

Sierra de Andújar Natural Park, Sierra Morena, Spain

1 to 5 February 2010

Report by Lee Dingain

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Introduction

This short trip was focused primarily on trying to see the world's rarest cat - the Iberian Lynx. Just a few years ago the Coto Doñana in southern Spain was considered to be the best place to attempt to find Iberian Lynx, however, access and viewing is difficult here and sightings remain rare. But over the last few years lynx sightings have been reported regularly from the Sierra de Andújar Natural Park in the Sierra Morena, some 260 km to the north-east. Here, it seemed, Iberian Lynx were much easier to see and often the views were incredible. Sightings became so reliable that several tour companies began running tours, so we decided to give it a go ourselves. In addition to Iberian Lynx there were a few target birds we hoped to find including Spanish Imperial Eagle and Wallcreeper. But it turned out that we didn't get the views of lynx that we wanted until our last evening and so we ended up neglecting the birds somewhat.

Iberian Lynx - status, threats and conservation

The Iberian Lynx is endemic to the Iberian Peninsula and was formally found in southern France, Portugal and Spain. Long in decline due to hunting and habitat loss, the population has crashed over the last couple of decades and today Iberian Lynx is classified as Critically Endangered by the [IUCN](#). In 1990 there were 12 Spanish populations containing around 1,100 individuals¹, but surveys in 2004 estimated only 84-143 animals remaining (with only 38 breeding females), and just two viable breeding populations - one in the Coto Doñana and the other in the Sierra Morena in southern Spain². It was also found that the Portuguese breeding population had disappeared and it is uncertain whether they still hang on there. Iberian Lynx feed almost exclusively on European Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus* (rabbits are a key prey species for many Iberian predators including Spanish Imperial Eagle), but over the last 50 years rabbit numbers on the Iberian Peninsula have fallen by a massive 95% as a result of habitat loss, hunting and diseases such as myxomatosis³. This decline has played a large part in the fall of lynx numbers and the current low rabbit population continues to be a major threat to lynx survival. In addition, illegal shooting, inappropriate predator control and road deaths maintain a high lynx mortality rate.

An Iberian Lynx conservation effort appears to have successfully halted the population decline with numbers in the Sierra Morena also starting to recover. Surveys in 2008 estimate around 150 animals now present in the Sierra Morena (including 40 breeding females) and another 50 in the Coto Doñana⁴. The conservation plan includes combating inappropriate predator control methods that lead to lynx deaths, restoration of the rabbit population, habitat protection and a lynx reintroduction programme. Evidence of the lynx conservation effort can be seen throughout the Sierra de Andújar, with road signs warning motorists about the presence of lynx and signs on a number of estates supporting the reintroduction of lynx. To find out more visit [SOSLynx.org](#).

General information

Getting there

We flew from London Gatwick to Malaga with easyJet (although flying to Granada, Seville or even Madrid would be fine). We booked online direct through [easyJet](#) - the return fare cost £41 per person including taxes, but we also paid an additional £18 per person for one item of hold luggage each (up to 20 kg). Overall easyJet provided a good service, although we were delayed by an hour going out - significant when we only had the last few hours of daylight that day to search for lynxes. We had a very early outbound flight and a late return flight and so we decided to drive to Gatwick and leave the car at one of the park & ride car parks. For this we used [Airparks](#) who we found to be very efficient and good value at £17 for five days parking. We booked online through [Purple Parking](#) who we found cheaper than booking with Airparks directly.

Travelling around

A car is essential for this trip as much of the searching for Iberian Lynx is done by driving around quiet roads, or from roadside stops. We booked a Ford Focus through [Carhire3000](#) who were by far the cheapest at £70 for five days, including unlimited kilometers, insurance (including collision damage waiver) and one additional driver. On collection at Malaga Airport we also opted to pay the additional 30 euros for windscreen and scratch cover. Luckily we checked the fuel gauge before we drove away as ours was only 2/3 full, even though we had just paid for a full tank! The hire car company resolved this out by swapping our car. The drive from Malaga to the hotel took about 2.5 hours and was easy driving, and fuel cost a total of £33 each for the whole trip. We planned to visit Fuente de Piedra on route for flamingos and waders but didn't have time in the end.

