

## BIRDING ABROAD

### SOUTHERN SPAIN – IBERIAN LYNX TOUR – 15 - 20 January 2016

Once widespread throughout the Iberian Peninsula, the range of the very rare and endangered Iberian Lynx or *Lynx pardinus* has contracted considerably and there are thought to be only some 300 individuals remaining in the wild, most living in the Sierra Morena, with a smaller population in the flatlands of the Coto Donana wilderness. After our successful trip to see them in 2015, we were hopeful of repeating our success with a new group and enjoying a sighting of this secretive cat. The area also hosts many other mammals and of course some typically excellent Spanish birding. This trip was organised and led by Lance Degnan and Nick Whitehouse of Birding Abroad, with members of the group comprising Giles and Renee Braithwaite, Mike and Lisa Hessey, Martin Limbert, Tony ('Chip') Rhodes, and Bryan Wainwright.

On Friday 15 January, Giles and Renee caught an early morning flight from Doncaster to Malaga, and were ready and waiting in the arrivals hall for the rest of the group who duly arrived just before lunch on a separate flight from London Stansted. After collecting our two comfortable vehicles, the group were soon travelling northwards into the quiet of the Andalucía countryside.



Our first stop was at the Laguna de Zonar, probably best remembered by older birders as the only site in Spain to see White-headed Duck back in the early 1970s when the species was almost extinct in Europe. We managed to see 13 of these still rare duck on the lake, accompanied by 20 Great Crested Grebe, a single Black-necked Grebe, 40 Common

Pochard and a single Black-crowned Night Heron. An amble to the watch-point at the lake side produced several Stonechats, Black Redstarts, Crested Larks and Chiffchaffs, with many Blackcaps and Serins constantly flitting about and calling, as well as four Sardinian Warblers, two Wood Lark and a couple of Hoopoes. Overhead a few raptors put in appearances notably three Marsh Harriers, five Red Kites, one Common Buzzard as well as four Ravens. The biggest surprise perhaps was some 100 House Martins above the lake, the largest number we have noted in southern interior Spain at this time of year. The introductory session had provided a nice sample of birds found during the Spanish winter. We had a picnic lunch to replenish our energy levels before setting off again to the Sierra de Andujar, noting 12 White Storks on nests and in the fields en-route, before we checked into the delightful Villa Matilda later that afternoon, where we were warmly welcomed by our hosts. We then enjoyed a stroll around the expansive gardens where several Chiffchaffs, two Hawfinches, six Crested Tits at close range and groups of Spotless Starlings getting ready for the evening roost were notable. The star birds of course around the Villa were our first Iberian Azure-winged Magpies of the trip, with some 40 of these lovely birds moving in small groups through the surrounding pine woodland. We ended the day with a tasty homemade evening meal and a glass of wine.



We were up for breakfast at 07.00am on Saturday 16 January, before setting off along a minor road through the hills to La Lancha, an area known to be favoured by several Iberian Lynx. Along the 14 kilometre route we paused to watch a few Fallow and Red Deer at close range, whilst a Wild Boar briefly ran alongside the vehicles before venturing off into the mountain oak woodlands. Having chosen an area with the best panoramic views, we spread

ourselves strategically along the road overlooking the wide areas of prime lynx habitat. Patience was the order of the day, and we kept scanning and scanning, watching for some movement between the bushes or amongst the hillside rocks. Red-legged Partridges were common and any rabbit, the main prey of the Iberian Lynx, was observed for signs of sudden nervousness, whilst sudden flights of Woodpigeons or deer on the run were potential clues that might lead us to a sighting of a stalking lynx. We were not alone and several small groups of observers, both Spanish and international were watching intently. A flurry of activity amongst one of these groups alerted us to the presence of our target – an Iberian Lynx walking up over a nearby brow and briefly along a fire break. What a relief, a sighting so soon and at a reasonable range too. The tension was at least over but the views had merely primed us for what we hoped would be closer views. The birdlife was not without interest of course – many Sardinian and Dartford Warblers were watched track-side, along with good numbers of Black Redstarts, including some lovely males and several Rock Buntings, this year more common than expected. The calls of at least three Iberian Green Woodpeckers rang out called across the valley whilst perched on close by rocks were two Blue Rock Thrushes and an Iberian Grey Shrike. Raptors slowly emerged as the day warmed and we enjoyed nice views of 60 Griffon and three Black Vultures, and up to three Spanish Imperial Eagles.

