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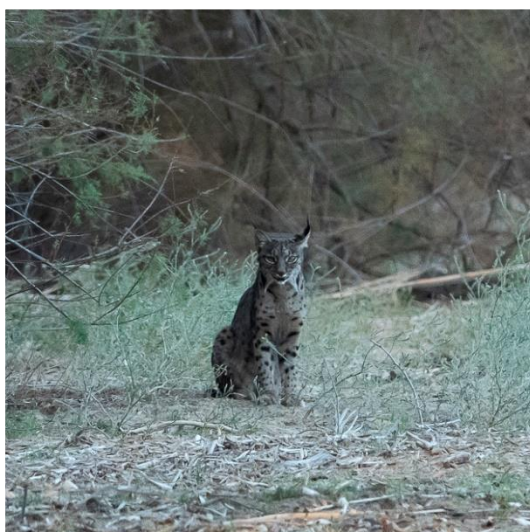


Tour Report

Spain: Iberian Lynx Quest

8 - 15 October 2023

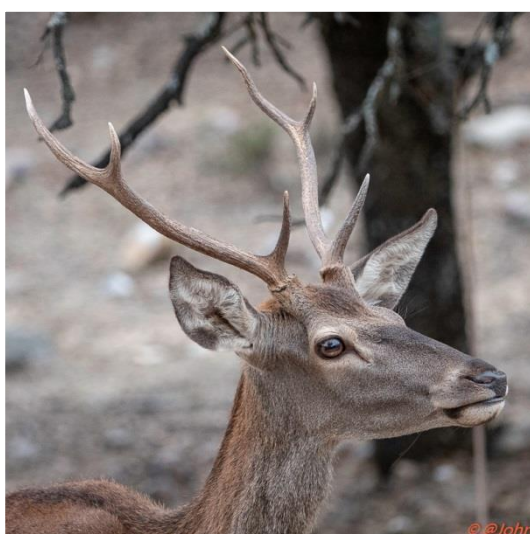
Iberian lynx



Little owl



Red deer



Spanish imperial eagle



Compiled by John Muddeman

Tour Leader: John Muddeman & Sergio Asián with 6 participants

Introduction

The Iberian lynx is still one of the rarest wild cats in the world, though fortunately the sad accolade of being the rarest now pertains to another species elsewhere. Following a critical situation in 2002 deriving from the collapse in wild rabbit populations across the Iberian Peninsula from the 1980s onwards, just two separate populations plus a few other dispersed individuals totalling, at most, 100 individuals survived. Thankfully, following intensive conservation measures, there are now officially almost 1,800 free-living individuals. This number is rising year on year, and the species is being successfully returned to former haunts plus, to a much lesser degree, dispersing to former haunts by its own means.

Naturally, with so few individuals, it still remains a challenge to see one in the wild, with just the areas of Andújar and Doñana in Andalucía currently publicly accessible with a realistic chance of viewing them. Consequently, basing the tour around a visit to both sites to see their differences and similarities is doubly rewarding. Firstly, to experience these two areas directly, which physically look so different, but in floristic and wildlife terms are surprisingly similar. Secondly, to give financial support to the local communities of the only respective areas where the animal survived in the wild state, via our group visits there. Of course, if there's no lynx activity in one area compared to the other when we visit, then we also stand better opportunities for seeing one!

Lynx watching can be a frustrating activity though! Plenty of observers now visit the countryside in their search for this gorgeous animal, meaning that better patterns of sightings and so likely occurrences while searching are available to the visitor. Still, at the same time, the notoriously fickle nature of the species in terms of its activity patterns means that more random sightings are now made, making it appear easier to see one than it really is. This year also, significant numbers of females have been without cubs in tow, so are far less active, plus a new male has entered into the main watching area in Andújar and is much shyer than his displaced predecessor, adding to the complexities of sighting one. Plus the drought continues... So perhaps, apart from being such an incredibly attractive animal, it's also what makes any sighting of one so very special.

Day 1: Arrive Seville, transfer to Doñana NP (El Rocío)

Sunday 8 October 2023

Coming down from Madrid on the high speed train, Sergio picked me up before we headed to the airport to meet Anne, who'd come over from Portugal, and we waited for the slightly delayed incoming flight from the UK bringing the rest of the participants. There was of course lots of space as we split across the two vehicles for the relatively short drive down to our base in the lovely sand-streeted town of El Rocío, where fortunately the temperature had dropped to just under 30°C for our arrival at dusk, rather than the 35°C in Seville itself!

Apart from a few cattle egrets seen during the drive and a couple of Moorish geckos on the hotel wall as we reconvened shortly afterwards for dinner, there had been little chance to really look at anything, but expectations were naturally high for the following day and after a large meal we were off to try and grab some sleep.

Day 2: Doñana N.P. drive and short evening walk and lynx watch

Monday 9 October 2023

With Spain's peculiar time zone and the clocks not having changed yet, it was still completely dark as we headed across to the hotel restaurant for breakfast, starting at 7 a.m. in lovely cool and clear conditions. Our local driving guides turned up just after 8 a.m. and we were quickly off in our 4x4 vehicles, skirting round the edge of town towards the woodlands of the fractionally higher and drier parts of this former river delta and flood plain.

