

Immersed in the realm of the Cantabrian Brown Bear

Spain – May 2023



A somewhat strange first scanning session

Despite the resident pair of golden eagles being present, the first evening will be one without large carnivores. Neither brown bear, wolf, nor a wildcat are discovered during the first scanning session. This despite the information of other bear fanatics on site who did spot a brown bear that morning from the vantage point where we were. So, they are present!



Well, that's just how it goes. After all, bears do not walk around here in large numbers, as the ungulates present here do. We know where to find red deer, roe deer and Cantabrian chamois. Logical to: top predators are always scarce given their place at the top of the food pyramid. In addition, we are in a mountainous landscape where a mosaic of shrubs and forests offer 1001 possibilities to go unnoticed.

Always a challenge and a sense of reward to spot a target species! Every bear trip is different and something to look forward to!

It is a somewhat strange and bizarre start to the current bear trip since the information provided of a bear trio that we were able to observe here last year:

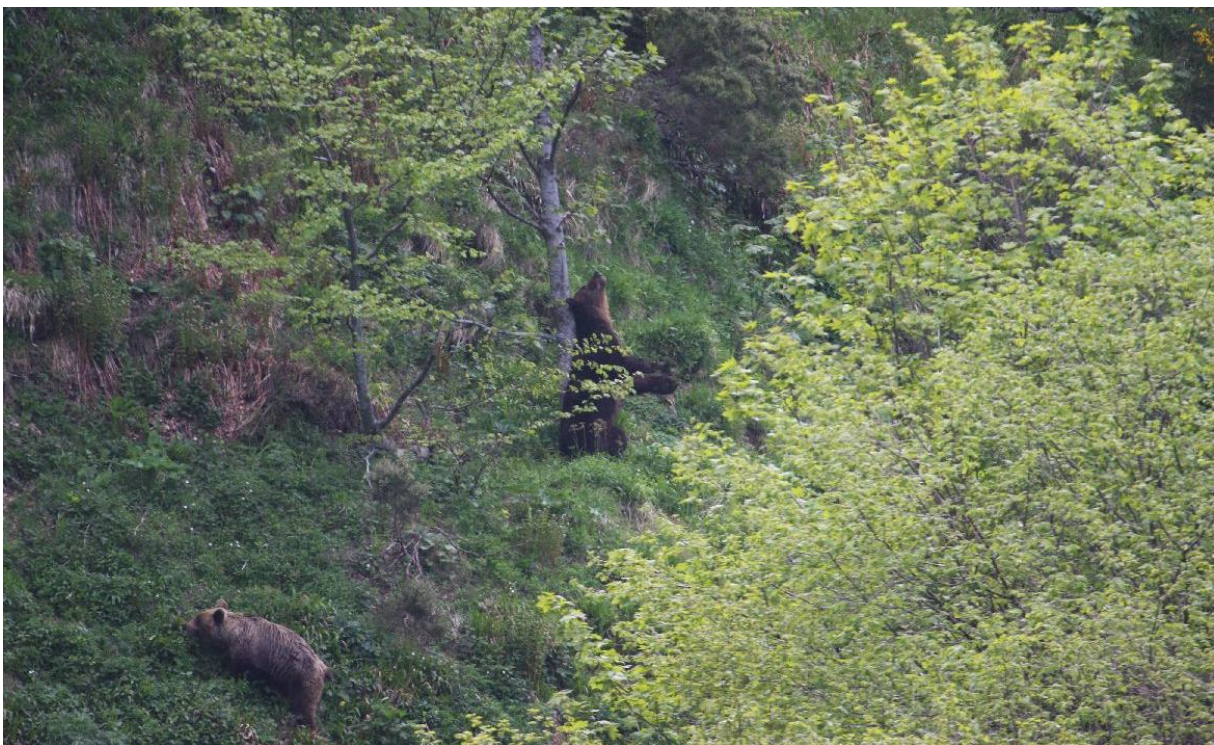
a female bear with her cub that we saw emerging from a rock cavity and a large, patrolling male in a field a little lower in the valley.

Video images on a mobile phone show that a meeting of this male with the female and her young, a few days after our observations, gets completely out of hand. The images are downright horrifying. Something you would rather not witness yourself.