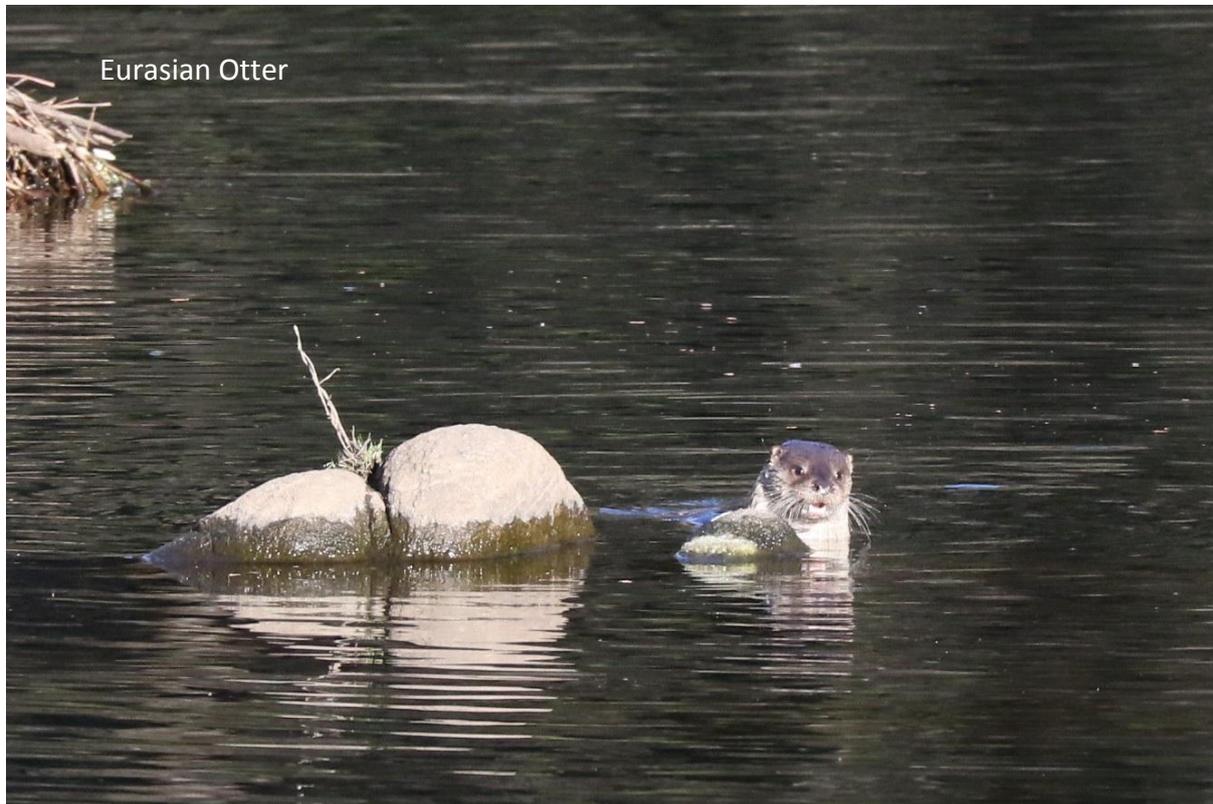
We enjoyed frequent sightings of Griffon Vulture to left and Black Vulture to right



A few Crag Martins and again some House Martins flew by intermittently and at one point a pair of Red-billed Chough circled. Rosemary was one of a few herbs in bloom on the hillsides and this attracted many bees from the hives set amongst the trees, showing how early in the year nature gets going in southern Spain. Over lunch, a second Lynx sighting followed – the animal sitting on a hillside amongst boulders about a half a kilometre away. Although distant, we could see the animal clearly through telescopes as it engaged in some mid-day preening, before it rose and slinked away into the ground cover. One thing that was different from the previous year was the weather – it was much sunnier and warmer than in 2015 when we had some dampness and cool days! This year during the middle of the day, even light jackets could be removed.

Having seen our main target, the Iberian Lynx, albeit distantly, we felt that we deserved a break from the constant vigil at the lynx site, and so during the afternoon drove a few kilometres to the Enchinarejo valley, slightly lower lying and set amongst very picturesque

scenery. Along the route we estimated some 150 Iberian Azure-winged Magpies. Here the tranquil waters of a lovely mountain river yielded great views of Otter, two being seen, with one playfully fishing in the water only metres away. Many Serins were noted, as well as two each of Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper, Kingfisher and more sightings of a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles. Satisfied with the day's observations, we returned to our accommodation, enjoying another nice evening meal together.



We were up at 7:30 am for breakfast on Sunday 17 January and decided to repeat our tactics of the day before, visiting La Lancha first. Raptors provided the main birding interest again, with close sightings of both vultures species, the Spanish Imperial Eagles and a pair of Red-billed Chough. Another short break from lynx watching took us to a nearby reservoir, where the arched roof of a narrow road tunnel hosted both Mediterranean Horse Shoe and Pipstrelle bats, cosily tucked into their wintering crevices. A fine male Blue Rock Thrush showed well on rocks at the reservoir edge. We returned to lynx watching to give it a final go during the afternoon. Our patience and persistence was rewarded when just as the late afternoon light began to fade, some Spanish observers alerted us to the presence of an Iberian Lynx, some way off but walking slowly through the bushes and boulders towards the road. We moved quickly and were soon in place as the animal emerged, only a few metres away, nonchalantly strolling up a shallow gully and then under the road via a large drainage culvert and up into the boulder strewn hillside above. We had terrific views, and the excitement amongst the group was palpable as we appreciated the beauty and wonder of such a fine mammal. Cameras were snapping away, but of course the light was by now fading. Our objective had been achieved, deservedly so, after much patient watching and we returned to our lodgings that evening well pleased with the results of our endeavours. The conservation effort goes on, so let's hope the Iberian Lynx programme can lead to a sustained and growing population and range.