A couple of red deer were just off to one side, requiring a quick stop to enjoy them and the first European rabbits made an appearance too, being a good sign as it's the principal mainstay of the Iberian lynx diet! The effects of the 4-year drought which has strongly affected the park were clear to see too, with very little grass and slow shrub cover actually affording us much better views than normal as we looked across the clearings and under the innumerable trees, which made it much easier to look for our quarry as we progressed.

Another pause where a few fine cork oaks stood proud of a huge pasture, the blackish silhouettes of two wild boar foraging for acorns stood out clearly against the pale sandy and grassy background. This was a good start!

The sun soon rose, starting to cast its powerful rays through the trees, so we continued slowly, working our way back and forth along the principal tracks, scouring the open areas and undergrowth as we went in the hope of seeing movement or perhaps the outline we were hoping for. This took us to the edge of the wooded area, where a short break outside allowed to scan the vast open fields ahead, where a few northern wheatears and the first of numerous common stonechats caught our eye first, although Sergio found a couple of red-legged partridge and a couple of distant Iberian grey shrikes were good spots.

The long drive out along a raised and very dry and dusty track was broken with a couple of stops, the first in the hope of seeing a few dotterel which had been reported on the adjacent field, but given that this field was vast, we had to make do with extremely distant views of a large flock of pin-tailed sandgrouse shuffling around in the heat haze, at least where the mirage 'water' allowed! A small group of Mediterranean short-toed larks had been down on the ground close to our path, but sadly moved off quickly as we disembarked from the vehicles, though we heard a couple of buzzing individuals as they passed overhead and into the shrubby saltmarsh behind.

A drink's break was called for, so at the visitor centre we parked up and headed in to look for drinks and use the loos, only to find it was full of water and so birds out in front! Indeed, being some of the only open fresh(ish) water available for miles around, it was an absolute magnet and amongst the black-winged stilts, greater flamingos, mallard, Eurasian teal and northern shoveler in front were a remarkable number of marbled ducks! This is an endangered species.

A gathering of griffon vultures was present amongst the bushes on our return where clearly they were feasting on some dead animal, probably one of the Doñana horses, so we stopped to watch, being rewarded with excellent flight views but also the appearance of a juvenile Egyptian vulture which rose out of the feeding melée and circled over almost directly above, affording us terrific views.

The drive back included a diversion through the Coto del Rey estate, with its pinewoods and open grazing areas, but given the heat we preferred to stay in the vehicle to watch, only getting out to enjoy the beautiful patio of the palace itself. Time had flown by, so we started the route back, only to get out for a short walk through the trees where on turning a corner we came across a fantastic picnic, set up on tables in the shade of the umbrella pines! Lunch! It was delicious too, with salad, potato omelette, cured meats, cheese, etc. and even a bottle of wine or two, though given the heat we all abstained!

We finally made it back about 15:15 for a good break during the heat of the afternoon, some going for a walk and others, like me, enjoying a good siesta ...

The evening was taken nearby, after a quite short, but still quite hot walk out along a soft sandy track, though we stopped in the shade of some white poplars, willows and narrow-leaved ash trees beside a temporary stream. A couple of European rabbits provided some diversion, plus a variety of small birds including willow warblers flitting through the treetops and Cetti's warblers yelling from the depths of the scrub. A nudge on my arm led to me turn to see the unmistakable silhouette of a stunning Iberian lynx sat

in the shade off to one side, relaxedly watching us as if it had been there all along! All eyes and binoculars and telescope lenses were trained on it in a moment, but by keeping quiet and by barely moving, it simply sat there at first, but then took a step forward before lying down in the scant vegetation in nearly full view! Wow!

We spent almost an hour enjoying this stunning animal. Most of the time it simply lay watching the movements of first some horseback riders, then two locals on a horse-drawn trap - who on stopping, when they saw it and tried to film it on a mobile phone (!), caused it to lie flat on the ground for a while - then briefly another group of observers who joined us after walking out for their 7th time (to try and see one!), then a couple of passing 4x4s and finally, one of the large green cross-country vehicles for official visits plus another 4x4 vehicle with visitors travelling with the same company we'd used in the morning! It was only when the large vehicle stopped, however, that she clearly decided it was time to go and hunt. After standing up, followed by a quick stretch, she sauntered behind the vehicles, broke into a quick jog, stopped, then started jogging again, before disappearing through the national park fence and rapidly out of sight. WOW!

We walked and then drove back to the hotel, elated, before reconvening for our dinner after just our first full day here!

Day 3: Brazo del Este; short evening walk and lynx watch

Tuesday 10 October 2023

Given the drought conditions, the fact that only 10% of the rice fields were being cultivated this year, the forecast for another hot day, and news of plenty of birds near the Guadalquivir River, we decided to make the longer drive to the Brazo del Este. So, after a slightly later breakfast, this required us to drive east and catch a ferry across the river. As chance would have it, only Sergio's minibus could get on the first ferry available! Fortunately, we didn't have to wait too long, though time was ticking along and the temperature rising, so once we had crossed we set off briskly down the roads and tracks to our final destination for the morning.

