

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



NORTHERN SPAIN: Wildcats, Wolves & Wallcreepers Monday 31st August - Friday 4th September 2015

Tour Participants: Frank Andrews, Billie Andrews and John Nadin

Leader: Chris Townend & local guides

HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

European Wildcat: Recorded on three days with a maximum count of 6 on one day including two fabulous Wildcat kittens.

Iberian Wolf: A wonderful morning was spent watching an adult and two pups playing together, visible from our watchpoint just a 15 minute drive from our hotel.

Wallcreeper: A male bird was watched for 30 minutes as it preened and fed at the well known site of La Vueltona above Fuente Dé in the Picos de Europa.

Raptors: Excellent sightings of Honey Buzzard, Goshawk, Egyptian Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Golden Eagle and more!



This European Wildcat was one of at least nine cats seen during the tour!

Videos of Wildcats, Wolves & Wallcreeper from this tour can be seen [HERE](#)

SUMMARY

The Cantabrian Mountains are a mountain chain extending approximately 300 km across northern Spain, almost parallel to the Bay of Biscay. This mountainous region holds an incredible diversity of large mammals with Wolves, Wildcats and Bears as well as some highly sought after alpine birds all of which can be found living in this wonderful habitat.

Our tour was based close to the small town of Riaño, located along the Esla River in the mountains of the province of León close to the foothills of the stunning Picos de Europa National Park and just 2-3 hours from Asturias / Santander Airports. Our focus was on both mammals and birds, both of which certainly did not disappoint!

The dates of our visit were specifically timed when the numerous mountain meadows have been cut and an abundance of small mammals allow "easy pickings" for a healthy population of European Wildcats. It is also a good time for Wolves as young Wolf Pups tend to remain close to the den and can often be seen in the surrounding area. Finally, a visit to this part of Spain would not be complete without a trip to the Picos de Europa where one bird in particular is always high on people's wish lists, the beautiful Wallcreeper.

Monday 31st August

After a direct flight from London Stansted, we all arrived into a rather cloudy Asturias airport. We collected our luggage and were soon on our way to the Cantabrian Mountains which was to be our base for the next four nights.

We arrived at our quiet hotel in the village of Boca de Huergano, surrounded by some highly impressive scenery and sunshine! Once we had checked into our rooms, we met for lunch and then headed straight out for some birding. A short stroll from the hotel revealed some great views of at least two Short-toed Eagles that gave great scope views as they sat in a nearby tree and called to each other. Passerines included Black Redstart, Pied Flycatcher, Spotted Flycatcher, Serin and Linnet. We met our local guide, Maria at the hotel and drove to a nearby viewpoint where we scanned for raptors. Here we enjoyed a good selection as we watched Griffon Vultures both perched and in flight, whilst a scan of the sky produced a lone Egyptian Vulture, Honey Buzzard and an adult Golden Eagle. Not bad for just a twenty minute session, before the rain appeared!

Our attention then turned to mammals as we slowly patrolled the quieter roads hoping for signs of Wildcats. The weather had certainly changed as the skies darkened and the rain began to fall more persistently and it seemed our chances of a Wildcat were becoming less likely. However, within a few minutes, those thoughts quickly reversed as Maria called "Wildcat!" and there in the adjacent meadow at 18.00hrs was our first European Wildcat. Everyone was quickly onto the animal, taking in the beautiful thick bushy tail with blunt black tip and greyish looking pelage before the heavier rain forced it to run for cover!

It was an exciting moment and despite the brief views, it was a great sighting and one which everyone was very happy about as the smiling faces proved! We waited a while in the hope that the rain might abate, but it seemed to become heavier and now the cat was deep in cover so we continued to check other meadows. A little further up the road at 18.45hrs, despite the seemingly far from ideal weather conditions, we soon found another Wildcat. This time allowing some longer views as it sat in the middle of a meadow seemingly unperturbed by the rain before it too, eventually ran off to find cover. A couple of Wildcats in under an hour was a great start to our tour, but as is so often the way with cats, we still wanted more!

