

Tour Report IBERIAN LYNX QUEST 19 – 26 January 2025

Iberian Lynx



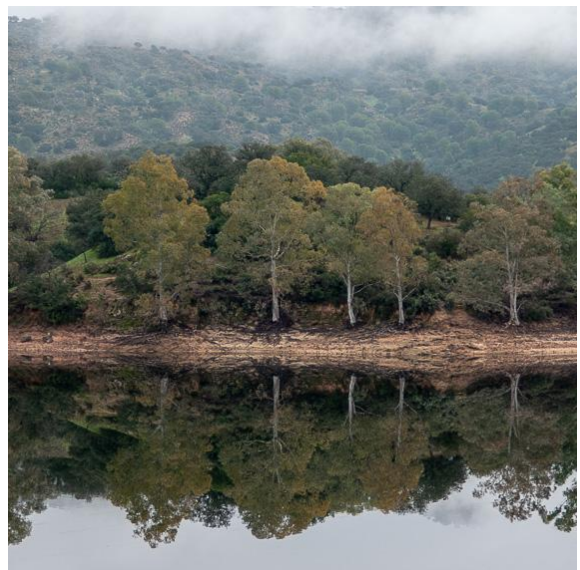
Great Egret



Eurasian Otter



El Encinarejo Reservoir



Compiled by John Muddeman

With some 2,600 Iberian lynx now present in the Iberian Peninsula (following a spectacular and continuing recovery after the population crashed to just some 100 individuals in just two population nuclei a little over three decades ago) it would seem that seeing them would be a lot easier. But of course, while the density of these animals has not changed much in the core areas, the population has spread hugely. The immense majority of these animals are still within the vast private estates in central and southern Spain, with extremely limited access.

The species was restricted to the greater Doñana area (in and around the National Park) and also in half a dozen of the huge estates lying in or adjacent to the Andújar Natural Park, northeast of Córdoba. A visit combining these two areas is still not only the most likely way of seeing one in the wild but is also a great reflection of their historical status.

Iberian lynx breeding success is directly linked to European rabbit population density and one of the main drivers for their catastrophic former decline was the appearance of rabbit haemorrhagic viral disease (RVHD). When combined with myxomatosis, already in the rabbit population, RVHD drastically reduced rabbit numbers across the country and consequently, severely impacted their specialist predator populations. Unfortunately, RVHD continues to decimate European rabbit populations locally, including in the Andújar mountains. However, given the large number of visitors passing through the area in their quest for this elusive species, with so many eyes on the lookout, the chances of catching up with one moving freely in the wild are as still good as anywhere.

So, how did we do?...

Day 1:

Sunday 19 January 2025

London Gatwick to Seville, then transfer to El Rocío

The flight from Gatwick to Seville went without a hitch and even landed a little early, around sunset. After approximately 30 minutes the group came through, we met in the arrivals hall and went through to the car park where I had the hire car ready. We loaded up only to discover that the folding middle seat would not drop back into place but with some combined minds on the job and some decent light, John cracked it and we headed out through the edge of Seville and then west to our destination.

Check-in was a little more complicated than hoped for, partly given the new requirements for hotel guests which came into force recently but, given the late hour, I accelerated the process, got us to our delicious tapas-style dinner in time and back to our very pleasant hotel for a decent night's rest.

Day 2:

Monday 20 January 2025

Raya Real + northern Doñana National Park

Still, with very light rain before dawn; increasingly breezy and wet; heavy belts of rain from noon onwards; rain continued into the night.

Given the need for an 8 am start, still dark, we headed to another small hotel by vehicle which was a few hundred metres away for breakfast. Once back, we were ready to be taken out by a local company, Doñana Nature, with Ana driving us in one of their 4x4 minibuses. With strong restrictions on vehicular access into and adjacent to the National Park, it's the perfect option to access the Northern fringe of the park where Iberian lynx regularly hold territory and sightings are relatively frequent.

It was actually darker than usual as we left given the complete cloud cover but as we gently explored the complex series of tracks crisscrossing the forested buffer zone to the park, so the light gradually increased. Enough to let us start appreciating some of the local wildlife, including red-legged partridges and some of Doñana's abundant red deer. A Eurasian sparrowhawk sat quietly in the shade of the stone pines but shot off soon after being spotted, but our eyes were firmly on looking for cats so we probably went past a few more other interesting creatures!