A high bridge over a deep channel allowed us views down onto the muddy edges where plenty of birds were present, so we detoured onto a track running parallel and stopped to take a look. We enjoyed some greater flamingos, black-winged stilts, a few ruffs, green sandpipers, common redshanks and even a little group of common snipe, while a passing common kestrel or two and a couple of western marsh harrier livened up the airspace! One of the harriers was buzzing something perched in a tall willow upstream, whose size and shape were confirmed in the scope as belonging to an escaped Harris' hawk! A potentially invasive species, since it has even bred in the wild in Spain, Sergio's rapid action in calling a local falconer was a great choice as another falconer nearby had lost the bird and wanted to recover it as quickly as possible. Numerous small birds were present too, but rather flighty, but calling sitting scholasticism, plus perched whinchat, northern wheatear and even a spotted flycatcher on the fence in front were all enjoyed as we listened to a fly-over of yellow-crowned bishops and Eurasian greenfinches!

A good drive followed, punctuated only for brief checks of birds on wires or raptors overhead, including a fine male black-headed weaver and pale morph booted eagle for the second vehicle, but it was well worth it as we stepped out where the sinuous old channel of the Guadalquivir is crossed by a huge agricultural track.

A few marbled duck, a northern pintail and an eclipse garganey were great finds on the first pool, while a hyper-active bluethroat, a small flock of creeping Temminck's stints and large numbers of glossy ibis, white storks, black-winged stilts, greater flamingos, grey herons, little egrets and Eurasian spoonbills on the other side were simply fantastic! Just one great egret was also present, but was still great to see, obviously!

Here we met a couple of Spanish ladies carrying out surveys for a project to restore other permanent wetlands in an adjacent estate, so we chipped in to help the surveying, especially as I knew one of them from past tours! Other species, including at the two subsequent crossings, included common ringed plover, lots of black-tailed godwits, a superb speckle-backed wood sandpiper, plus fly-over booted eagle, osprey, an unseasonal black kite and a 'stealth' peregrine falcon that sneaked off before we could see it properly!

The sun was still pounding down and the heat oppressive, so we decided to head back into the nearest local town to buy a picnic at a supermarket and, once again, Sergio's minibus made it across first without us! Hey ho, it wasn't THAT long a wait and we did actively notice the first house sparrows for the trip for some of us!

We lunched in the shade under pines trees in an empty picnic area beside a very quiet road. There were virtually no flies despite the intense heat, although even with this it was still a great stop! The journey back was punctuated by a stop beside a couple of churned up rice paddies with plenty of birds, but the most interesting, a whiskered tern, only flew around at the back, remaining in the heat haze. Dozens of dragonflies were present too, allowing some good shots, but the agricultural traffic - some of it tearing past at ridiculous speed - hastened our departure and return for a short afternoon break back at the hotel.

While the group went out again towards dusk to look for the same, or even another, Iberian lynx where we'd been so lucky the day before, I headed off for emergency dental repairs at a local town. We all met back at the hotel for dinner. I'd clearly been luckier in resolving my issue, but it had been a lovely evening again to be out on a 'lynx watch'!

Day 4: Odiel Marshes area; Doñana N.P. visitor's centre + lynx watch

Wednesday 11 October 2023

Leaving slightly earlier, we took the coastal road towards Huelva, passing through the vast area of native scrub and introduced pine forest that forms the national park's buffer zone, Doñana Natural Park. Most of it looks exactly the same as the fringe area of the national park, although there is a far greater extension of the so-called 'black heath' and far fewer trees than a few years when wildfire raged through the area and destroyed it, albeit temporarily, as it has apparently recovered extremely well.

Passing the heavily industrialised area of petrochemical plants we then passed the huge monument to Christopher Columbus at the junction of the Tinto and Odiel rivers and worked our way upriver through the city before crossing over and suddenly entering the vast estuary of the Odiel, bordering the salt pans as we now headed downriver.

Our quick stop in the visitor centre was extended when we realised that the water levels were excellent for waders on the nearby river and creek, so we started with a good scan of the tidal mud, where grey plover, common ringed plover, Eurasian whimbrel, common sandpiper, common redshank, ruddy turnstone and dunlin were all present. So, just like in the UK! A single curlew sandpiper, typical here even through winter, added a touch of the exotic and allowed a good comparison as it fed alongside a dunlin. A few gulls were scattered amongst the sandwich terns roosting on a hand rail, including three Mediterranean gulls. The white wingtips of two lovely adults were easy to see in the scope, while the head pattern and structure of the second-winter bird could be compared to the adjacent black-headed birds (both yellow-legged), and their darker, lesser black-backed cousins provided another good comparison.

It wasn't just larger birds here though, as a lovely European pied flycatcher showed well under some trees, although a calling spotted flycatcher in the treetops refused to appear! The dry rattle of a red-eyed Sardinian warbler gave away its presence and regular "chacks" came from a couple of very mobile common stonechats in the saltmarsh.