We spent some time patrolling the roads and scanning every likely area, but the rain refused to disappear. Therefore we returned to the site of our first Wildcat sighting in the hope that the animal may still be in the near vicinity. Despite some time spent waiting, we could not relocate it and so thoughts began to divert towards food, but Chris was keen that we tried just once more in the area of our second Wildcat sighting. By now, the rain had weakened a little and at 19.55hrs our third and final Wildcat of the evening appeared. It tried to give us the slip by hiding behind a tree, but after a little careful manoeuvring of our vehicle, we were soon enjoying the finer details of this beautiful Wildcat as it sat and posed. The tail was particularly impressive due to its thickness and the black rings were clearly marked ending with a lovely thick black tip. It was a little wary of its onlookers and it gave us a few unimpressed stares before finally slinking off out of view. It was a great end to our first day in the Cantabrian Mountains and we returned to our hotel for some home-cooked food and a celebratory beer.

Tuesday 1st September

This morning we were up early and out before dawn, though at this time of year it was not too painful a start and actually quite civilised as we left the hotel at 06.45hrs. Once again an ever cheerful Maria met us and we took a short drive along the road before we headed off on a muddy track, taking full advantage of the 4x4 Land Rover! We arrived just as the first glimmers of dawn could be seen and then took a 15 minute walk up a steep wooded track before settling down on the hillside where we sat quietly scanning the hillside opposite.

It was a calm morning and visibility was good as Pied Flycatcher, Firecrest and Crested Tit flitted around our watchpoint but we remained focused scanning the hillside. Then at about 08.30hrs a call of "Lobo" (Spanish for Wolf) heightened everyone's concentration, but frustratingly it was just a brief view as an animal appeared and then immediately disappeared amongst the dense heather and broom bushes. We waited and sipped coffee whilst another 30 minutes past. A Black Woodpecker repeatedly called nearby but refused to show and then Frank had our full attention as he spotted two Wolf pups in the same area as the first sighting. After some careful directions, everyone was soon enjoying some great scope views of these fantastic mammals as they excitedly chased each other

amongst the broom bushes whilst a third animal, an adult, slowly sauntered around interacting with the youngsters. It was a great scene to witness and we all simply drank it all in for the next 20 minutes before the animals then disappeared from sight.

We gathered our bags and scopes and then quietly took the short walk back to our vehicle as our brains replayed the great images of the morning. Once back on the road, John then spotted a Wildcat from the vehicle. This particular animal was very much in hunting mode as we watched it stalk the edge of a nearby meadow before disappearing out of view. A little further up the road a second Wildcat was seen briefly from the vehicle also. It had certainly been a great morning and with two quality mammal sightings "in the bag" before breakfast everyone was upbeat as we returned to the hotel.

After breakfast we headed out for a walk along the nearby Esla river where we enjoyed some good birds. Highlights included a number of vocal Honey Buzzards, a dark phase Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, Red-rumped Swallow, White-throated Dipper, Common Firecrest, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Crested Tit and numerous Pied Flycatchers. "Iberian" Wall Lizards were also seen.

After a substantial and relaxing late lunch at the hotel, we took time for a siesta for those that required it and then headed back out during the late afternoon for another hoped for Wildcat watching session. We stopped at the same raptor viewpoint as yesterday and enjoyed some great scope views of Egyptian Vultures feeding on the ground. The birds were of varying ages from very dark 2nd and 3rd calendar year birds to pristine black and white adults. A Marsh Tit and Common Whitethroat were the main passerines of note and then sharp-eyed John located yet another European Wildcat. The animal was very distant, but a great find nonetheless, as it sat on the edge of a meadow. It was presumably out a little earlier in the day (16.30hrs) due to the cooler weather conditions. We then visited a picturesque mountain valley where we added a new mammal for the trip list in the form of a couple of small groups of Cantabrian Chamois. Nine animals in total gave some excellent scope views as they slowly trotted around the scree slopes in the evening light. Billie then diverted our attention to a raptor soaring above us that turned out to be a male Goshawk and was very much appreciated by all before we slowly made our way back to check the meadows. However, despite our best efforts and some careful scanning of the same meadows from the previous night, we found no Wildcats. Woodlark, Whinchat and Yellowhammer were some of the new species that were added to the growing bird list.

