

## BIRDING ABROAD

### NW SPAIN – ASTURIAS, CASTILLA Y LEON & GALICIA

2 - 8 SEPTEMBER 2016

The following is an account of a short two centre trip to NW Spain organised by Birding Abroad. The remote and beautiful Cantabrian Mountains in the Asturias and Castilla y Leon regions of Spain are home to two very rare and much sought after mammals – the Cantabrian Brown Bear *Ursus arctos* and the Wildcat *Felis sylvestris*. Our primary aim was to see these superb animals in their natural environment whilst enjoying a supporting cast of delightful Spanish birds amongst the lovely mountain scenery of the Somiedo National Park. In addition, the trip itinerary embraced Spain's top sea-watching site, the rugged promontory of Estaca de Bares, jutting out into sea in adjacent Galicia province, where the currents of the Bay of Biscay meet those of the Atlantic Ocean. Here and weather dependant, we were hopeful of some interesting seabird passage. Members of the group comprised Denis and Dorothy Jackson, Ron and Joyce Marshall and June Williams with Nick Whitehouse the Birding Abroad leader.

**Friday 2 September** - The group met at lunchtime at Stansted airport and were soon aboard the EasyJet flight to Asturias, arriving there just before 6 pm local time. After collecting our comfortable people carrier, we set off southwards through the rich agricultural fields, orchards and lush riparian woodlands of the coastal plain before climbing steadily in altitude, winding our way through limestone gorges up onto the higher passes of the Somiedo National Park. The two hour drive was punctuated with a couple of brief stops to admire the panoramic views and watch small groups of Eurasian Crag Martins and listen to a couple of Cirl Buntings, whilst a Common Swift was our only swift sighting of the trip.



A quite splendid sunset enveloped the western skies as we reached our accommodation; a lovely family run rural hotel set in the small hamlet of Villaseca de Laciana, just to the south of the national park. Here we were warmly greeted by our hosts and met Damian our amiable and amazingly knowledgeable Spanish guide, and good friend of Birding Abroad. We then enjoyed a lovely evening meal together whilst discussing plans for the next day before retiring to bed, eager in anticipation of what the following day might bring.

**Saturday 3 September** – A pair of Tawny Owls with young in the rear garden greeted our awakening with the male obligingly sitting out on top of the stone chapel next door. After a hearty breakfast at 7 am, we drove a few miles into a little known high-sided valley where there were small areas of recently mowed alpine meadows bordered by traditional old stone walls. This habitat is favoured by Wildcats which venture out of woodlands to hunt for mice and other rodents amongst the stubble and spilled hay at this time of year. Patient scanning was called for, and as we turned slowly around one hair-pin bend, Damian spotted something and called for us to stop the vehicle. There sitting out in the middle of a meadow was a superb Wildcat. Our trusty guide took us through the distinctive features which ensured there was no confusion with a hybrid cat (some of which occur here but are rare). We enjoyed terrific views and a few photos were taken of this rare and secretive mammal, which centuries ago were of course much more widespread, even in Britain. We felt rather privileged to share the sunrise with the Wildcat before it slinked away into the mountainside.



The group enjoyed stunning views of Wildcat

Our next stop was at a site that had been frequented by a female Brown Bear with cubs during the previous week. A couple of members of the local bear conservation group were already in place as we drew alongside and they kindly directed our sights onto the open hillside scree covered with patches of berry bushes. Initial scans revealed the first of many Cantabrian Chamois on the hillsides, but then the local male Brown Bear came into view, moving ponderously amongst the scant vegetation and giving great views. What a start to

the day! We spent a while just watching the bear as it went about its business, even coining a name for it, "Blondie", due to the paler fur on its back.



As the sun's rays warmed the valley birds started to move, with several Tree Pipits flying south and groups of Griffon Vultures taking to the air, with some perched on the backs of a few dead cows, which had apparently been killed by lightning the week before. A few Rock Buntings and Water Pipits showed at the roadside and a surprise Western Subalpine Warbler was seen in the scrub. Other local observers picked out a second and then third Wildcat for us, this time in the distance, walking nonchalantly across a mountain meadow.