Accommodation

We based ourselves at [Los Pinos](#) - a hotel located about 14 km north-east of the town of Andújar on the A-6177, and ideally situated for exploring the lynx sites. The hotel was good value at £118 each for four nights, but we had real trouble booking as the hotel never replied to our emails and eventually we booked via a contact in Spain. We opted for a six bed house instead of rooms, to make use of the self-catering facilities, but these turned out to be a very basic kitchenette with just two hot plates and no oven (although there was a microwave, fridge, utensils etc). The rooms were very clean with central heating (which was needed in February) and the house included a small living/dining room. The staff were very helpful, especially when we had bought pizzas from a supermarket on route, only to find on arrival that we had no oven to cook them in! But the restaurant staff kindly agreed to cook the pizzas for us so we could eat them back at our house (for four Brits with virtually no Spanish language skills, being able to ask the staff to do this successfully was arguably our finest hour on this trip!). We never did eat in the restaurant (apparently it is good) although we did have some excellent tapas at the bar.

Currency

The exchange rate was poor at about 1.15 euros to the UK pound. Spain is no longer a cheap destination and as a rule, eating out is expensive whereas self-catering was reasonable. We took about 250 euros per person but allow quite a bit more than this if you plan to eat out each day.

Resources

The best source of information on the web about where to see Iberian Lynx is [mammalwatching.com](#), where you can find a number of trip reports. For mammal identification the *Mammals of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East*, S Aulagnier, P Haffner, AJ Mitchell-Jones, F Moutou and J Zima, 2009 (ISBN-13: 9781408113998) is good. For birds, the *Collins Bird Guide*, L Svensson, K Mullaney, D Zetterstrom and P J Grant, Second Edition 2010 (ISBN-13: 9780007267262) is the obvious choice.

Equipment and clothing

Binoculars and a telescope are essential - many sightings of lynx are made over a considerable distance and it is unlikely we would have had our first sighting at all without a scope. A lot of time is spent scanning distant hillsides and so a chair or stool would be very useful. During our visit it was mainly sunny and calm but also quite cold for much of the time, especially in the mornings and evenings, and so warm clothing, a hat and gloves were also essential. Sun lotion is a good idea and take plenty of water.

Itinerary

Feb 1st: Arrive Malaga and drive north to Andújar. Spent the late afternoon driving the road to La Lancha.

Feb 2nd: All day on the road to La Lancha with a few hours at the Jándula Dam.

Feb 3rd: Morning on the La Lancha road. Afternoon at the Encinarejo Trail.

Feb 4th: All day at the Encinarejo Trail.

Feb 5th: Pre-dawn start at the Encinarejo Trail. Late morning to late afternoon on the La Lancha road with lunch at the Jándula Dam. Late afternoon return to Malaga.

Main lynx watching sites in the Sierra de Andújar Natural Park

There are two main sites to concentrate on; the road to La Lancha and the Encinarejo Trail along the Rio Andújar.

Road to La Lancha via Los Escoriales

This is actually two roads - the JH-5002 to Los Escoriales and the JH-5004 to La Lancha. Lynx are seen along both roads, but especially by scanning from vantage points overlooking the dehesa towards the end of the JH-5004 near La Lancha. Turn right out of Los Pinos onto the A-6177 and then take the first right onto the JH-5002 to Los Escoriales. The road here is new tarmac for a few kilometers while it passes some houses but soon degrades to a rough road. The road winds through private estates until after 9 km you reach a farm called Los Escoriales on your left. Continue past the farm and take the next left onto the JF-5004



(sign posted to Mirador del Embalse del Jándula). You drive past some cattle fields before passing more private estates. 3.7 km from the junction at Los Escoriales the road bends to the right and a wide view across the dehesa opens up on your left (the hill town of Santuario de la Virgen de la Cabeza is visible in the distance). There are several laybys along the next 2 km where you can park and scan the valleys and ridges for lynx (lynx are seen on both sides of the road). One of the best vantage points is an obvious high embankment on the left next to a layby by some white concrete blocks. We saw our first animal on a distant ridge looking west from the next layby along. Also look for Black Vulture, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Golden Eagle and Mouflon along this road. The road continues for another 3 km to the Jándula Dam just past La Lancha. Around the time of our visit a Wallcreeper was wintering on the wall of the dam but didn't manage to find it despite a few hours searching. The dam is also good for Black Wheatear and the small tunnel at the far end holds roosting bats. Finally, during our visit an Eagle Owl was reported calling from around the buildings at La Lancha as well as the viewpoint (Mirador del Embalse del Jándula) situated on the right just before the road descends to the dam.