We returned to the hotel for another great meal and we all raised a glass to a memorable day and in particular the fantastic morning spent watching Wolves.

Wednesday 2nd September

Today our main focus was birds, so after breakfast we headed east to the Picos de Europa National Park and the famous Fuente Dé cable car. It was a fabulous journey as our local guide Bernardo drove us through some very impressive mountainous scenery from lush alpine meadows to deep gorges. The weather was ever changing from almost zero visibility to completely clear in just a matter of a few kilometres. After about an hour, we were soon in the tourist town of Potes where we took time to have a quick leg stretch and we could get our first view of the mountains to which we were heading. The visibility did not look very promising as no obvious mountain peaks visible. Despite this, we continued to Fuente Dé and the base of the cable car which was to be our next mode of transport. A quick check with the cable car operators and it seemed we were in luck, as despite the low cloud at the base of the cable car, it was beautifully clear at the top! Before too long we were all inside the cable car and slowly began our smooth ascent from an altitude of 1,070M to 1,823M in just a few minutes. It was quite a surreal moment as we travelled through the cloud and then rose up above the cloud where we were treated to the most wonderful mountain peak views - simply fantastic!

With our feet firmly on solid ground, we took a little time to enjoy the spectacular views before heading along the well worn trail to find our target species. A couple of very close Yellow-billed Choughs were the first birds to greet us, as we continued on our walk towards La Vueltona, a regular site for Wallcreeper. It was perfectly calm and sunny as we headed to the site and a number of Cantabrian Chamois allowed some great photographic opportunities close to the main path. We soon arrived at an area of boulder scree and caves which was to be our stake-out. Here, we simply watched and waited. We spread out giving ourselves a little distance between each of us to cover as much Wallcreeper habitat as possible. After about twenty minutes of scanning, we located the main prize, the superb Wallcreeper. Amazingly it did the decent thing and sat and preened in the exact same spot for the next 30 minutes allowing everyone to have some fabulous scope views. After watching the bird for a little while and some careful rock scrambling, John and Chris managed to get a little closer whilst the bird remained in the same spot completely unperturbed. A confiding Alpine Accentor diverted everyone's attention for a short while as it hopped around the rocks just below the Wallcreeper. Finally, after a good 30 minutes of preening the Wallcreeper then left its sunlit perch and began to creep up the rock face in search of food, flicking its scarlet wings as it went and allowing everyone to enjoy the incredible behaviour of these fascinating and simply amazing birds.

With the Wallcreeper "in the bag" the cloud seemed to be rising so we began to re-trace our steps to the cable car in the hope of finding some other alpine specialities. A number of Alpine Accentors allowed more good views on the return journey, but unfortunately the cloud had beaten us to it and by the time we reached another good birding area, visibility was almost zero! We headed into the cafe and enjoyed a well earned coffee and some lunch in the hope that the cloud might lift.

Sadly, the cloud seemed set, so we had to make do with a couple of Yellow-billed Chough that were lured into view by a cheese sandwich(!) before we all took the next cable car back to Fuente Dé. We slowly headed back towards Boca de Huergano and once again, John's sharp eyes added a new mammal species to the list in the form of a Red Fox trotting across a roadside meadow. Later we stopped at narrow gorge where we were treated to another new mammal species as we enjoyed excellent scope views of a small mixed group of adult female and young Iberian Ibex.

Once back at the hotel, Billie, Frank and Chris headed out for a stroll before dinner, despite the slightly threatening looking sky. Perhaps somewhat predictably, not long after leaving the hotel, heavy rain and thunderstorms soon stopped any birding activities! Later we met for an evening meal and beer and discussed the highlights of the day, to which there was only really one reply - Wallcreeper!

