

## Trip Report by tour participant John Wright

EB5 preamble: Our tours have already taken place several times to Northern Spain with both Iberian Wolf and Cantabrian Brown Bear being prime targets. In April 2013 we even managed to add Iberian Lynx to the aforementioned species while running an Ultimate Spain trip for a group of 10 Belgians – more details and pics from that tour can be found on the EB5 report chapter.



This particular summer 2014 tour started to take shape earlier that year over an evening meal in Poland. Tour participant John was with 5 friends on an EB5 tour for European Bison – and very successful that trip was too - see EB5 trip report chapter. Half a year later, Jan's words "for wolf and bear watching the real way, you've to go to Spain" became reality. John along with his wife Jane had a great trip with 100% success with Wolf and Bear plus Wildcat and Pine Marten. In addition a pelagic added Common Dolphins and some great seabird species.



Lobo, oso y gato montés

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**Saturday 16th August:** We met up with Jan and 3 other tour participants early afternoon in the Sierra de la Culebra. As it was quiet hot we had a couple of hours of leisure around our accommodation in the rural house (and the local playa) before dinner. But of course still kept an eye out for wildlife seeing Red Kites, Booted Eagles, Golden Orioles and Cardinal Butterflies. In the evening we walked to a private vantage point that overlooks the core area of a pack of Iberian Wolves. We watched 2 **Red Foxes** and soon spotted the wolves main prey - **Red and Roe Deer**.



But the resident pack of wolves stayed hidden until dusk when 4 distant, resting individuals were spotted laying down in a ploughed field. As it got slightly darker the pack became more active, they strolled around and chased each other now and again. This boistrous social behavior kicked up the dust and changed the animals into spooky shapes. It soon got too dark to get satisfactory views so we left the vantage point and headed back to our overnight accommodation. Despite the wolves being a bit distant and in fading light it was a promising start with this our first observations of large predators for the trip!





**Sunday 17th August:** A pre-breakfast morning walk back to the previous night's viewpoint to look for the wolves unfortunately drew a blank. But Red-backed Shrikes, Dartford Warblers, Cirl and Rock Buntings kept us entertained. After breakfast we left for the Picos de Europa which undoubtedly is one of the best places in the world during the summer to get prolonged observations of wolves showing natural behavior. Before reaching the Picos we did a small detour for Great Bustards seeing around 30 of these huge impressive birds along with Red & Black Kites, Short-toed & Booted Eagles, Lesser Kestrels, Little Owls and Rock Sparrows. An **Iberian Hare** in the same area as the bustards was a nice mammal bonus.





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We arrived in the Picos and settled in to our small, comfortable hotel late afternoon. Soaring Griffon's a pleasure to watch from the frontdoor! But early evening saw us sitting on the slope of a hill, with binoculars and telescopes at the ready, looking across a grassy river valley to the hillside opposite. To begin with we only saw a **Red Deer** but we didn't have to wait long before we were having terrific views of an **Iberian Wolf** family - 2 adults and 2 cubs. Furthermore in the valley below us a **European Wildcat** was hunting rodents and stayed in almost constant view during the 3 hours we were there. The wildcat shared this, obviously productive, hunting ground with 3 **Foxes**. Back on the wolf hill there was a solitary **Wild Boar** that suddenly appeared very close to the wolves! It didn't hang around - understandably given the circumstances I'd say! Before we left we even heard the wolves howling – amazing!

