

A short update about lynx watching in Andujar Charles Foley



In late January 2025 I spent a couple of days in the Sierra Morena's looking for Spanish lynx and other mammals. There are lots of trip reports about this area so I will just provide a few thoughts and updates.

The most striking thing about lynx watching in this area is just how much it has changed in the past 20 years since I first visited. Back then the Iberian lynx was the world's rarest cat and in serious danger of going extinct. The only known populations were in the Coto Donana NP and the Sierra Morena mountains, and conservation efforts including captive breeding were only just getting underway. Today the Iberian lynx population exceeds 2000 individuals and there are sustainable populations across various different sites in Spain and now also in Portugal. Most of this is due to the success of the EU funded LIFE lynx project which worked with scientists and local land-owners to protect the species.

While back in the early 2000's you might expect to come across a few people looking for lynx in Andujar, these days it's a major wildlife destination. There are now several local companies dedicated to lynx watching and options of accessing private ranches which were formerly off-limits. During the lynx mating season of January through early March, you can expect to see many tour vehicles and private vehicles full of people all searching for the elusive cat.

I spent two nights at a recently established hotel in the area called Gato Clavo. They have set up a large hide for lynx photography on their property which can be booked by anyone – whether a hotel guest or not. The hide looks out onto a small spring which lynx come to drink at, and the surrounding environment has been shaped to optimise photographic opportunities. The hide can seat over 12 people and has different sections – an outdoor and an indoor section – which allows for different groups to visit at the same time. The whole set-up is fairly sophisticated. They have a permanent staff member supervising the hide and you can watch the action at the hide from a high- definition video camera that projects into the lodges' sitting room. The rate for using the hide for a day is 180 Euros which I believe covers a morning, afternoon and evening session. The hotel was comfortable and good value. I spoke with the main guide who told me that the hide overlaps with the territories of 5 lynx that visit it regularly. During the mating season most

people see a lynx within a day, though he recommends two days to be certain. In the hot summer months (when there are very few visitors) one could expect to see a lynx within three days of hide use.



View from hide at Gato Clavo



Inside hide at Gato Clavo

On the first afternoon I drove the road to La Lancha. There are now covered look-out spots along the road to provide some shelter to lynx watchers which is definitely a step-up from yesteryear. There were about 50 other people looking for lynx on the road that day and within a couple of hours someone had located

one of the old female lynxes that had recently been fitted with a radio-collar to keep tabs on her. Clearly fully accustomed to lynx fame, she strolled unconcernedly a few meters passed the ogling crowds and fell asleep on a rock 20 meters from the road. I had heard that a Least weasel had produced a family of kits on the La Lancha road, but I was a few days too late to find them. I did however see three River otters showing themselves well in the Jandula River.



The next day I went out with a local guide called Tirso Pérez who worked at Gato Clavo. I was interested in exploring some of the other parts of the Sierra Morena's beyond the two roads that most visitors use. Gato Clavo had just negotiated a deal with a land-owner who owns the ranch on the west side of the road driving down to El Encinarejo, giving them access to the land. And by 'just negotiated' I mean I was the first client they took there. We didn't have the best weather with some light rain for much of the day, but I did see some very impressive mouflon and large Red deer stags, as well as a big male ibex. It seems that increasing numbers of the private ranches are looking to diversify away from sport-hunting and tap the wildlife watching market. The first to do this was El Encinarejo which occupies the land opposite the viewing points along the Jandula River. It was bought a few years ago by a South African family who has converted it from a hunting reserve into a safari style reserve. They have opened up a luxurious lodge and imported European bison onto their land. For those with deep pockets, the lodge costs about 450 Euros a room per night.

On my way out I stopped for a meal at Los Pinos hotel and asked them how much business the lynx tourism brought in. They said that it basically kept the whole area going during the winter months when there are otherwise very few visitors. That is certainly good news for both the lynx and the local community. In fact, for some lynx watchers there are now too many visitors in Andujar and they are now heading to another location near Ciudad Real which has fewer people. However, if you hire a guide they can take you to places where you can easily get away from the crowds in Andujar. And besides, hanging out with the people in the crowds can be fun. Among the battle-hardened birders and photographers was a hairdresser from Cordoba sporting some fabulous tattoos and several young biology students. At one point a young local guy and his girlfriend who was wearing a (very) short mini-skirt stopped their car to ask what everyone was looking at. I showed them the lynx through my binoculars and they joined the crowd of happy people. And thus some new mammal-watchers were born!