Thursday 3rd September

Today was our last full day and everyone was eager to get one last Wildcat fix! After a good breakfast and essential caffeine hit, we headed out once again with local guide Maria and we were all very focused on Wildcats. It was a lovely calm and sunny morning as we patrolled the nearby meadows and it soon became apparent that there was plenty of Wildcat activity taking place. Between 08.30hrs and 11.00hrs we enjoyed some great encounters with at least three different Wildcats. It was literally a morning of constant Wildcat action as we watched two Wildcats continually hunting small mammals with great success. It was a real treat to study the Wildcats behaviour and at such close range too. A check of other meadows failed to reveal any other Wildcats though finding a fresh Cantabrian Brown Bear print was very exciting.

We spent the remaining part of the late morning re-checking the meadows where we had most Wildcat activity, but it seemed the cats were sleeping off their food! We then visited the Riaño reservoir where the highlight was another Honey Buzzard before we headed back to our hotel. En route, yet another Wildcat was seen close to the road and seemed to be carrying prey, so we pulled over to investigate. No sooner had the cat seen us than it ran for cover but we waited quietly. After five minutes a movement in the nearby grass revealed something quite unexpected - two Wildcat kittens! It was almost 12.30hrs and the two kittens were very playful as they chased each other in the grass. They appeared inquisitive to our presence, stared at us for a couple of minutes and then vanished. Needless to say, we were all buzzing from the experience as we returned to our hotel for a rest and some food.

After lunch, we headed out for another walk along the river Esla. The White-throated Dippers were still busily feeding in the river and passerines included the now expected Pied Flycatcher, Common Firecrest, Crested Tit, Bullfinch, Black Redstart and a number of Chiffchaff, including a calling bird that

confirmed itself to be an Iberian Chiffchaff. Raptor activity was notably quiet compared to our first day and so we returned to the hotel where we met Maria who was to be our local guide for the last evening.

Due to our great success with finding Wildcats and Wolves, we decided to spend our last evening looking for Bears. This was not on the original itinerary as the nearest most reliable bear watching area is in Somiedo Natural Park and was too far to travel on this particular tour. However, there is a smaller more nomadic population of Bears that can sometimes be seen in valleys not far from our hotel, so we decided to give it a go! After a short drive, we walked up a very steep hillside that took some careful negotiation but we all took our own pace and then positioned ourselves with a view across to another hillside. We carefully scanned the slopes for an hour or so and despite our best efforts, we found no bears though Red Deer was a new mammal and Short-toed Eagle Goshawk were welcome distractions. Cloud began to appear and hang in the valley and with distant rumbles of thunder, we were unsure if it was heading our way! We decided it was probably best to get down the steep terrain in good light so we slowly returned to our vehicle. Maria then dropped us off at our hotel where we said our goodbyes. We enjoyed one last great meal and a celebratory drink before dreaming of another great day of wildlife watching.

Friday 4th September

Today we were up early ready for our transfer to the airport. We arrived in good time and enjoyed coffee and food before our flight back to London where the tour ended, but memories of Wildcats, Wolves and Wallcreepers would remain in the forefront of our minds for a long time to come.

Conservation Donation – Following this tour to Northern Spain £90 was transferred to the Wise Birding Holiday's central conservation fund. This shall be used to support a conservation project in the future, yet to be determined.

For the last three years Wise Birding Holidays has been supporting a number of small conservation projects following the successful completion of a tour. However, we now believe that to make a bigger difference to conservation it seems best to pool the donations from most of our tours into one central fund. Once a target amount has been reached this money will then be used to support a single project in the hope of achieving more for species conservation. Some tours will still continue to donate money to help some of the smaller projects that we feel will still benefit from such smaller donations. Please visit our [Conservation News](#) and [Latest News](#) links to find out more.



**Riaño Reservoir and Peak Gilbo (above) and looking
towards La Vueltona, Picos de Europa NP (below)**





Short-toed Eagle (above) and Honey Buzzard (below)





Our first European Wildcat (above) and the third animal (below) - Both seen on our first evening





**Western Bonelli's Warbler (above) and
the cable car at Fuente Dé (below)**





This fabulous Wallcreeper showed exceptionally well at the well known site of La Vueltona in the Picos de Europa





This European Wildcat showed very well on our last morning as it hunted small mammals





**Alpine Accentor (above) and
Yellow-billed Chough (below)**





The view from the top of the cable car(above) and
one of the many Cantabrian Chamois (below)