The drive down passed some fantastic areas of pristine coastal scrub, which have remained that way thanks to their (sadly, from a different point of view) being completely out of bounds! Pools and creeks in the

saltmarsh also held variable numbers of waders and other wading bird, while one pocket - presumably containing some fish - held an excellent group of Eurasian spoonbills, grey herons and a great egret or two.

A short walk out to another wide area of estuary crossed a tidal creek full of the tiny West African fiddler-crabs. As we enjoyed these, which including waiting for a while for them to reappear after regularly dashing back down their burrows when sensing danger, a robin-like bird flew out calling from the saltmarsh bushes before pitching into the top of one of them, displaying obvious orange patches at the base of the tail. A bluethroat! It moved to another bush moments later, where we could watch it in the scope and could see it was a fine male, albeit in dowdier winter garb. When it turned its head on a few occasions we could clearly see patches of stunning blue on the sides of its throat and breast.

We encountered some very flighty Thekla's and crested lark singing and calling in the dunes, more rattling Sardinian warblers in the bushes and, at the end of the track, excellent views over another huge area of tidal estuary, with a fine selection of waders. In addition, a few Eurasian oystercatchers, Eurasian curlews, bar-tailed godwit, common greenshank and sanderling were present, while Sergio excellently picked out the sleek forward-leaning profile of a slender-billed gull swimming on the incoming tide, which we watched in the scopes for a while as it flew up and down looking for somewhere to feed. One or two western marsh harriers had been around, but a low-flying harrier crossing in front turned out to be a ringtail hen harrier which then quartered the dunes opposite for some time, probably looking for small migrant birds amongst the marram. Finally, a few calling Kentish plovers flew past towards the mud on an adjacent higher area as the rising tide pushed them off these lower areas.

There was still a little way to go to the end, where the narrowing dunes and a few more broom bushes help to concentrate the birds, with several northern wheatears on migration being the most notable. It was hot, sunny and with a light onshore breeze, so it was no surprise that there was nothing out to sea, although it was still fun to look out over the Atlantic and (metaphorically) get some sand between our toes!

Another comfort stop at the visitor centre produced plenty of Eurasian whimbrel roosting alongside the now greater numbers of sandwich terns, but it was hot and getting quite late, so we moved on quickly. We continued along the coast a little way and stopped at a site where Mediterranean chameleons occur. Despite our best efforts, we weren't able to see any, but there was at least just time to buy a picnic lunch in a nearby supermarket and, after consulting Google, we headed to a nearby picnic spot in the pinewoods.

As luck would have it, on reaching one at a roundabout, I turned off while Sergio continued on, but since I had the food... A large bird drifting parallel to the coast as we were setting out lunch turned out to be a juvenile Egyptian vulture, an intriguing record here. It was probably a bird reorienting from SW Portugal and heading towards the Strait of Gibraltar to attempt the much shorter crossing. A couple of Iberian green woodpeckers were calling almost throughout lunch, but it wasn't almost until we'd finished that we spotted a few shapes gliding between the huge umbrella pines, heading for another picnic table where someone was clearing up his lunch before moving off. So, we headed over too, complete with a few leftovers of our own and were rewarded with fantastic views of a healthy flock of Iberian magpies gliding in, dropping onto either the ground or the table to grab a beakful of food, before launching again and disappearing into the dappled shadows.

Naturally, you can't really visit Doñana without going to one of the main visitor centres with a shop for a spot of retail therapy (on request, of course!), so we dropped into the Acebuche centre for a "quick break". In addition to the usual goods for sale, there is also a small bar and I decided to grab a drink and an icecream after an already very successful day. This turned out to be doubly rewarding, since a quick look at the little artificial pool outside revealed a huge Spanish terrapin and even better (IMO!) a gorgeous stripeless tree frog sat out on the vegetation! The plate glass window separating us has meant that these animals are very accustomed to people's presence and the interest increased further when a flock of Iberian magpies appeared, one or two coming down to bathe right in front! With two tree frogs, lots of

Spanish water frogs hauled out on a chunk of floating wood, a pair of Thekla's larks foraging under the ancient olive trees and even a young stag red deer just behind the centre, plus most people taking drinks, the time flew by!

With the memory of 'our' lynx fresh in the memory, we headed back past El Rocío and cross-country to a new site where Sergio had had some recent success, arriving in good time to walk out and split into two groups to check both sides of a wooded and currently dry stream line. This time was also a stand-and-wait option, meaning that we needed to keep more to the shadows of the bushes and trees, but leaving good area of open ground in front where a broad track passes through. Of course, being Sunday meant that a few other people were out and about in their vehicles and on foot, but as we'd seen before, the Iberian lynx in busier areas are familiar with cars, quads, walkers and horse riders, so largely ignore their presence. A few European rabbits pottered about and a little owl wailed from the trees off to one side, but despite our patience, including with a few pesky mosquitoes, the light finally started dimming and so we headed back for our last evening meal in Doñana.

