

SOUTHERN SPAIN – IBERIAN LYNX – 1 to 6 FEBRUARY 2017

TRIP DESCRIPTION: A six day tour to Andalucía to see the Iberian Lynx, the rarest feline in Europe, with many exciting Spanish birds too, including sought after specialities such as Spanish Imperial Eagle, Black Vulture, White-headed Duck, Great and Little Bustards, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Azure-winged Magpie, Black-winged Kite and many more. We will visit several different types of habitat to ensure that we maximise our wildlife opportunities. There will be a relaxed ambience about this tour incorporating no long drives once we are in the Sierra de Andujar. Late starts and early finishes are the norm, but we will still be able to savour our sightings and enjoy a Spanish break away from the dreary UK winter weather.

This is a repeat of our 2015 and 2016 tours - back by popular demand.

PHOTOGRAPHIC OPPORTUNITIES: Very good with a strong chance of catching an Iberian Lynx emerging from the hillside vegetation, and of course plenty of bird life on offer.



BIRD LIST: Highlights include Red-crested Pochard, White-headed Duck, Black-necked Grebe, Greater Flamingo, Great Egret, Cattle Egret, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, White Stork, Black-winged Kite, Red Kite, Black Kite, Griffon Vulture, Black Vulture, Northern Goshawk, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Merlin, Purple Gallinule, Great Bustard, Little Bustard, Common Crane, Stone Curlew, Kentish Plover, Black-winged Stilt, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Great Spotted Cuckoo, Iberian Grey Shrike, Azure-winged Magpie, Red-billed Chough, Common Raven, Crested Lark, Woodlark, Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper, Fan-tailed Warbler, Bluethroat, Dartford Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Black Redstart, Blue Rock Thrush, Cirl Bunting, Rock Bunting, Serin, Rock Sparrow.

MAMMALS & OTHER WILDLIFE: Our main target is of course the Iberian Lynx or *Lynx pardinus* to give it its Latin name. This very rare and endangered cat was near to extinction only twenty years ago, but its population has been rescued by a well organised conservation programme, and there are currently thought to be around 300 individuals extant, living mainly in the Sierra Morena (of which Andujar comprises the central section), with a smaller population in the flatlands of the Coto Donana wilderness. The Iberian Lynx is a small cat, almost half the weight of the European Lynx. It is more brightly coloured than its commoner cousin, having spotted russet-brown fur and larger 'sideburns'. It feeds mainly on rabbits, which often account for 90% of its prey, but as *myxomatosis* and other diseases affected the rabbit population, the cat has been forced to travel greater distances in search of food making it susceptible to road traffic injuries. Rodents and deer carrion form just a small part of the whole diet. Several of the animals have been radio tagged in this region, part of an on-going study of their behaviour, distribution and habitat usage which will help their future conservation.

Also on this trip we could encounter Wild Boar, Fallow Deer, Red Deer, Roe Deer, Mouflon and Spanish Ibex, whilst Wildcat, Common Genet and Stone Marten are found in these parts, but realistically we would be very fortunate to see them.



EASE & PACE: A leisurely short break, with no long car journeys, no long walks (all our observations will be from near to our parked vehicles, with a maximum walk of some 20-30 minutes from the vehicles). But we will no doubt want to take a steady stroll when we can in the lovely southern Spanish countryside. We will use two people carriers driven by your Birding Abroad leaders, with plenty of space and leg room.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD: We spend the first three nights at the Villa Matilda attractively nestled within the Sierra de Andujar and conveniently located for all the Lynx watch points. For our last two nights we move to the Hospederia Del Monasterio in the agricultural town of Osuna, a very comfortable base from which to explore the surrounding area.

WEATHER: The weather in southern Spain in January is usually quite nice, a welcome change in fact from that on offer at home in the UK. Day time temperatures rise to 15 - 16 centigrade, though it will be cooler first thing in a morning when light frost may cover the ground. We could get some rain or wind, but the tendency is for sunny and calm days to predominate. As ever we need to be prepared with layers of clothing which we can discard when necessary, though a sun hat and cream are still recommended even for January.

PRICE: The price is £795 per person, to include all accommodation (bed, breakfast, evening meal and packed lunch provided), all guiding and transport in Spain. Not included are international flights plus your drinks during the day and from the bar.

GROUP SIZE: The tour will proceed with 5 group members plus a Birding Abroad leader, and maximum group size will be 12 plus two leaders.



Villa Matilda, our home for the first three nights

ITINERARY:

Day 1 – Wednesday February 1: An early morning departure from the UK delivers us to sunny Malaga by lunchtime. There is likely to be a slight delay whilst we collect our two people carriers, before we head off northwards out of the city. Leaving the Malaga metropolis behind, we initially follow signs for Cordoba but after an hour or so of driving, a short detour to the Laguna de Zonar beckons, where we will experience our first birds of the Spanish winter. This is a noted hotspot for White-headed Duck and the chances of seeing this attractive species are good. Around the lake itself kites include both the Red and Black variety, and the surrounding woods are likely to be alive with small passerines, mostly Blackcaps and Chiffchaffs, but also wintering Song Thrushes and Serins. Black Redstarts search any open ground for food and are a common sight here. All too soon we have to move northwards again, and then eastwards towards the Sierra de Andujar where we reach the Villa Matilda, our home for the next three nights. Azure-winged Magpies are plentiful, often coming right into the garden, where Hawfinch and Crested Tit are also likely. Night Villa Matilda.

