them for some time, and then were treated to two black vultures and several griffon vultures, as well as deer, rabbit and mouflon.

We continued our journey and went to visit one of the most beautiful castles in the area – in the town of Baños de la Encina. From there we headed towards the Andujar Natural Park Visitor Centre, where we enjoyed our picnic lunch. Then we stopped at our hotel for a cup of tea and continued our way back to the river area. Within ten minutes, we saw a kingfisher on the riverbank, and a couple of Spanish imperial eagles appeared, performing acrobatics in the air to the delight of all of us. We also saw more griffon vultures, cormorants, crag martins, grey wagtails, hoopoe, green woodpecker and other passerines.

When night approached, we observed the resident otter in the river, eating a fish on a rock just six or seven metres from us, as well as bats and frogs.

Day 4 Tuesday 31 January 2017

After a good breakfast we left our hotel to head to Doñana National Park. After three hours driving, with a stop to stretch our legs and have a cup of tea, we arrived at El Rocío and the Hotel Toruño, our base for the rest of the week. El Rocío is a very unusual village, more like something from the far West than an Andalusian town. All its streets are sandy, there is no asphalt, many people travel around on horseback and it is located right on the border with Doñana National Park.



In the afternoon we made our first foray into the National Park. Doñana is a territory with more than 58,000 hectares where you can find different ecosystems in very good condition: Mediterranean forests, sand dunes, beaches, Guadalquivir estuary and the most important wetland in Europe. Its location in southern Europe, very close to the African continent, it is a favourite migration place, as well as a wintering, breeding and resting spot for more than one million birds. It is here where another of the Iberian lynx populations still survives.

First we took an excursion through the forest area, which is made up of huge pines, cork oaks, oaks and Mediterranean scrubland. We observed Iberian magpies, greenfinches, goldfinches, woodpigeons, hoopoes, rabbits, red deer, stone chats and Iberian chifchafs.

We then headed to the natural marsh that has never been modified by man, where we were able to observe wild native horses and cows, in addition to a large number of water birds, among which were: greylag geese, Eurasian cranes, glossy ibises, flamingos, shovelers, pintails, common teals, purple gallinule, red kites, white storks, southern grey shrike, serines, coots, common kestrels and short eared owl.



On the way back we crossed the forest area again and just as we were leaving the park and with the last rays of sun, our protagonist of this tour appeared. Just 15 metres from the vehicle, drinking in one of the streams, we could see a large male Iberian lynx looking at us for a few minutes, then with a calm walk crossed the stream by a small wooden bridge, stopped in front of us for a few minutes, before heading into the thicket of the forest to disappear among the vegetation like a ghost. Everyone was very excited to have been able to observe this wonderful animal so close and for more than 15 minutes.

We headed back to our hotel for dinner and of course to celebrate our great sighting that afternoon. As a guide I must say that it is rare to be fortunate enough to see this animal as close as we had done today. We went to sleep very happy!

Day 5 Wednesday 1 February 2017

We got up before dawn and after breakfast we headed back to Doñana National Park. During a long visit of more than eight hours we visited forest areas new to us, and areas of marshes that we hadn't discovered the previous day.

In an area called Coto del Rey - a very quiet place and where only exclusive groups can enter - we were watching a Spanish imperial couple with our telescopes as they copulated on a large pole, while two young Spanish imperial eagles (in their first year) were posing within around 600 metres of them. In addition we observed red kites, short eared owls, greylags, fallow deer, stone curlews, grey plovers, night herons, grey herons, glossy ibis, wild boars, cranes, teals, shovelers, gadwalls and red deer. We also visited the José Antonio Valverde Visitor Centre and part of the marsh outside the National Park, where we could also observe a large number of waterbirds and passerines.



In the afternoon we went to La Rociana Visitor Centre, located close to our hotel, where we walked through the forest adjoining one of the rivers that supply water to Doñana marsh. Here we observed many glossy ibis, paintails, shovelers, Cetti's warbler, garganey, teals, greylags, mallards, flamingos, spoonbills, grey herons and spouted starlings.

At dusk we returned to the hotel for dinner.