Iberian Wolf habitat (above) and the adult Wolf we saw on our first morning (below) taken by tour participant John Nadin





Two of the European Wildcats seen on our last morning





The Wildcat kittens seen on our last morning (above) taken by tour participant John Nadin and Common Wall Lizard (below)



Wise Birding Holidays Checklist: NORTHERN SPAIN
Wildcats, Wolves & Wallcreepers 31st Aug - 4th Sep 2015

#	Common Name	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Two birds recorded on the 1st
2	Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	Recorded daily
3	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	A single bird seen over the town of Potes
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Recorded daily
5	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	Recorded on two days at Riano Reservoir
6	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	A bird was heard calling outside our hotel one night
7	European Honey-buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	Recorded on three days with a minimum count of 3 birds on the 1st
8	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	Recorded on three days with a maximum count of 5 birds on the 1st
9	Short-toed Snake-eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	Recorded on two days
10	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	Recorded daily
11	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	An adult was seen on our first evening near Riaño Reservoir
12	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	A single dark phase bird showed well on the 1st
13	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Two birds recorded on the 1st
14	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	Two separate sightings of a male on the 1st and the 3rd
15	Eurasian Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Recorded daily
16	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	Heard along the river Esla on the 1st
17	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>	A bird was seen briefly whilst travelling towards Potes
18	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	A bird was heard calling whilst watching Wolves
19	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	A single bird recorded on the 1st
20	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Recorded daily
21	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>	A single bird was seen on the evening of the 1st by John
22	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Recorded daily
23	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>	Recorded daily
24	Northern House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	Recorded on two days
25	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	Two birds along the river Esla on the 1st was a good find by John
26	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Recorded daily
27	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	Recorded on three days
28	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	Recorded on three days with a maximum count of 3 on the 1st
29	Northern Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	A bird was heard on the 3rd
30	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>	Some excellent views of at least 5 birds close to La Vueltona
31	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	Recorded on two days
32	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	Recorded on two days
33	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Recorded on three days
34	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	Recorded on three days
35	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	Recorded on three days
36	Common Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquatus</i>	Recorded on two days
37	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	A single bird seen on the 2nd feeding in one of the many meadows
38	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	A single bird seen briefly at La Vueltona
39	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>	Recorded on three days
40	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	Recorded daily
41	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>	Recorded on three days
42	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	Recorded on two days
43	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	Recorded on two days
44	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>	A calling bird seen by Chris and John on the 3rd confirmed the id
45	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	Recorded on two days
46	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	Recorded on two days
47	Greater Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	A single bird on the 1st
48	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	Recorded on three days with good views on the 1st
49	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	Recorded on two days
50	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>	Recorded on two days
51	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Recorded on at least one day
52	Common Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	Recorded on three days
53	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	Recorded on two days
54	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	Recorded on two days
55	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>	Superb views of a moulting adult male on the 2nd at La Vueltona
56	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	Recorded on two days
57	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	Recorded on two days
58	Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Recorded on three days
59	Yellow-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>	Recorded on two days with our best views at the cable car above Fuente Dé
60	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	Recorded on two days
61	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	Recorded daily
62	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Recorded daily
63	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Recorded daily
64	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Recorded on three days
65	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>	Recorded on three days
66	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Recorded daily
67	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	Recorded daily
68	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	Heard by Chris on the 3rd only
69	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	Recorded on two days
70	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Recorded on two days
#	Common Name	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Iberian Wolf	<i>Canis lupus signatus</i>	A fabulous morning was spent watching an adult and two pups on the morning of the 1st
2	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Singles recorded on the 2nd and the 3rd
3	European Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>	A minimm of 9 different cats seen over three days with a max. day count of 6 on the 3rd
4	Iberian Ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>	A group of at least 10 animals were seen very well on the 2nd consisting of adult females and young
5	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	A group of 3 animals were seen on the evening of the 3rd
6	“Cantabrian” Chamois	<i>Rupicapra pyrenaica parva</i>	Recorded on two days with maximum count of 12 above the cable car at Fuente Dé
#	Common Name	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Common Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis muralis</i>	At least two recorded near the river Esla on the 1st