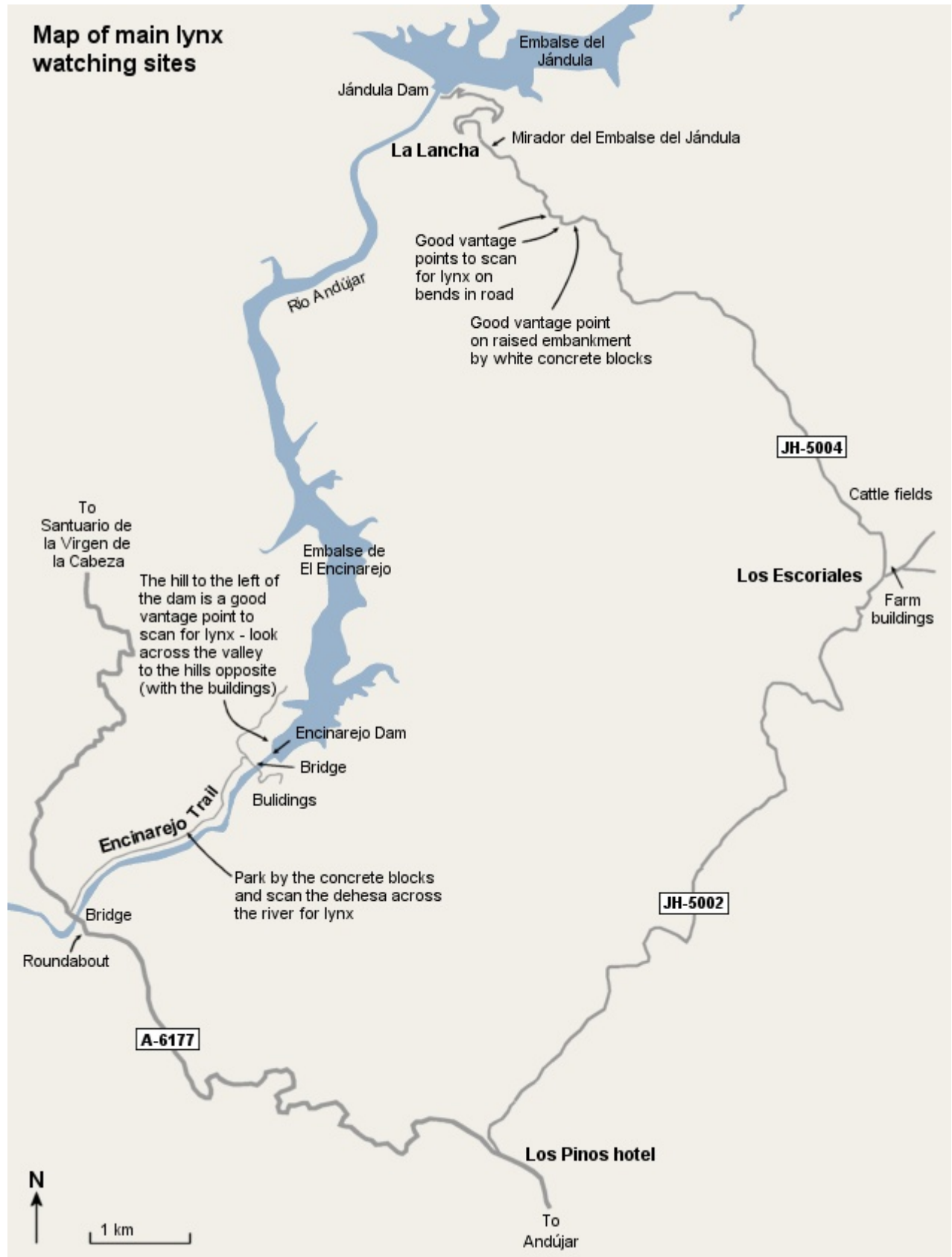
The Encinarejo Trail

Sometimes referred to as the Rio Andújar site, this site is at a much lower altitude than the La Lancha road and might be the better site to try if there is low cloud or heavy rain. From the Los Pinos hotel turn right onto the A-6177, continue past the right turn to La Lancha and follow the road as it winds down the mountain. After about a 10 minute drive, you come to a roundabout just before the River Andújar (just past the 22 km sign), take the first exit and drive across the road bridge. Immediately after the bridge take the immediate right turn onto a dirt road that follows the River Andújar on your right, past some picnic areas, to the Encinarejo Reservoir (this road is the Encinarejo Trail - look for a sign for Sendero de



El Encinarejo at the entrance). There are two main lookout points for lynx along here - the first (main) lookout is at the brow of a small rise in the track after about 500 m - look for a layby with some concrete blocks on the right, park here and scan the dehesa across the river. Lynx are regularly seen here and sometimes visit the river to drink, but we drew a blank despite putting in a lot of hours (check the river for European Otter). The second place to scan from is the hillside next the dam at the end of the trail. Drive to the end of the track and park at the dam. Walk up the hill to your left (when facing the dam) until you find an obvious flat area at

about the same height as the dam wall and scan across the valley and anywhere around you. Our second lynx appeared on the hill we were standing on, but animals have been seen around the buildings on the hill opposite and also following the river.