The male, known by the locals as Pintocho, appears to have crawled all the way to the top of the rock formation where the female, along with her cub, uses a cave that acts as a shelter and refuge. The male had intentions to kill the tiny cub. But the mother does not let this happen just like that; she goes into battle with the much larger male. But that turns out to be a losing battle. The neck bite of the male almost makes the female succumb. But then something happens that you wouldn't have thought possible: the two adults, first slide off the rock in the tumult of the life-and-death fight, a little later fall from a lower cliff into the depths. The male makes the deepest fall. The next day he is found dead by the employees of the medio ambiente; government forest rangers who act locally as a bear patrol. The unfortunate male bear is taken away. It can be viewed these days in the local educational center of the Montana Palentina Natural Park, where an entire exhibition has been set up around this incident. It turns out to be a real tourist attraction!



The female, whose fall was shallower into the ravine, manages to get back into her hiding place. She is accompanied by her cub. It is also the medio ambiente who set up a rescue operation near the cave at the very top of the rock in which the unfortunate duo are hiding. They try to supply the female with apples through a long PVC tube. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to work. Camera images, fifteen meters deep into the cave, only show the distraught wandering cub. No trace of the mother. Maneuvering the cable on which the camera is attached shows the sad image of the deceased female. She too succumbed to the fight and the fatal fall. Moreover, her cub didn't survive after the death of its mother. It really hurts the heart that our bear trio from last year is no longer among the living!



Why do male bears kill cubs?

By killing the young, the female bear stops producing milk and returns to estrus. However, this does not mean that the infanticidal male is the one who will mate with the female afterwards, as other, more dominant males can and will take this privileged place when the situation presents itself.

Another theory is that bears are also sometimes just cannibals. Very aggressive and oversized males are always a potential threat to cubs, young females or females smaller in size. Especially when males, frustrated by not being able to mate, are overflowing with hormones during the spring.

Liquidating peers is also a way to avoid competition. This concerns the supply of food in the habitat that bears share with their peers. Fewer congeners mean more food for those remaining – a survival tactic especially poignant in times of food scarcity.

The incident, which was filmed in its entirety, shows how harsh, unforgiving and emotionless nature can be at times.

The next morning, we have to work hard (in the good sense of the word) to find our first bear. This on the same slope where we have discovered large carnivores in the past. In the summer of 2020, that was a young brown bear and two patrolling wolves in the same telescope view, in February 2022 three wolves checking a herd of red deer for their alertness, and in May 2022 a wolf passing at the top of the ledge which we are scanning. Every visit here so far has yielded wolf sightings or bear and wolf sightings together! Talk about productivity! Moreover, it is a place that can only be reached with a 4x4 vehicle. Only those hard-core bear fans are present here!



Pleasant to see are the alpine swifts that, calling loudly, skim over our heads. The bear we discover betrays its presence because it suddenly appears in an open area between some bushes. Despite the great distance, you immediately see that you are dealing with a bear. No other animal prowls through the undergrowth in such a way! Based on experience, we also know how to give the experienced bystanders specific instructions on how to pick up the bear themselves through binoculars or telescopes.

Briefly, the bear is no longer visible after it dived into a strip of oak forest. But moments later, it appeared at the other end of the oak forest. Strolling to another forest fragment, everyone manages to get the bear in their sight.

Nothing is more satisfying and fun than to enjoy these kinds of sightings together. The atmosphere that then arises is always something special. Fun, laughter and joy from those who share the same passion! The marvelous breakfast buffet afterwards tastes even better!

During the third scanning session, we took up a position in a place where a local wolf pack had passed a few days before. The opposite slope we are scanning is home to several red and roe deer with newborn young; most likely the reason that both wolves and bears hang around here looking for easy prey. Especially for bears, it is a protein-rich addition to their almost completely vegetarian menu during this period. With the cry of a red deer calf near the rock formation where we are positioned, we think for a moment that there is indeed a hunting scene going on. The hind itself immediately rushes over to see what is happening. But the predator turns out to be a fox. No bear or wolves appear on the scene.

The stature of the red deer is too imposing for the fox to strike, so it makes no further attempts to outwit the calf. Immediately, peace and silence returns. But again, despite four pairs of eyes and good optics, we did not see a large carnivore on this evening session. Something that fortunately changes the next morning.