Day 5: Short walk + lynx watch; transfer to Andújar + evening lynx watch Thursday 12 October 2023

Today was transfer day, but without any particular need to rush to get to Andújar, our base for the rest of the trip, we took the opportunity again to try watching for lynx where we'd seen one on our first full evening. It was still moderately dark as we started our walk, with a couple of hooting tawny owls setting the scene. The light improved notably as we continued, though the hooting owls were now joined by yelling Cetti's warblers, "chinking" common blackbirds and "ticking" European robins, amongst a few others. Indeed, it was also interesting to hear the rapid "swee-ooo" calls coming from most of the numerous common chiffchaffs present, which predominated over the classic "huit" as cited in the field guides, just as in autumn and winter a few years ago. Why? No-one knows...! With no lynx forthcoming, we continued to keep an ear and our eyes open for the local birds, when a rapid "pee-pee-pee-pee-pee" from one of the poplars alerted us to a lesser spotted woodpecker which flew across and gave us views as it fed briefly in a willow. A first for several in the group and, as they noted, it was amazing to see a house sparrow-sized woodpecker! A couple of late willow warblers and "cronking" common ravens rounded off the session, though on our walk back a calling common redstart perfectly 'imitated' a willow warbler and two gorgeous Eurasian hoopoes graced the wires, finally fluttering off in a black-and-white scramble as we continued.

A good break after breakfast allowed everyone to pack and most to go for a walk around the town as well, before we finally loaded up and commenced the drive which took us first past Seville, then Córdoba, before a lunch stop at a roadside restaurant. The staff were very helpful in sorting out the various dietary requirements and after a relaxing break we headed on to our accommodation in the hills above Andújar, where we dropped off our bags in our respective rooms and readjusted for an evening excursion.

It was still hot as we dropped deep into the Jándula valley along a winding road, but at least the great majority of the cars we saw were heading out in the opposite direction! That said, plenty of people were still out enjoying the last hour or two before dusk, with a lot more than normal being present on a Thursday as it was a national holiday.

It was still hot in the sun, so we stopped where large umbrella pines (once again!) threw excellent shade and there were no other people to either disturb, or be disturbed by! The large pool in the river here is a favourite for otters, but there was no sign of them today, though we kept ourselves busy by watching the noisy whistling common kingfishers dashing back and forth along the river and the occasional sharply rising fish and one or two fishing great cormorants - watched over by several more roosting in a large poplar nearby - created an array of ripples that kept us looking hard!

Once the sun dipped and the shadows lengthened enough to cover the valley bottom, we headed up the short distance to a footbridge over the rather algae-filled river. Once again common kingfisher was a prime

attraction here, the electric-blue back dazzling as it shot past underneath in flight and glowing in the shadows as it sat on the riverside rocks and bushes. A much more dapper grey wagtail graced some stones beside a tiny rapid and a couple of barn swallows and a small group of Eurasian crag martins cruised overhead near an old stone dam. Other observers joined us, but no lynx showed (as is normal for this endangered animal, to be honest!) and once again we were reminded of just how lucky we had been in Doñana on that first evening!

We returned to experience our first memorable copious meal at the accommodation!

Day 6: La Lancha; Gorgojil

Friday 13 October 2023

The Andújar area has traditionally been where most Iberian lynx watchers go to try and observe it in the wild, partly given that Doñana is so flat that the vegetation makes it much harder to see there. Add to this that at the lowest point in the species' existence there were just some 20 animals left in Doñana, but 60 or so in Andújar, it's also no surprise that much large numbers of observers still come here in preference, combined with the opportunity of watching over very much larger areas of terrain and for other interesting mammal species. And today was our first opportunity to try!

The narrow winding road leading to the main watching area always requires careful driving, not only because of the occasional local traffic, but also since it crosses several huge estates where lynx have always been present. Indeed, since the tour I have discovered that if it weren't for just five sympathetic landowners in the past, who liked lynx and didn't want them shot (they were once listed as vermin as they principally prey and depend on European rabbits), they probably would not exist at all today! We noted a few red deer and our first fallow deer of the tour, while a pair of little owls on a small boulder outcrop were a treat.

After parking up we got out to join small numbers of other watchers already on the track which looks out over a vast swathe of western holm oak and lentisk tree dehesa - woodland pasture - with 'fill-in' gum cistus scrub on the steep slopes running down towards the Jándula river way below. Sometimes it seems a shame that there are others here too, but the extra eyes give you a much better chance of seeing a lynx in such a large area!

We started scanning, listening to the sounds of roaring red deer – something that was a big attraction for many of the watchers present. We noted a few rabbits - a good sign, since neither of the females in this area have bred (or at least reared young this year) and breeding is dictated by having a sufficient density of rabbits for the females to feed themselves and their cubs on.

A few birds caught our eye as we continued watching and waiting, with a huge, presumed female, Spanish imperial eagle adorning a treetop on a distant slope, a few Iberian magpies slipping through the trees, calling European robins, Eurasian blackcaps, common blackbirds and a couple of common redstarts feeding on the red berries of the gum lentisk. At one spot above us, a loudly "ticking" passing hawfinch pitched into a lentisk before finally shuffling out to the outer fruiting branches to give us a view as it fed. Two red-billed choughs went "chow" as they passed over, the only black corvid present here apart from the occasional common raven, although a couple of yelling Eurasian jays were buried in the trees somewhere, probably on the hunt for early-ripening acorns. Not that a little group of wild boar foraging under some cork oaks were going to help them!