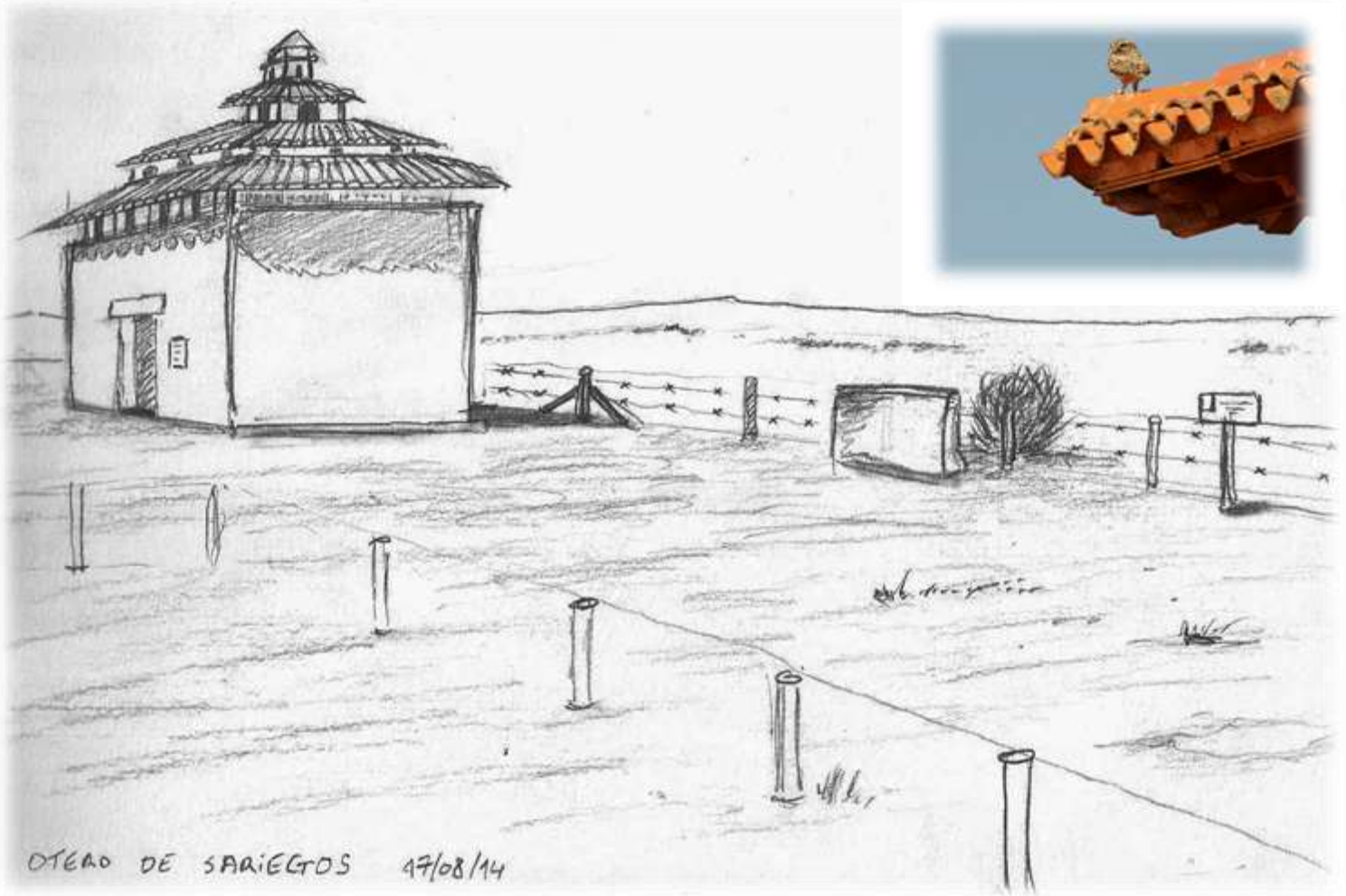


**Monday 18th August:** An early start and back up the hill to where we were Sunday evening. The **Wildcat** was in the valley - presumably the same cat - and showing very well being closer this morning than last night. Again the valley was being shared, with 2 **Foxes** present this time. On the hill opposite a **Roe Deer** was feeding and the solitary **Wild Boar** was again snuffling around. Of course the **Wolves** weren't to be outdone this morning, we had terrific views again of the 2 cubs and this time at least 3 adults. After a brilliant start to the day we went back to the hotel for a late breakfast before driving (nice scenery!) to the coast for our pelagic boat trip the following day. We stayed over night in a hotel in Luanco not far from the harbour.









**Tuesday 19th August:** We 'set sail' from the harbour around 08:30 in a catamaran and headed in the general direction of the continental shelf. It was a bit slow going as we were sailing straight into a head wind but nevertheless we did alright and got a long way off shore. No accurate count was done but we certainly saw big numbers of **Common Dolphins** many of which came and swam right alongside us - really super. We did okay for seabirds with the following species noted: Sooty, Balearic, Great and Cory Shearwaters, Storm Petrels, Pomarine and Arctic Skuas. We got back to the harbour around 17:00 and drove back to our hotel in the Picos. Later that evening we had a short drive around the quiet roads coming across a **Wilcat** and a **Fox** in the river valley where we saw the species a couple of days previous.