Day 6 Thursday 2 February 2017

We got up early to head for the Marismas del Odiel Natural Reserve, about 60 kilometres from our hotel. It was raining, so we first made a stop at the 'Calatilla' Visitor Centre where we had a coffee until it stopped and we were able to walk on a path that crossed a salt area and reached the mouth of the Odiel River. Along the route we observed several flamingos, spoonbill, yellow legged gull, lesser black-backed gull, great black-backed gull, whimbrel, spotted redshank, greenshank, green sandpiper, common sandpiper, snipes, dunlin, sanderlings, curlew sandpiper and black winged silt.

It rained again so we returned to the vehicle and drove via a small asphalt road a few kilometres until we reached the sea shore. On our way we observed an osprey couple on an artificial platform where they have

built their nest for the past three years, as well as two short eared owls that flew next to the vehicle, plus some magpies and many passerines.

After taking our picnic in a hide next to a lagoon where we could observe coots, mallards, gadwalls, cormorants and little grebes, we headed towards the moving dunes of the Doñana National Park. We took a short trail of about a kilometre, where in addition to observing several species such as skylark, crested lark, magpie, raven and sanderling on the virgin beach of Doñana, we were able to identify several species of plant and shrubs typical of this area.

From there we continue to went to El Acebuche Visitor Centre to enjoy a cup of tea and a documentary on importance of Doñana for bird migration, before returning to the hotel for dinner.

Day 7 Friday 3 February 2017

Our last day in Doñana. The day started sunny, and in the morning we again crossed an area of Mediterranean forest to the natural marsh. We observed three young Spanish imperial eagle individuals, several purple gallinules, lapwings, squacco heron, southern grey shrike, cranes, grey lags, white storks, hoopoe, short eared owl, Iberian magpie, moorhens, coots, red crested pochard, red kite, lesser kestrel, spotted starlings, marsh harriers, hen harriers, fan tailed warbler, corn buntings, red and fallow deer and many passerines.

In the afternoon we headed towards the Dehesa de Abajo Natural Reserve, about 35 kilometres from our accommodation. This is a nature reserve with a 100-year old wild olive tree forest, where a female lynx is known to live, as well as a breeding colony of white storks with more than 400 pairs. There is also a large lagoon where we could observe ferruginous duck, red crested pochard, great crested grebe, black-necked grebe, marsh harriers, black headed gull, coots, crested coot, common swift, house martins, greenfinches and black kites.

On our return to the hotel we took a route through a zone of domestic cattle, where we observed a black shouldered kite, a flock of cranes, a colony of Spanish sparrows, amongst other passerines that we saw from the vehicle.

Day 8 Saturday 4 February 2017

We left the hotel at 07:30 to head for the airport in Seville and said our goodbyes after a very pleasant week.

SPECIES CHECKLIST

BIRDS

GROUSE, PHEASANTS & allies - Phasianidae

Red-legged partridge *Alectoris rufa*

GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS - Anatidae

Greylag goose *Anser anser*

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Northern shoveler *Anas clypeata*

Eurasian teal *Anas crecca*

Red-crested pochard *Netta rufina*

Common pochard *Aythya ferina*

Pintail *Anas acuta*

Ferruginous duck *Aythya nyroca*

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

GREBES - Podicipedidae

Little grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Great crested grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Black-necked grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*

FLAMINGOS - Phoenicopteridae

Greater flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*

STORKS - Ciconiidae

White stork *Ciconia ciconia*

IBIS & SPOONBILLS - Threskiornithidae

Glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

Eurasian spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*

HERONS & BITTERNS - Ardeidae

Black-crowned night heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*

Western cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Grey heron *Ardea cinerea*

Little egret *Egretta garzetta*

Squacco heron *Ardeola ralloides*

Great white egret *Egretta alba*

CORMORANTS - Phalacrocoracidae

Great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

HAWKS, EAGLES & allies - Accipitridae

Black-winged kite *Elanus caeruleus*

Red kite *Milvus milvus*

Black kite *Milvus migrans*

Griffon vulture *Gyps fulvus*

Cinereous/monk/black Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

Western marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

Hen harrier *Circus cyaneus*

Common buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Spanish imperial eagle *Aquila adalberti*
Golden eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*
Booted eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*

FALCONS & allies - Falconidae

Lesser kestrel *Falco naumanni*
Common/Eurasian kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