Day 2 – Thursday February 2: We will have breakfast at 07.00 am; thankfully there is no need to get up any earlier because it doesn't get light until 08.00 am! Moving off as dawn approaches, we take the minor road towards the Jandula dam, spending the best part of the day covering the last few kilometres of this road – a favoured area for Iberian Lynx - known locally as La Lancha. Early morning is probably the best time to see them and constant scanning is required, but the chances of success are good. We aim to find a good vantage point, which is normally one with panoramic views all around. Here we get comfortable and begin scanning intently. The animals are not shy, but spend plenty of time concealed in the dense shrubby grassland vegetation. Best chance to actually spot one is when an animal walks slowly between the bushes, but they rarely move off quickly and once spotted there are good chances that we will all get a view. It is worth keeping an eye open for excitement amongst other 'cat-watchers', normally a good sign of a sighting.

Any early morning mist will disguise a very scenic landscape, and one inhabited by plenty of mammals other than the Iberian Lynx. Species such as Wild Boar, Mouflon, Fallow and Red Deer are all common but like our main quarry, they can sometimes be near and sometimes further away. The elusive Spanish Ibex are more unusual, but still frequent the area.

As the day warms up, vultures take to the skies, mainly Griffons, but also Black Vultures and we can see up to a dozen of the later during the course of a day. It is worth listening out for an unusually coarse call, a sort of repeated "ach" sound which is often the first indication that the Spanish Imperial Eagles are on the wing. They will be displaying at this time of year, so prolonged views are likely of this majestic and very rare bird of prey. At dusk we aim to be at the dam at Jandula reservoir, where Tawny Owl and sometimes Scops and Eagle Owls can be heard calling. Night once again Villa Matilda.



Day 3 – Friday February 3: Today we explore a second good area for Iberian Lynx. Leaving Matilda we take the road to the left which eventually leads to the Enchinarejo Trail. This area is at lower altitude to La Lancha, likewise is very picturesque, and with plenty of picnic areas it is a delight to be here. The river often has European Otter, so we will have a good look for these, whilst the dehesa in the background has regular sightings of Lynx. We will enjoy our picnic lunch admiring this open landscape which attracts plenty of Chaffinch, Serin, Dartford Warbler, Cirl Bunting and Azure-winged Magpie. A warm spring is likely to produce an early returning Great Spotted Cuckoo to the area, so we will listen carefully for their raucous calls. If nothing is happening we can always retrace our steps and re-visit the La Lancha area which, being slightly higher in elevation is probably the best site for the uncommon Rock Bunting and Rock Sparrow. Night Villa Matilda.

Day 4 – Saturday February 4: Driving slowly towards La Lancha, the whole area is good for wildlife so we will stop at each and every opportunity. Once at the watch point, we can stay all morning searching once again for Iberian Lynx.

Lunch will be taken at Los Pinos where we will recharge our batteries before a one and half hour drive towards Osuna, our base for the next two nights. There are several 'steppe' lakes en route, where wintering waterfowl are abundant and with luck, Bluethroat, Cetti's and Fan-tailed Warblers might reveal themselves.

As evening approaches we will search an area of dry fields for the elusive Black-bellied Sandgrouse, a very uncommon species in the whole of Andalusia with less than 50 surviving birds. Previous visits have identified a good location where we have been lucky on our last three visits, so fingers crossed! Night at the Hospederia Del Monasterio in Osuna

Day 5 – Sunday February 5: The agricultural landscape around Osuna is in great contrast to the Sierra de Andujar. Wide flat fields with an open aspect, few hedgerows and scattered farmsteads are the norm. This is the best area in Andalusia for Great and Little Bustard, so frequent stopping and scanning will be the order of the day, though sizeable flocks of each, up to 100 birds in total, are possible. Ploughed fields host flocks of Skylarks and Calandra Larks and Corn Buntings are all around. All this potential prey is not lost on raptors, and Black and Red Kites, Common Buzzards and Hen Harrier are possible. With luck we may happen upon a Black-winged Kite, one of the avian attractions of this area.

During the day we will have time to visit a small remnant steppe lake, which often has White-headed Ducks, as well as Black-necked Grebes and Greater Flamingo. Night once again at the Hospederia Del Monasterio in Osuna

Black-winged Kite



Day 6 – Monday February 6: Sadly our last day in sunny Spain, so we leave promptly after breakfast which will give us time to take a look at the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra, a noted hotspot for birds in these parts. Famous for its Greater Flamingos, we can expect to see several thousands of birds even during the winter. Closer scrutiny of the wetland habitats could reveal Purple Gallinule, Common Cranes and Iberian Shrikes as well as a multitude of ducks including Red-crested Pochard.

However before long we must leave and complete the one hour journey to Malaga, ready for our lunchtime departure for the UK, giving us plenty of time to get home for tea time.



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