Time flew by and the temperature rose sharply, so we headed down to the river, or almost, since the track ends at an impressive dam. The good news is that this provides an excellent raised viewpoint. Indeed, we could hear a briefly singing blue rock thrush and a female Spanish ibex was spotted feeding in the shade of some bushes on a steep slope, with a young male resting nearby. Excellent! Little else was present, so we moved on and into the shade of a little tunnel, where there are a few bats to see, despite having to move

to allow a passing car! While we obviously kept disturbance to a minimum, we could readily see a couple of greater mouse-eared bats, the rarest resident species present in the UK, plus what looked like several very fluffy bent-winged bats. A couple of photos should help us resolve doubts, as they are never easy to ID in the field using low-powered torches!

A further Iberian ibex was spotted as we left, plus a few Eurasian crag martins overhead and even the blue rock thrush came out to play, affording us good views. With an increasing breeze, things started to get stirred up and first one, then a second and then, back beside the vehicles, a third two-tailed pasha butterfly dashed past. At the neat orange border to the dark brown upperwings could be seen by most as these large butterflies cruised past!

We took our leisurely picnic lunch at the only picnic table in the shade, with a pair of Eurasian nuthatches coming in briefly to take a look (and I guess to assess whether there were any left-overs around to grab!).

We returned to base for a decent break before once again heading out to go lynxing, this time taking a different route out to see some different views and perhaps have more luck! The winding road was now becoming more familiar, though we saw little as we progressed, other than more fallow deer in one of the estates. Taking a track up and over a ridge led us through much more species-rich woodland, with plenty of strawberry trees lining the route, but the vast vistas on the far side, looking out principally over the immense areas of olive orchards covering much of lowland Jaén were impressive.

More and more red deer appeared as we continued, some clearly undernourished, such as a very small stag which approached the front vehicle while we stopped to take some pictures - the effects of the ongoing drought were very obvious again.

We stopped briefly beside one of the very few natural springs remaining, where a trickle of water running out beside the track acted as a natural watering hole for the local animals and the mud had been churned by innumerable hoof- and footprints of thirsty visitors. Another water trough further on showed that plenty of water is being provided though and even a dragonfly or two, plus numerous drinking honey bees were buzzing it as one of the only decent-sized water bodies around.

Our drive back was punctuated twice, first to stop and look at some scat by the side of the track, which Sergio checked and confirmed as Iberian lynx scat that was a couple of days old, and then to go up to a vantage point from where to scan over the innumerable pleats and folds and rocks and clearings in the hillsides in front. Plenty of European rabbits are present here thanks to the presence of numerous artificial warrens and Iberian lynx visit regularly. That said, it was quickly obvious that far more people than normal were cruising the tracks, either looking for red deer rutting or simply out for a drive through the countryside, it being a holiday weekend. Careful scanning finally revealed a female mouflon, one of a small group present which we all got to see in the scopes.

We started the return as dusk was falling, with a red fox crossing the track just in front of us being seen by all in the gathering gloom. Then, further along, I stopped rather abruptly to check a snake I could see lying partly on the road. This turned out to be a lovely immature ladder snake, which was in perfect condition and slithered off unharmed before any more vehicles came past. We got back with just enough time to get ready before heading for another impressive meal at our accommodation.

Day 7: La Lancha x 2

Saturday 14 October 2023

Finally, and for the first time in months, significant rain fell during the night. Hooray! This also had the grace to stop early in the morning, so by the time we headed out after breakfast, it was much fresher and with the vegetation having been washed and the tracks not throwing up clouds of dust as we passed. Indeed, low cloud and mist still clung to a few hillsides and some fog persisted down in the valley, but it was quite

fine and spirits were high as we started our vigil along the main track. Strangely perhaps, given that the rain should have freshened things up and in particular should have stimulated the red deer into roaring more, it seemed to have the opposite effect and it was notably quiet as we watched at the beginning. That said, more deer were definitely wandering around, since the cloud was keeping the temperature down and conditions were favourable for grazing out in the open.

Apart from one false call, when a passing driver said that two lynx had been seen running down one of the small valleys nearby in front of other observers, when we went to check, those observers noted that it had been two red deer...

We stuck it out for a good while, with most people opting to wander down along the track as far as a couple of covered viewpoints. This at least gave us a little exercise as well as seats for those whose backs were tiring, plus a few people noted a little owl on the way and a calling passing woodlark was twice pulled closer as I whistled back to it, before allowing it to move on. The rising breeze prompted a few vultures to move, with a little flotilla of griffons going past followed by one or two cinereous, which maintained their distance and a slightly different flight line, illustrating that they do behave rather differently. Two adult Spanish imperial eagles joined the fray, though always a little higher up and one not for long as it cruised through.