Idyllic

The better weather conditions allowed us to head to the more humid, western side of the Cantabrian Mountains in the morning of day three. It is a nice cloudless sky. Before we reach the location where the scanning will take place, we first must drive for half an hour through meadows interspersed with broom bushes. This on a dirt road only passable with a 4x4 vehicle. Apart from the local farmers (ganaderos) it is a location where no one comes. Good driving experience is needed if you don't want to collide with protruding boulders here in the dark! Fortunately, that does not happen. In order to disturb the environment as little as possible, the car lights are switched off during the last ten minutes of the bumpy ride. We arrive at dawn at a place to lick fingers and thumbs. Moreover, apart from some cows and horses, the location is completely ours. Telescopes and tripods are immediately prepared. With a cup of coffee in hand, we start scanning the surrounding mountain slopes and rock formations looking for the resident bears and wolves in the area.



The heather and broom in bloom, makes the picture idyllic. The bear we discovered is an adult. Strolling and grazing through the vegetation, we watched this individual for a long time. The muscular torso and massive head result in a downright impressive appearance. These animals are and remain fantastic creatures of mother nature!



The animal also has other intentions. Grazing sessions are interspersed with quests for something else to eat. The bear pokes its nose in the air while sniffing, it then looks for scent marks on the ground or looks around for something other than the available vegetarian food. And it turns out that it isn't the only animal on the lookout for something else to eat. Three wolves also patrol at the bottom of a rock formation. A group of red deer, running away from them, betrays their presence.

The typical, red-brown fur of these wolves really is a striking feature that you only notice in terms of the coloration of the Iberian Wolf. Sometimes you really think you are looking at an African black-backed jackal, judging by the colour pattern. Not in general, of course, after all the posture and the head are too robust for that.

At one point, the bear appears to be under the spell of a scent trail. Standing still amongst the blooming broom, it peers down into the valley for a few moments, mouth open. With a red deer in the vicinity, putting it on a run, we think some predator versus prey type action is about to take place. Unfortunately, it is premature. The red deer is out of reach of the bear in no time and a calf is nowhere to be seen. The bear quickly retraces its steps and forages and continues its way over a higher slope, strewn with boulders and overgrown with grasses.

It is only when the sun appears over the slope that the bear gives up. A change in behavior that only gets tighter once spring progresses towards summer. Then you only have a chance of seeing bears for an hour around sunrise and an hour before sunset. Heat and sunlight are something they really shy away from! The shade of the canopy and the coolness of the forest floor are factors that hardly make them come out of the local forests during the summer months. This is especially from the month of July to the end of August.



Also worth mentioning is the fact that, despite the rather remote location where we are stationed, we got a visit from the local forest police aka guardia civil seprona. Something that also happened during the first evening - the medio ambiente. After all, primely, you are not allowed to go wherever you want without a written permit. Furthermore you must stay on the paths near public vantage points everywhere and the use of drones is strictly prohibited.

Bears clearly enjoy their protected status here, and rightly so!

A happy reunion

The next session we score again. This for the first time during the evening. We focus on a location where five to eight bears were observed earlier in the spring. Upon arrival, the vantage point turns out to be completely ours. Many bear spotters have tried their luck here earlier in the season. Something we ourselves are not sad about. Finding a bear will be done by us, ditto the observation! Privilege and exclusivity are guaranteed with this one!

It doesn't take long. Soon, a few chamois, looking backwards, sprinting up a slope, betray the presence of a carnivore. It turns out to be an adult bear using the flat surface of a small quad track that winds its way from east to west on the slope. We see him briefly, a little later, still at the very top of a rock formation.

An hour and a half later, we discovered a second bear. Since its sudden appearance on a gigantic rock formation, this adult individual must have awakened in one of the rock cavities that are located there. With its legs stretched wide and its body pressed close to the ground, the animal descends the very steep slope meandering from one clump of vegetation to another. This with the aim of leaving as many scent traces of its passage as possible.

Low vegetation is thereby crossed over with the head, neck and genitals; on trees, the bear stands fully erect or sits on its bottom and rubs its fur back and forth, as well as from top to bottom, over the trunk to infuse it with its scent. Something we can lavishly behold for a long time!

The next morning, we tried a location where, according to the information obtained yesterday from a local bartender, a bear with two cubs was hanging out a few days earlier. It is, of course, one of the many locations we know after fifteen years of visiting the Cantabrian Mountains.