We returned to our accommodation well satisfied with the morning's observations and enjoyed a sumptuous al fresco lunch in the garden, where Black Redstarts and Pied Flycatchers flitted around. Our afternoon session began with a drive through the sunny and warm slopes of the Laciana valley, where we had nice views of Egyptian Vulture before we ascended some of the higher roads in Somiedo National Park. Many migrant 'flava' wagtails, Whinchats and Northern Wheatears were using the meadows, with four Red-backed Shrikes and three Common Rock-thrushes being observed track-side as well as a Nightjar that was flushed. A female Hen Harrier quartered the hillside bracken and several Short-toed Eagles performed on the afternoon thermals. A pleasant stroll to a rocky outcrop failed to produce the hoped for Wallcreepers, but it did yield two Alpine Accentors, a flock of Red-billed Choughs and close views of fledgling Eurasian Crag Martins clinging to the cliff face. We passed several small villages which hosted Spotless Starlings and European Serins, whilst as many as 50 Pied Flycatchers were counted, some even using the road surface to take flies. We ended the day at one of the more well known bear-watching sites, where we joined

several other tour groups. A Brown Bear did show eventually, quite distantly though and whilst it is always exciting to see a bear (and hear the excitement on the voices of those around us), it didn't quite match the views of 'Blondie' we had enjoyed rather more exclusively earlier in the day. We then enjoyed a pleasant and relaxing evening at our accommodation before retiring to bed with the pressure firmly off after accomplishing good views of the two major target mammals.



**Sunday 4 September** – We again had breakfast at around 7 am, with Damian already up and using his bat detector to reveal the presence of both Free-tailed and Pipestrelle Bats feeding over the garden. The former are found in southern Europe and emit a characteristic 'tsick-tsick' noise which was clearly audible. We then ventured to the same hillsides where we had been so successful the day before, but this time and despite much scanning, the bears and Wildcats did not show themselves. The female bear had apparently put on a great show with her cubs the evening before! Not to be deterred we returned for a coffee, watching Hummingbird Hawk-moths in the garden where an Iberian Green Woodpecker was also present. The remainder of the morning was spent enjoying a few short walks in Somiedo, the first of which produced two superb Golden Eagles, more Red-backed Shrikes, Whinchats and Stonechats. Damian showed us both Bocage's Wall and Western Iberian Rock Lizards and tried turning many rocks over near to the streams to locate Golden-striped Salamander but without any luck this time. Nice views of White-throated Dippers were enjoyed as we ate our picnic lunch and both an Iberian Chiffchaff and a Firecrest put in appearances. A Honey Buzzard drifted over during another coffee stop, an adult bird which differed clearly from the hordes of Common Buzzards we had seen over previous days.

Our next stop was a steep limestone gorge where, next to the parking area, we had great views of a Wallcreeper (with a second bird being glimpsed), always a crowd-pleaser. The bird came down the cliff face to feed on some boulders just a few metres away. Singing Iberian Chiffchaff, a couple of Rock Buntings and a flock of 40 Red-billed Choughs added to the variety. An area of high woodland where Citril Finches breed regularly was checked but the post breeding flock could not be located, though a Marsh Tit, Crested Tit and Hawfinch provided some compensation and a migrant Wood Warbler was seen. The day ended with another lovely sunset over the mountains.



**Monday 5 September** – today we spent the morning enjoying a couple of strolls in the lovely warm weather which had been a feature of the trip so far. In the Laciana Valley, Damian showed us the site of a pair of breeding Red-rumped Swallows (we saw three at close quarters), explaining how their population had grown significantly in northern Spain during the last two decades. Common Redstart, Short-toed Treecreeper and more Whinchats, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Willow Warblers and Turtle Dove were all seen. A narrow rocky gorge yielded a flock of 25 Common Rock-sparrows before we made one last drive around the ‘golden meadows’ trying in vain for another view of a Wildcat.