Species Lists

Mammals

Iberian Lynx *Lynx pardinus*

1 seen at 17:25 on 2nd for a few seconds walking along a sandy track on top of a distant ridge before disappearing into a patch of trees. The animal was viewed from the next bend along the JH-5004 after the vantage point by the white concrete blocks (about 5.8 km from the junction at Los Escoriales). Another animal was seen at very close range at 18:25 on 4th when it appeared in front of us on the hill next to the dam along the Encinarejo Trail. We watched it for about 10 minutes as it walked down the hill, across the car park to the river and then across the bridge, before turning right following the river when it was lost to view. It appeared completely unperturbed by our presence and was seen down to about 3 m!

European Otter *Lutra lutra*

1 seen very well in the River Andújar from the vantage point overlooking the river along the Encinarejo Trail at 15:20 on 4th.

Mouflon *Ovis musimon*

1 seen along the JH-5002 on 2nd and 5 distant animals seen from the JH-5004 on 3rd.

Fallow Deer *Dama dama*

Many seen from the road to La Lancha on most days.

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

Abundant at both sites.

European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Good numbers seen daily.

Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*

1 seen on the Encinarejo Trail on the evening of the 4th and another along the JH-5002 in the early afternoon of the 5th.

Birds

The taxonomy and nomenclature of this list follows Clements, James F, *Birds of the World: A Checklist*, 6th edition (updated 2008).

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Many seen on the River Andújar.

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Common.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

1 on the Jándula Reservoir on 2nd.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Common on the Rio Andújar.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

2-3 on the Jándula Reservoir on 2nd and several present around the River Andújar along the Encinarejo Trail.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*

Several seen on route to Andújar from Malaga.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

3 seen on route to Andújar from Malaga.

Red Kite *Milvus milvus*

Several seen on route to Andújar from Malaga.

Eurasian Griffon Vulture *Gyps fulvus*

Small numbers seen daily.

Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

4 over the JH-5004 near La Lancha on 2nd, 1 there on 3rd and 1 over the JH-5004 and 2 over the Jándula Dam on 5th.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

3 along the JH-5002 on 2nd and 1 over the A-6177 on 5th.

Eurasian Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

1 on route from Malaga to Andújar.

Spanish Imperial Eagle *Aquila adalberti*

2 seen from the JH-5004 (including 1 seen well perched) a few kilometers from La Lancha and another seen over the Jándula Dam on 2nd.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

1 over the A-6177 on 4th, 1 adult and 1 immature over the JH-5002 and another immature over the Jándula Dam on 5th.

Eurasian Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

1 at the Jándula Dam on 2nd, 1 over the JH-5004 on 5th.