The next morning we said farewell to Villa Matilda and visited the Enchinarejo valley once more. Great views were had of close Iberian Azure-winged Magpies whilst several Rock and Cirl Buntings obliged. The biggest surprise was three stunning Great Spotted Cuckoos, seen at close quarters, being hassled by Common Magpies. The river again yielded an Otter as well as Green Sandpiper.



After a restaurant lunch lower down the valley at Los Pinos, we drove some 150 kilometres to the south west to the little town of Osuna, set amongst low lying agricultural land. Here a fine Black-winged Kite was seen as well as small groups of common finches. Roadside lakes were much drier than in the previous year, but we eventually found one lake with water which produced an impressive gathering of some 64 Stone Curlews who broke their cover and provided fine flight views. A drive down a farm track checking through the abundant finches and larks, eventually produced five Calandra Larks and an attendant Merlin. Large groups of sparrows were checked in the tamarisk bushes and most showed themselves to be Spanish Sparrow, some 80 being counted in all. We checked in to our hotel, the Hospederia Del Monasterio set amongst some very nice Spanish architecture in Osuna, before enjoying a nice evening meal at a traditional Spanish restaurant down one of the town's narrow roads.

Tuesday 19 January saw us up at a relatively relaxing 8am and ready to explore the various tracks that traverse the area in the hope of finding some of Spain's very specialised and scarce 'steppe' species. Scanning from a raised vantage point quickly produced our first Great Bustard of the trip, before more gradually came into view, allowing decent telescope views. Though it took all day and from various vantage points, the final tally eventually came to 44 Great Bustards, mainly male birds we thought, a truly fine species, and thankfully still doing well here in Spain. The warmish sunny weather induced raptors into the skies, with 75 Red Kites being noted, but oddly no Black Kites this year. Marsh Harriers numbered 15 with double that score for Common Buzzard. A few Cattle Egrets moved amongst some livestock, and whilst eating our packed lunch out in the fields, a group of Black-bellied Sandgrouse flew over. Having noted where they had alighted, we carefully approached the birds eventually having acceptable 'scope views of some 16 birds. This is a rare species in Andalucia with only 50 or so believed to survive, so our sighting was a significant one.

open panorama near Osuna, January 2016



Away from the fields, we then had a brief interlude at a small lake nature reserve, where amongst commoner duck species we located two male Ferruginous Ducks and three female plus a drake White-headed Duck as well as four Black-necked Grebes. Many wintering Chiffchaffs were catching insects around the lakeside as well as two Cetti's Warblers. Moving back amongst the agricultural fields, the keener mammal watchers in the group managed to count 12 Iberian Hares, a separate species showing their distinguishing features of the whiter underside covering the top side of the front legs. We watched a close quartering female Hen Harrier and two Black-winged Kites. Groups of starlings all proved to be of the Spotless variety, numbering some 1000 birds for the day. Little Bustards were another of our target species and patient watching and scanning finally resulted in us seeing 62 of these lovely birds during the day, subtly blending amongst the ground cover, but the white flashes of their wings making them dazzling in flight.



White-headed Ducks, here a male and three females

We returned to our hotel, again having worked hard for the days birding and over our last evening meal of the tour and a couple of drinks of course, reflected on what had been a very successful trip. We had been very fortunate to see Iberian Lynx so well (and in two successive years!), and with the added bonus of some excellent birding, the short five night tour had produced the goods and provided an excellent mid-winter break.

Wednesday 20 January was our final day but of course the birding wasn't over yet. With our flight not until late afternoon, we drove south to the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra, famous for its breeding population of Greater Flamingos, many of which over-winter. We duly saw some 400 of these colourful birds, pink lines and clusters blossoming out of the shallows. Despite careful scanning, we were unable to locate the solitary Lesser Flamingo that was in residence. Terrific views of Black-winged Kite and four Hen Harriers, which included two males, were had in the borderland of the lagoon, and several species of wader were new for the trip including Black-tailed Godwits, Golden Plovers, Avocets and Black-winged Stilts and

even a Little Ringed Plover. We concluded just after lunch and drove the final hour to Malaga airport where our flight was on time to Stansted.

Many thanks to go to the entire group for their good company and perseverance to ensure a successful outcome and to Giles and Mike for their photographs taken on the trip.

Lance Degnan and Nick Whitehouse

Birding Abroad