However, the nest of a pair of golden eagles (2014) is no longer present. The same goes for the bear and her cubs here earlier this week. Since the backlight also plays tricks on us, we quickly visit on the way back to the hotel, another vantage point from where bears are spotted. Just like in 2012 and 2013, this is from the car. A young bear passes openly over some loose scree that breaks through the abundant vegetation of ferns. The very skinny animal forages for a long time in the rock crevices. Two local bear spotters, who also arrive at the lookout point, are delighted when we show them the location where the scrawny beast hangs out. After fifteen years you clearly notice that personal knowledge of the surrounding area is something that makes spotting and finding bears easier. These local bear lovers are not (yet) at that stage. Especially when they notice a second bear that can't be relocated. No worries: after all, we scored another bear! The third scanning session in a row already!

Harmony

We continue the trend with information we collected in another valley later in the day. Where we first marvel at orchids and subalpine flora, the afternoon brings us back to such a typical valley that you will only find here in Spain: winding, easily accessible mountain roads where nature and open space predominate. This also applies to the extensive agriculture and small villages with cosy bars with terraces from where you can spot a bear with a bit of luck, while sipping a beer and eating tapas.

For us this happened at a place where you have a view of a rock formation where in the past, we saw a golden eagle hunting chamois calves. Now we find the nesting location of some circling egyptian vultures and we see alpine and red-billed choughs that are clearly not pleased with a ravens presence. We also note migrating honey buzzards, soaring griffon vultures and a hovering short-toed eagle. The airspace never gets boring here!



The location that was given to us is also known to locals. The friendly way in which a couple accompanies us clearly shows that there is certainly something to discover here. And this time it's the locals who do. They are the first to find an immature bear of two to three years old on a part of the slope with a lot of grass. After sniffing around for a while, the animal quickly settles on its bottom before stretching out and falling asleep. The early time of day and warm weather will put the bears into inactive mode for a while! That is why we also leave this location. Even more so because we know of another location where a bear with cubs has been hanging out for several days.

A gem to end with

We also know this location from past visits. The steep valley from 15 years ago is these days now a fully-fledged vantage point to spot the resident bears. Some picnic tables and benches, as well as an information board and a covered viewing hut, make spotting bears a lot more comfortable. The bears here are part of the local community! Or how Spaniards are proud of their large carnivores and clearly have a green connection with their immediate environment! Great stuff! We turn out to be the only foreigners among ten locals present; also armed with binoculars and telescopes.

However, the resident bear with her two cubs is at a respectable distance. A very stable hand was really needed if you wanted to get her in your sight. This once again shows the added value of a binocular adapter mounted on the tripod. It provides a stable image in which the bear and her cubs are easily found. Moreover, top binoculars and telescopes really show a difference in terms of image quality. Enlarging the image to 40x zoom with the telescope completes the picture. It is a five-star experience in terms of nature experience!

Two cubs, less than three months old, are having fun around their mother, who is napping in a kind of pit. Every now and then she raises her head when her cubs get a little rough on a rock that acts as a playground for them. Once the evening progresses, the mother wakes up and the three go out. But the movement they make is nil since the cubs keep returning to their play rock. In addition, the mother is very wary. Something that, given last year's situation, no longer surprises us. The appearance of a local male is something we would rather not see happen now!

Half an hour before darkness falls, we get a great buzz observing the mother bear, seated on her bottom, suckling her two cubs.

An image that we will never forget and a very harmonious end to a long bear weekend! The trio then opts for the safety of the pit that we can still see, supplemented with some nesting material that the bear scraped from the nearby vegetation.

More than satisfied we close the evening with, for the first time, an extensive dinner at the restaurant. After all, on the previous days we always ate in the field since evenings were fully spent at viewpoints. Sagging afterwards, was something that was not possible because of the early rise the next day. Being in the right place at the right time really matters here!

The sequel

After all these years it really isn't that hard to spot spring bears in Spain with all our area knowledge. We are considering planning a 10-day trip in late May - early June focusing on five different bear locations that we now know very well. Something that, with a bit of luck, could yield 20 to 30 bears.

Some more pictures and video footage, related with this report, are added to one of the latest new sitemas (*Infanticide: an ugly side of nature*) on the europesbig5.com website.