At lunchtime we said farewell to our friendly hosts, packed the vehicle and began the drive towards Galicia, stopping on the way to check another well known bear site, but again without luck. Here too we said goodbye to Damian thanking him for his enthusiastic and knowledgeable guiding support. Eventually, after following a rather circuitous route provided by our ‘sat-nav’ (easier sometimes to just drive on the main roads you know!), we arrived at our hotel in Viveiro not far from Estaca de Bares. The wind was calm but there was a thick coastal mist, so we decided to defer our sea-watching until next day. A nice evening meal followed, with the hotel being full because of a coach tour party from southern Spain. It seems a visit to Galicia for them is like a visit to Scotland for us!



**Tuesday 6 September** – after breakfast at 7:30 we drove along the coast to the headland at Estaca de Bares. The weather had again produced a very patchy sea mist around the coast, keeping the temperature quite cool, but it was clear and bright with hot sunshine only a few miles inland. Nevertheless we placed ourselves on the famous cliff top by the stone bird observatory and began a two hour sea-watch. Groups of Northern Gannets moving west out of Biscay and into the Atlantic (the main direction of travel of seabirds here) were the most obvious sign of passage and some 300 were seen. Gradually we got our 'eye-in' and began to note other species on the move. The shearwater totals came to 8 Sooty, 2 Great, 25 Cory's, 300 Manx and 5 Balearic – a really terrific assortment for us to enjoy. Our patience was rewarded when two adult Pomarine Skuas flew past, complete with spoons! Many Yellow-legged Gulls were also on the move whilst a few Shags sat on the rocks below our viewpoint. There are few places in Europe that can match Estaca for sea-watching, and in the days that followed the wind increased from the north-west, producing some quite remarkable totals for the regular watchers.

A nice coffee break was called for so we enjoyed a restful hour in a cafe in the pretty sheltered bay at Porto Bares with its almost empty sandy beach providing a nice setting. From our tables we relaxed, winding down and watched several close Black Redstarts and off-shore foraging Sandwich Terns. A walk on the gorse and bracken covered headland produced only a Meadow Pipit and a fly-over Green Sandpiper though the resident Dartford Warblers did eventually show, as did an Adder.

The estuary at Viveiro was our next stop, where on the tidal mud flats we observed Little Egrets, Common Ringed Plovers, two Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew, several Sanderling and

three Mediterranean Gulls accompanying some Black-headed Gulls. This area and nearby reservoirs quite often attract vagrant American waders to add to the spice of a visit for the sea-watching. Another nice evening meal was enjoyed back at the hotel.

**Wednesday 7 September** – this was our last day and we had to be back in Asturias by late afternoon to connect with our flight home. We had a leisurely start to the day, and because sea mist was quite thick even to a few miles inland we opted to drive east along the north coast highway stopping wherever took our fancy. The main birding stop was actually back on the northern fringe of Somiedo where we had seen the Wallcreeper earlier in the trip. We had no such luck this time though, but we did have amazingly close views of a singing Iberian Chiffchaff and enjoyed the picturesque scenery with the many spectacular gorges and quaint villages. A lunch break in a local cafe helped restore our energy levels and we drove on to the coast near Aviles where we had a stroll along the shore, admiring the local sculptures dedicated to various sea gods.

By early evening it was time to head to the airport at Asturias, where we returned our vehicle and boarded the flight to Stansted. Here we said our goodbyes.



The short trip had fulfilled its objectives – Cantabrian Brown Bear, Wildcat, some lovely mountain birds and a bit of quite special sea-watching. In addition it had provided a real insight into a lesser known part of Spain which is little visited by British tourists. Everyone agreed that the Cantabrian Mountains and coastal north-west tip of the country has much to offer and we headed for home taking great memories of very pleasant short trip.

Thanks to Damian Romay Cousido our Spanish guide and friend, and to Ron Marshall for his photos of Brown Bear, Wildcat and Wallcreeper used in this report.



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