Finally, after seeing how the clock was ticking and nothing was moving, we started back slowly, pausing on the way for a little owl or two, then again at a famous corner where lynx are occasionally seen, though the Iberian wall lizards sunbathing on the rocks here attracted more attention than anything else! The second bus was a little delayed when we discovered a stunning adult common swallowtail feeding on the abundant fennel growing along the roadside. While flighty, making it all but impossible to photograph, it was certainly close and almost flew into the bus at one point! There was just enough time to pause for a stunning male orange-wing darter dragonfly which hovered in front of my bus as we progressed, but landing on the road meant that although most of us could see it, we were blocking traffic and it quickly moved off when I tried a quick approach!

We lunched in style with chairs and tables on the grass in the shade behind our accommodation. Lovely! A few griffon vultures went over while we were out, while ironically, a singing coal tit in the pines behind wasn't as expected!

This was followed by another well-earned break before we loaded up and returned to the same area again, this time in much warmer conditions, the second bus being delayed by a close golden eagle which was hunting red-legged partridges close to the road. However no sooner had we managed to get out than it was seen wheeling over the ridge above, being carried rapidly away downwind.

We set up vigil again along the main track. A surprise juvenile Spanish imperial eagle wheeling above us caused me to call out louder than normal to alert everyone and it was fantastic to then see it shadowed by an adult, and then the mate of the adult, with the pair continuing to wheel around for some time after the young bird drifted quickly off. We saw the usual range of bird suspects, and a luck few had a brief view of a rock bunting. Despite enjoying the challenge of spotting roaring deer hidden under the trees, we drew a blank with lynx so headed back a little earlier than usual, before the 'rush' of other wildlife watchers and families of weekenders, some of whom were still going out towards the track even though the light was fading!

Day 8: Gorgojil drive a.m., then transfer to Seville

Sunday 15 October 2023

Given the afternoon flight time, we had a morning to 'kill', so decided to take the pretty drive out through the Gorgojil Estate again, since it would just give us enough time to go out and back comfortably before having to grab our things, pack the minibuses and leave.

It was a fine morning again, cool at the start but warming nicely, with plenty of red and fallow deer and, this time, a small group of mouflon quite close to the track, with a couple of females and a young male showing nicely. Unexpectedly once again lots of weekenders were out for a drive even at this early hour, so after another short scan with the scopes, we realised that it was the perfect time to turn around and work our way gently back to our accommodation. I still needed to pack, so the hour or so we spent there was ideal to get everything shipshape and us on the road at the allotted hour. That said, we also took a very quick look out from the Pilgrim's Statue viewpoint towards the imposing Santuario de Nuestra Señora de la Cabeza, that crowns the low peak on the far side of the valley, where a Spanish imperial eagle circled a few times before disappearing, but little else was showing.

Down in Andújar Sergio refuelled his vehicle while I took mine for a quick wash and we met again on the motorway. As having a picnic was going to be tricky, we had lunch at a service station on the way, even though we couldn't find the restaurant we had originally considered (which was further ahead of where we finally stopped). Although this took a little longer than expected, we were still at the airport in plenty of time to check in for the flight, where we bade our farewells then, after I refuelled and dropped my hire vehicle off, Sergio, Anne and I headed off into Seville where we dropped Anne off, and then Sergio dropped me at the train station to conclude the tour.

Checklist for Iberian Lynx Quest



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	BIRDS									
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓						
2	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>			✓					
3	Northern shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓					
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓			✓		
5	Northern pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			✓					
6	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓					
7	Marbled duck	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>		✓	✓					
8	Red-legged partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓
9	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>			✓					
10	Rock dove / Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
11	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
13	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓	✓					
14	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓						
15	Western swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		✓	✓					
16	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
17	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				✓				
18	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		✓	✓					
19	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓	✓					
20	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>				✓				
21	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	✓	✓				
22	Kentish plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>				✓				

23	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				✓				
24	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				✓				
25	Bar-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>				✓				
26	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓	✓					
27	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				✓				
28	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		✓	✓					
29	Curlew sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>				✓				
30	Temminck's stint	<i>Calidris temmincki</i>				✓				
31	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				✓				
32	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓				
33	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓					
34	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleuca</i>				✓				
35	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			✓					
36	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				✓				
37	Wood sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>			✓					
38	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓	✓				
39	Slender-billed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>				✓				
40	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
41	Mediterranean gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus</i>				✓				
42	Yellow-legged gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>				✓				
43	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓	✓				
44	Caspian tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>				✓				
45	Sandwich tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>				✓				
46	Whiskered tern	<i>Chlidonias hybrida</i>			✓					
47	Black stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			✓					
48	White stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			✓	✓				
49	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
50	Glossy ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		✓	✓					
51	Eurasian spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		✓	✓	✓				
52	Western cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓					✓
53	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	

54	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>		✓	✓	✓				
55	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓	✓				
56	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>			✓	✓				
57	Egyptian vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>		✓		✓				
58	Griffon vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓
59	Cinereous vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Short-toed snake eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		✓						
61	Booted eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>			✓					✓
62	Spanish imperial eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>						✓	✓	
64	Western marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
65	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				✓				
66	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		✓	✓					✓
67	Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>			✓					
68	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
69	Tawny owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>					H			
70	Little owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				H		✓	✓	✓
71	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>					✓			
72	Eurasian hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓		✓		✓		✓
73	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					✓			
74	Lesser spotted woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>					✓			
75	Iberian green woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>				H	H	✓	H	H
76	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
77	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓					
78	Iberian grey shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		✓						
79	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>						✓		
80	Iberian magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Red-billed chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>						✓	H	
83	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓		✓			✓
84	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>							H	