Common Moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Several along the Rio Andújar.
Green Sandpiper <i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1 bird seen on 1st along the small river beside the cattle fields along the JH-5004, just along the after the JH-5002/JH-5004 junction at Los Escoriales.
Yellow-legged Gull <i>Larus michahellis</i>	Common around Malaga and flooded fields on route to Andújar.
Rock/Feral Pigeon <i>Columba livia</i>	Fairly common.
Stock Dove <i>Columba oenas</i>	Seen most days.
Woodpigeon <i>Columba palumbus</i>	Very common.
Eurasian Collared Dove <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Common.
Little Owl <i>Athene noctua</i>	Up to 3 seen most days.
Tawny Owl <i>Strix aluco</i>	1 heard from the dam on the Rio Andújar early morning on 5th.
Eurasian Hoopoe <i>Upupa epops</i>	4+ in the cattle fields along the JH-5004 on 2nd, 1 along the same road and 1 heard at Los Pinos on 3rd and 1 at the River Andújar on 4th.
Great Spotted Woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos major</i>	1 seen in the dehesa along the JH-5002 on 2nd and 1 heard at the River Andújar on 4th.
Green Woodpecker <i>Picus viridis</i>	Heard or seen daily.
Red-backed Shrike <i>Lanius collurio</i>	1 female/1st winter seen on route from Malaga to Andújar.
Southern Grey Shrike <i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	2 along the JH-5004 on 3rd and 1 over the dam on the Encinarejo Trail and 2 along the JH-5004 on 5th.
Eurasian Jay <i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	5 in the dehesa along the JH-5002 on 3rd.
Azure-winged Magpie <i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>	Abundant and always in flocks, some consisting of over 100 birds.
Eurasian Magpie <i>Pica pica</i>	Common.
Eurasian Jackdaw <i>Corvus monedula</i>	Locally common.
Common Raven <i>Corvus corax</i>	1 on route from Malaga to Andújar on 1st and another over the JH-5002.
Crested Lark <i>Galerida cristata</i>	Seen on route from Malaga to Andújar.
Woodlark <i>Lullula arborea</i>	Fairly common in the dehesa along the La Lancha road and also along the Encinarejo Trail.
Eurasian Crag Martin <i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	Flocks of up to 4 seen most days.
Barn Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1 east over the River Andújar on 4th.
House Martin <i>Delichon urbicum</i>	Small flocks of up to 5 seen most days.
Crested Tit <i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	1 seen beside the JH-5004 on 3rd and others heard.
Great Tit <i>Parus major</i>	Common.
Blue Tit <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	Common.
Long-tailed Tit <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	Small flocks of the iberian race <i>irbii</i> seen daily.
Eurasian Nuthatch <i>Sitta europaea</i>	1 seen in the dehesa along the JH-5002 on 3rd and others heard.
Short-toed Treecreeper <i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	Several heard.
Winter Wren <i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1 heard at the Jándula Dam on 5th.
Goldcrest <i>Regulus regulus</i>	1 heard at the JH-5002 on 5th.
Cetti's Warbler <i>Cettia cetti</i>	1 heard from the viewpoint overlooking the River Andújar on the Encinarejo Trail on 3rd.
Common Chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Several seen along the Encinarejo Trail.
Blackcap <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	Several seen with good numbers around the Jándula Dam on 2nd.
Dartford Warbler <i>Sylvia undata</i>	A few seen almost daily along the JH-5004.
Sardinian Warbler <i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	Fairly common.
European Robin <i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	Abundant.

Black Redstart <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	Good numbers seen.
Stonechat <i>Saxicola torquatus</i>	A pair along the JH-5004 on 2nd was the only record.
Blue Rock Thrush <i>Monticola solitarius</i>	1 male at the lynx viewing area along the JH-5004 on 2nd and 1 male at the Encinarejo Dam on 5th.
Eurasian Blackbird <i>Turdus merula</i>	Seen daily.
Song Thrush <i>Turdus philomelos</i>	Seen most days.
Mistle Thrush <i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	Common.
Spotless Starling <i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	Fairly common.
Dunnock <i>Prunella modularis</i>	Seen most days.
Grey Wagtail <i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1 at the Jándula Dam on 2nd and 1 at the Encinarejo Dam on 4th.
White Wagtail <i>Motacilla alba</i>	Fairly common.
Meadow Pipit <i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Seen or heard occasionally.
Cirl Bunting <i>Emberiza cirlus</i>	1 seen along the JH-5002 on 2nd.
Rock Bunting <i>Emberiza cia</i>	1 beside the road at the lynx viewing spot on the JH-5004 on 1st.
Corn Bunting <i>Emberiza calandra</i>	Several seen and heard.
Chaffinch <i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Very common.
European Greenfinch <i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Fairly common.
European Goldfinch <i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Small flocks seen most days.
European Serin <i>Serinus serinus</i>	Several seen and many heard.
Hawfinch <i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	4 along the JH-5004 on 3rd and 1 on the Encinarejo Trail on 4th.
House Sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>	Common.
Rock Sparrow <i>Petronia petronia</i>	5 on the wall of the Encinarejo Dam on 5th.

Reptiles

Horseshoe Whip Snake <i>Hemorrhois hippocrepis</i>	1 along the trail by the Jándula Dam on 2nd.
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Amphibians

Southern Tree Frog <i>Hyla meridionalis</i>	Several seen on the Encinarejo Trail on the evening of the 4th.
Natterjack Toad <i>Bufo calamita</i>	Several seen on the Encinarejo Trail on the evening of the 4th.



Iberian Lynx



Mouflon



Hoopoe



Black Redstart

Summary

This is an excellent short trip that not only gives you a good chance of seeing one of the world's rarest animals, but also a great supporting cast of other mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians as well. It was also refreshing to see the Iberian Lynx conservation effort so much in evidence and with so much apparent support from local landowners. We thoroughly enjoyed the trip and would like to go back again, although maybe slightly later in the year when migrant birds will be around and the weather a little warmer. For more accounts of our trip, including more photos and some video of our second lynx sighting, see <http://creamteabirding.blogspot.com/2010/02/operation-iberian-lynx.html> and <http://leedingain.blogspot.com/2010/02/lynx-effect.html>.

Sources

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