RAILS, CRAKES & COOTS - Rallidae

Purple swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*
Common moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*
Red-knobbed coot *Fulica cristata*
Eurasian/common coot *Fulica atra*

CRANES - Gruidae

Common crane *Grus grus*

STILTS & AVOCETS - Recurvirostridae

Black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

BURHINIDAE

Stone curlew *Burhinus oedicephalus*

PLOVERS & LAPWINGS - Charadriidae

Grey plover *Pluvialis scutellaris*
Little ringed plover *Charadrius dubius*
Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*

SANDPIPERS, SNIPES & allies - Scolopacidae

Common snipe *Gallinago gallinago*
Black-tailed godwit *Limosa limosa*
Green sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*
Sanderling *Calidris alba*
Dunlin *Calidris alpina*
Common sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*
Spotted redshank *Tryngas erythropus*
Redshank *Tringa tetanus*
Grenshank *Tringa nebularia*
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

GULLS, TERNS & SKIMMERS - Laridae

Black-headed gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*
Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus*
Yellow-legged gull *Larus cachinnans*
Great black-backed gull *Larus marinus*

PIGEONS & DOVES - Columbidae

Rock dove / feral pigeon *Columba livia*
Common wood pigeon *Columba palumbus*
Eurasian collared dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

OWLS - Strigidae

Little owl *Athene noctua*

Short eared owl *Asio flammeus*

SWIFTS – Apodidae

Common swift *Apus apus*

KINGFISHERS - Alcedinidae

Common kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

HOOPOES - Upupidae

Eurasian hoopoe *Upupa epops*

WOODPECKERS - Picidae

Iberian green woodpecker *Picus sharpei*

SHRIKES - Laniidae

Southern grey shrike *Lanius meridionalis*

CROWS, JAYS & MAGPIES - Corvidae

Iberian magpie *Cyanopica cooki*

Eurasian magpie *Pica pica*

Red-billed chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*

Western jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

Northern raven *Corvus corax*

TITS & CHICKADEES - Paridae

European crested tit *Lophophanes cristatus*

Great tit *Parus major*

Blue tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*

SWALLOWS & MARTINS - Hirundinidae

Sand martin *Riparia riparia*

Barn swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Eurasian crag martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*

Common house martin *Delichon urbicum*

LARKS - Alaudidae

Calandra lark *Melanocorypha calandra*

Crested lark *Galerida cristata*

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*

Eurasian skylark *Alauda arvensis*

CISTICOLAS & allies - Cisticolidae

Zitting cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*

OLD WORLD WARBLERS - Sylviidae

Cetti's warbler *Cettia cetti*

Common chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*

Iberian chiffchaff *Phylloscopus ibericus*

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Sardinian warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*

WRENS - Troglodytidae

Eurasian wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

TREECREEPERS - Certhiidae

Short-toed treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*

STARLINGS - Sturnidae

Spotless starling *Sturnus unicolor*

THRUSHES - Turdidae

Common blackbird *Turdus merula*

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*

Song thrush *Turdus philomelos*

OLD WORLD CHATS & FLYCATCHERS - Muscicapidae

European robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Black redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

European stonechat *Saxicola rubicola*

Blue rock thrush *Monticola solitarius*

OLD WORLD SPARROWS & allies - Passeridae

House sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Rock sparrow *Petronia petronia*

Spanish sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

WAGTAILS & PIPITS - Motacillidae

Yellow wagtail *Motacilla flava*

Grey wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

White wagtail *Motacilla alba*

Meadow pipit *Anthus pratensis*

FINCHES & allies - Fringillidae

Common chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

European serin *Serinus serinus*

European greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

European goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Common linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*

BUNTINGS, NEW WORLD SPARROWS & allies - Emberizidae

Corn bunting *Emberiza calandra*

MAMMALS - MAMMALIA

RABBITS & HARES - Leporidae

European rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

CATS - Felidae

Iberian lynx *Felis pardina*

WEASELS & allies - Mustelidae

Eurasian otter *Lutra lutra*

PIGS - Suidae

Eurasian wild boar *Sus scrofa*

DEER - Cervidae

Red deer *Cervus elaphus*

Fallow deer *Dama dama*

Mouflon *Ovis orientalis*