

Iberian Lynx, Sierra de Andujar, Spain, 22nd – 24th January 2012

Trip Report by John Wright

Participants: Paul Baker, Richard Howard, Don Petrie, John Wright

This brief report is an update on looking for Iberian Lynx in the Sierra de Andujar area of Spain's Andalucía. Fuller site details and directions are already well documented in other trip reports on this website – for example the report by Lee Dingain, February 2010.

We live in the Southend-on-Sea area of South East Essex except for Richard who moved from the area to live in Murcia, Spain 25 years ago. We flew from Stansted (Essex) with Ryanair Saturday 21st January at 17:20 arriving at Murcia Airport about 20:00 and were met by Richard. We stayed the night at his house. We departed Murcia for Stansted on Saturday 28th January at 21:30.

Although I have spent some time in Spain I hadn't had the opportunity to look for Lynx. Trips with friends had been organised but the plans had been disrupted for various reasons, for example flight cancellations due to the ash cloud from the volcanic eruption in Iceland in 2010.

Sunday 22nd January. Weather: A cool, bright sunny day

We left Murcia just after 08:00 and with one stop en-route arrived at the Los Pinos Hotel complex in the early afternoon for a three night stay in one of the houses. After checking in and dropping off our bags we set out at around 14:30 to suss out the area. Turning right out of the Los Pinos we first drove the Encinarejo Trail adjacent to the Rio Andujar stopping for about 40 minutes at a small lay-by on the brow of a slight rise marked with concrete blocks. We scanned across the river to the dehasa opposite but didn't see anything of interest but at least now knew where to come just in case. We did the same for the dam site a little further up the road but again saw very little on the mammal front which was pretty much expected at that time of day. Furthermore nearly the whole length of the river was full of noisy families enjoying picnics in the sunshine.

We then drove along the La Lancha road (from the Los Pinos turn first right) via Los Escoriales and stopped in a lay-by near some white concrete blocks. About 15 people, in small groups, were spread along a few hundreds metres of road scanning the valley below. After a brief chat to some of them it appeared that the only lynx sighting that day was of one animal briefly seen by two people early that morning. Those who had already spent two days in the area wondered if the lack of sightings was due to the many hunters on the adjacent hills on Saturday and Sunday. There had been many dogs charging around in pursuit of Red Deer accompanied by the blowing of loud hunting horns and much shooting.

At about 16:00 the four of us were sitting on the white blocks and scanning the valley where a few Red Deer and Rabbits were out feeding. At about 18:10 Paul got a brief view of a Lynx not far away on the edge of a fire break. We focussed in but saw

nothing for what seemed like an age but then the Lynx appeared from behind some small trees and onto the fire break - what a relief! We waved over the other people and got them onto the Lynx which was an obvious male in breeding condition. The Lynx sauntered slowly along the fire-break scent marking low bushes as it went. After about 4 or 5 minutes it walked off the fire-break and disappeared in the adjacent thick vegetation. Many happy people, big smiles all round. We carried on scanning for the next 15 minutes but the Lynx did not re-appear. At about 18:30 as dusk was settling we drove further along the road to have a look at the dam and have a quick look for hibernating bats in the tunnel at the far end of the dam wall. None were present but we did see a pipistrelle sp. fly over the dam.

Monday 23rd January. Weather: Cold, frosty start, calm, sunny rest of day

Unsurprisingly this morning we decided to go back to the same area along the La Lancha road where we saw the Lynx the previous day which turned out to be a very good move. It was around 08:10 and had just got light and we were about 500 metres from the lay-by with the white concrete blocks. We were then flagged down by two Dutch guys who informed us that a Lynx had just crossed the road and had gone up the steep hill side to the right of the road. We piled out and started looking hard up the slope splitting up to cover more hill-side. Paul then glimpsed not one but two Lynx disappearing behind bushes. After about 5 minutes both Lynx appeared and showed brilliantly sitting on adjacent rocks and then indulging in play fighting and the feline equivalent of tag around the rocks and bushes. The larger bulkier Lynx was again an obvious male and no doubt the same animal as yesterday which had this morning been joined by his mate for a spot of pre/post breeding bonding. After about ten minutes and some brilliant Lynx watching moments the male chased the female behind the bushes. Despite us wanting an encore the show was over. It was now around 08:30 and the only people on the road to enjoy these fantastic scenes were us and the two Dutch guys. You couldn't ask for a better start to the day.