85	Crested tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				H				
86	Eurasian blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		H		H		✓	H	
87	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		H		✓	H	
88	Eurasian penduline tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>					H			
89	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
90	Thekla's lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				✓			✓	
91	Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
92	Calandra lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		✓						
93	Mediterranean short-toed lark	<i>Alaudala rufescens</i>		✓						
94	Sand martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			✓					
95	Eurasian crag martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>					✓	✓		
96	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			✓		✓			
97	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H	H		H			
98	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>				H	H	✓		✓
99	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓						
100	Common chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	H	✓	H	H	
101	Eurasian reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		✓	✓					
102	Zitting cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		✓	✓	✓				
103	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				H	✓	✓	✓	
104	Dartford warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>						H	✓	
105	Sardinian warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		H		✓	✓	✓	✓	H
106	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓			✓			H
107	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>						✓		
108	Short-toed treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>				H			H	
109	Spotless starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
110	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>						✓		✓
111	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
112	Spotted flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			✓	H				
113	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓		H	✓	✓	✓	H
114	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>			✓	✓				

115	European pied flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
116	Black redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>						✓		✓
117	Common redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>					H	✓	✓	
118	Blue rock thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>						✓	✓	
119	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		✓	✓					
120	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
121	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓				
122	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					H			
123	Spanish sparrow	<i>Passer hispanicus</i>			✓					
124	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
125	Black-headed weaver	<i>Ploceus melanocephalus</i>			✓					
126	Yellow-crowned bishop	<i>Euplectes afer</i>			✓					
127	Common waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>			✓					
128	Red avadavat	<i>Amandava amandava</i>			✓					
129	Western yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>			✓					
130	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		H			✓			
131	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	H
132	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>						✓	✓	
133	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓	✓	✓	H	H	
134	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓				
135	Common linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓	H					
136	Corn bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>						✓		
137	Rock bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>						✓	✓	
	MAMMALS									
1	European rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Iberian lynx	<i>Lynx pardina</i>		✓						
3	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>					✓	✓		
4	Greater mouse-eared bat	<i>Myotis myotis</i>						✓		
5	(Schreiber's) Bent-winged Bat	<i>Miniopterus schreibersii</i>						✓		

6	Pipistrelle sp.	<i>Pipistrellus</i> sp.					✓	✓		
7	Eurasian wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		✓				✓		
8	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
9	Fallow deer	<i>Dama dama</i>						✓	✓	✓
10	Spanish ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>						✓		
11	Mouflon	<i>Ovis orientalis</i>						✓		
	REPTILES									
1	Spanish terrapin	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>				✓	✓			
2	Moorish gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>	✓	✓	✓					
3	Large psammodromus	<i>Psammodromus algirus</i>					✓			
4	Iberian wall lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanica</i>							✓	
5	Ladder snake	<i>Rhinechis scalaris</i>						✓		
	AMPHIBIANS									
1	Stripeless / Mediterranean tree frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>				✓	H	H		
2	Iberian water frog	<i>Pelophylax perezi</i>				✓		✓		
	BUTTERFLIES & MOTHS									
1	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>						✓	✓	
2	Clouded yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	
3	Small white	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			✓	✓			✓	
4	Bath white	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	African tiger	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>		✓	✓					
6	Two-tailed pasha	<i>Charaxes jasio</i>						✓	✓	
7	Red admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>				✓				
8	Painted lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			✓					
9	Wall brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>							✓	
10	Small copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>			✓					
11	Long-tailed blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>				✓		✓		

12	African grass blue	<i>Zizeeria knysna</i>			✓					
13	Southern/Spanish brown argus	<i>Aricia cramera</i>			✓				✓	
14	False mallow skipper	<i>Carcharodus tripolina</i>			✓					
15	Olive-haired/Borbo swift	<i>Borbo borbonica</i>			✓					
16	Crimson speckled	<i>Utetheisa pulchella</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	DAMSEL & DRAGONFLIES									
1	Blue emperor	<i>Anax imperator</i>					✓			
2	Lesser emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>		✓						
3	Red-veined darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
4	Violet dropwing	<i>Trithemis annulata</i>						✓		
5	Orange-winged dropwing	<i>Trithemis kirbyii</i>							✓	
	PLANTS									
1	Strawberry tree	<i>Arbutus unedo</i>								
2	Chicory	<i>Chicorium intybus</i>								
3	Rush skeletonweed	<i>Chondrilla juncea</i>								
4	False yellowhead / Sticky fleabane	<i>Dittrichia viscosa</i>								
5	Sea squill	<i>Drimia maritima</i>								
6	Common heliotrope	<i>Heliotropium europaeum</i>								
7	Western holm oak	<i>Quercus (ballota) rotundifolia</i>								
8	Cork oak	<i>Quercus suber</i>								