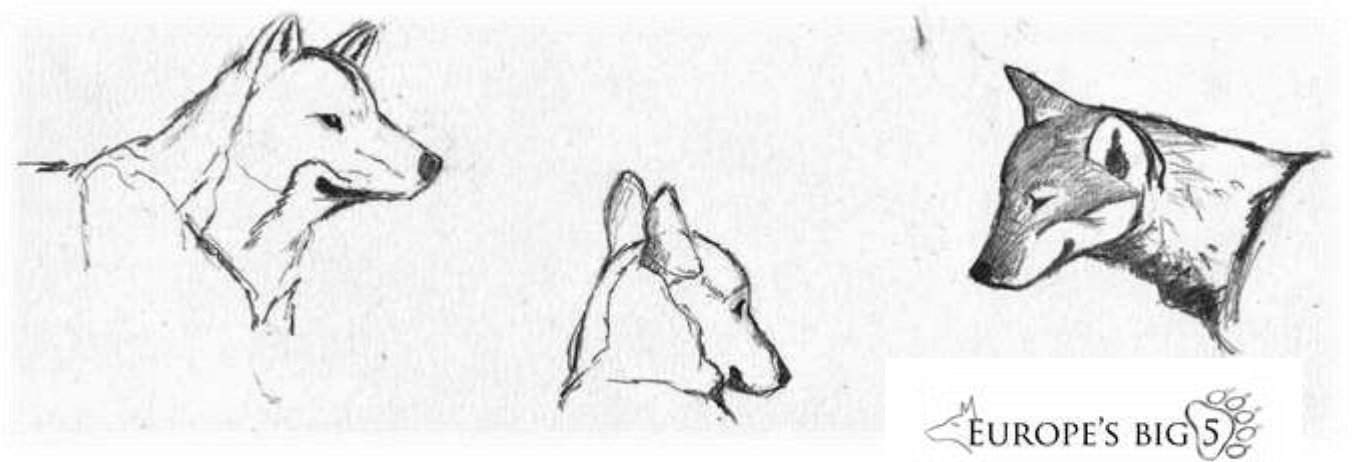




**Wednesday 20th August:** An 06:00 start this morning to go to a different location for a chance at another wolf family. After a short drive we walked for an hour up hill! But it was worth it for the spectacular scenery and just being in a fabulous wilderness. We settled down at a specific spot and started scanning for the resident wolf pack that was raising their cubs in the area. There then followed a spectacular few hours as we watched 8 (possibly 10) **Wolves**. The pack consisted of 4 adults including the alpha male and female, with 4 (possibly 6) cubs - what a spectacular sight as they played tag around rocks and bushes or indulged in mock attacks and fights. We could all clearly see the social status manouvers between the adults when they made close contact - they either stood tall with head up or were slinking low with ears back and tail between legs. It was just so good to watch them acting naturally and unconcerned, or unaware, of our presence. What was also interesting to watch was a really huge male **Wild Boar** feeding not far from the wolves - it was obviously confident of its fighting power, being such a big specimen, as it didn't appear to be fazed by the fact that the wolves were so close by. However, very much keeping their distance on some adjacent hills were **Red** and **Roe Deer**.











After about 4 hours we made our way back to the hotel for lunch, grabbed our bags and spent the rest of the afternoon driving to Pola de Somiedo which was to be our base for 1 night. Arriving in Somiedo late afternoon we dumped our bags at our hotel and was out in the field from around 18:00. We checked out a couple of watchpoints for bears but visibility was poor due to low cloud. We didn't find any bears but did see a few **Cantabrian Chamois** and **Red Deer**.



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**Thursday 21st August:** Acting on information recieved we drove out early in the morning to a low hillside and scanned the opposite slope. Before long we were all watching our first **Cantabrian Brown Bear** of the trip - and what good views too as it wasn't very far away. It went about its business of scoffing berries to gain weight for the leaner winter months ahead - although in this area they don't tend to sleep out the winter. The bear eventually wandered off out of sight for some time so having had our fill of the bear we went back for breakfast - all very happy.





The rest of the day was spent exploring the National Park and surrounding area, enjoying the walks and watching butterflies and birds such as Griffon Vultures, Honey Buzzards, Montague's Harriers and Ravens. At about 17:00 we went back to the spot where we saw the bear earlier in the day and we weren't disappointed as we were soon watching the **Bear** again which was on view, on and off, for over an hour. We also saw a few close **Chamois** - always good to see. In the early evening we left Somiedo and drove to the Municipality of Cangas del Narcea for a 2 night stay.







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**Friday 22nd August:** We visited a few watchpoints and hills in the hope of more bears but low cloud/fog hampered our viewing so we drew a blank. As the day warmed up and the low cloud and fog lifted we visited various locations but didn't come across any mammals but did see a few good bird species - Common and Honey Buzzards, Short-toed and Booted eagles, Griffon Vultures. Late afternoon we visited the site that was fog bound first thing and almost straight away a **Bear** was spotted. Unfortunately it didn't stay on view for very long which was a bit disappointing but that's the way it goes sometimes with mammal watching. A fair few **Chamois** were more obliging however.







**Saturday 23rd August:** Our last day in the area, well our last morning really as we were driving back to the Sierra de la Culebra around Inchtine. We had a very nice walk along a woodland track that wound its way up to a summit that afforded some super scenic vistas. On the way up we came across a **Pine Marten** sitting in a low tree, the marten just stayed where it was and watched us for what seemed an age before it descended and ran off into the undergrowth - a superb close encounter. Despite some intense scanning we didn't come across any bears from the summit, just good numbers of **Chamois**. Back in Culebra that evening we had brief but decent views of 2 **Wolves**, **Red and Roe Deer** a **Hedgehog** a **Nightjar** and a **Tawny Owl**. A nice way to end a brilliant trip as mid-morning the next day my wife and I flew back to the UK.