We then spent most of the day birding the La Lancha road and dam area but going back to the Los Pinos early afternoon for some food. On the mammal front we saw a few Red Deer and Rabbits and checked the La Lancha road dam tunnel again (in daylight) for bats but still didn't find any. I'm not sure if the tunnel is a hibernating site or a nursery but nothing was present. Late afternoon until dusk we sat and scanned for Lynx from the small lay-by along the Encinarejo Track but didn't see any Lynx just a few Rabbits, Red Deer and a single Fallow Deer. We kept an eye on the Rio Andujar below us for otters but without success although it was good for fish watching – Chub I believe. We did see four or five Daubenton's Bats hawking low over the water at dusk. Back at Los Pinos later that evening we heard that a Lynx had been seen briefly and fairly distantly in the late afternoon from the white concrete blocks along the La Lancha road.

Tuesday 24th January Weather: Cold, damp misty morning, brighter afternoon

At first light we drove the La Lancha road, we scanned from the various viewing points, but viewing was restricted due to the mist, and only saw Red Deer and Rabbits. After a couple of hours we decided to go birding around the general area and

hoped the mist would clear for the afternoon. Fortunately it did start clearing and as we slowly made our way south down the La Lancha road in the early afternoon it was good to find a herd of around 25 Fallow Deer, these were near the fields with the black fighting bulls. Unfortunately the deer were a bit skittish and very soon ran off. We carried on down the road and were pleased, at 13:45, to come across two Mouflon, both fine rams, on a slope only about 40 metres from the road. A little further on and we also came across more Fallow Deer but only three this time. We were still on the La Lancha road (south of the Los Escoriales) at this time and if I remember rightly just south of the fields with the mainly white cattle. We then went back to the Los Pinos for a late lunch.

At about 15:30 we drove the Encinarejo Track and watched from the lay-by on the slight rise but it was very quiet mammal wise. We moved on to the dam at about 16:30 where we stayed until dark, unfortunately we didn't see any Lynx just 12 Red Deer. We then drove back to the Los Pinos where we were told that a Lynx had been seen from the La Lancha road lay-by. It had been seen well if distantly asleep on a rock just before dusk. Apparently the Lynx initially walked across the road past a couple who had spent four days looking for Lynx without luck. So it just goes to show that sometimes you need luck on your side or to be patient and put the hours in!

It was our last evening in Andujar as we were leaving early next morning to go back to Murcia. The plan being was now to do some birding in south east Spain for the rest of the week. However, if we hadn't seen Lynx by this time we would have continued looking for another day.

Summary: Up to two Lynx were seen in and around the valley viewed from the general vicinity of the lay-by with the white concrete blocks along the La Lancha road. We didn't see any Lynx or hear of any sightings from the Encinarejo Track or dam. Other mammals seen by us were Rabbits, Red & Fallow Deer and Mouflon. We also heard that on one morning a few Wild Boar were seen along the La Lancha Road.

For the birders amongst you the best of the birds seen during the two and a half days were: Griffon and Black Vultures, Goshawk, Buzzard, Spanish Imperial Eagle (2 pairs), Golden Eagle (2 pairs), Southern Grey Shrike, Azure-winged Magpie, Raven, Black Wheatear, Crested Lark, Wood Lark, Crag Martin, Short-toed Treecreeper, Firecrest, Dartford Warbler, Sardinian Warbler, Blue Rock Thrush, Hawfinch and Rock Bunting.

In Murcia we saw Rabbits and an Iberian Hare and just east of Almeria, Andalucía, two small pods of Bottle-nosed Dolphin and a short-fin Mako Shark.

John Wright
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