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After a little prep talk the evening before, it was still quite a surprise after just an hour when one of the clients suddenly called out "LYNX!" from the back of the vehicle. Ana quickly reversed us into position and we were treated to the sight of a young female sitting on the grass looking straight at us before it all too soon decided it wasn't happy, turned and trotted off behind some bushes...wow! This was by far the quickest I've seen a lynx on this tour and despite us not having time to get the cameras out, it was a fantastic start! Three other vehicles carrying guests also looking for the species soon appeared but unfortunately it did not reappear, despite us searching along a couple of nearby tracks, so we decided to head towards the open marsh and take a break for refreshments.

The J.A.V. visitors centre, out on the edge of the seasonally flooded marshes, was reached along a raised track. With a stop for a lovely group of stately common cranes striding across, the route was fine, given that the rain was hitting the opposite side of the vehicle and we saw a few other birds, such as a lovely little owl perched on a stump and a passing common raven.

We enjoyed coffee in the centre while watching some of the birds, with wild greylag geese, some gorgeous and very pink greater flamingos, dapper black-winged stilts and pied avocets vying for attention on the pools in front. At times, they were accompanied by small groups of foraging barn swallows and common house martins, both of which appear to winter here now in small numbers, in addition to early returning migrants, plus a couple of western marsh harriers, flocks of glossy ibis and fast-moving black-tailed godwits passing overhead.

Time was running on and the weather was slowly getting wetter. We carefully headed back along the raised bank towards the Raya Real and then headed east and into the Coto del Rey (*King's Hunting Estate*) and its "palace" (a former hunting lodge). The conditions were not conducive to getting out and having a walk or even seeing much but Ana detoured carefully to a favourite area and there, as hoped, a fine pair of Spanish imperial eagles appeared from the scattered trees and flew to perch on their respective electricity pylons.

We headed towards the "palace" to take a look, stopping to enjoy a superb flock of white storks grounded on the pastures in front, then continued on to the nearby La Garvija outhouse which, apart from a second comfort stop during the morning, gave us a little shelter as the rain started sheeting down outside.

We returned slowly along the Raya Real searching as we went, naturally without the same luck as had in the early morning – but we always try, of course! Returning to the Doñana Nature's offices, a fine picnic lunch was laid out, although we didn't start until a few purchases of cuddly lynx toys and t-shirts were made by a few of the party.

With lunch over we headed back to the hotel for a break, reconvening to judge the conditions a couple of hours later. I decided that given the state of the tracks and forecast for further wind and rain, it was better to stay inside, enjoy the hotel's log fire and run through the checklist for the day during a relaxing evening. Indeed, with over three inches of rain during the day and especially in the afternoon, it was a wise choice!

Dinner was taken at the same restaurant as the evening before, though getting there through the surprisingly deep pools and even across small streams, dissecting the town's sand streets, making it an interesting journey there and back!

Day 3:

Tuesday 21 January 2025

Villamanrique de la Condesa, Dehesa de Abajo, Villamanrique de la Condesa

Still and dry start after some heavy overnight rain; threat of rain most of the day; light to moderate rain starting from 4 pm onwards. Very mild, c. 16-18°C with light to moderate breeze in more exposed places in the afternoon.

The extensive plaza in front of the hotel was still peppered with pools of water but the streams were now significantly down following a few hours of respite from the rain leading up to dawn.

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As for the remainder of the tour, our start was taken an hour after breakfast (which started at approximately (!) 8 am (and still half an hour before sunrise). We headed out towards the east to the only lynx-watching spot that I considered would still probably be accessible. Indeed, all the streams and drainage channels running down from the north through the area were seething brown masses of water, with an apparently shallow but quite long flood across part of the road. Thankfully, this was safely passed once I'd carefully assessed its depth before trying and, even more to my liking, there were no similar incidents afterwards - despite some slimy patches on a section of the track almost at our destination.

Looking down from a bridge revealed how the much more intense the rain just to the north (almost five inches just inland!) had driven the river into full spate, though we were also assured that another flooded section of the exit road ahead, along which we later traversed, was also perfectly crossable with care. A stark contrast to the bone-dry conditions the week before when I was here!

A Spanish couple were standing looking along a couple of tracks waiting for lynx as well. However, we quickly discovered that despite having been there all of the previous day and again since before dawn, they'd seen none. After a short, but highly informative chat with a local warden who joined the party, I rejoined the rest of the group for a short walk where we noted in passing lots of small birds, apparently feeding actively after the bout of rain. Our concentration, however, was definitely focused on looking for fur and not feathers.

We took another short walk nearby, enjoying the very pleasant conditions as well as a couple of flighty Eurasian hoopoes and two fly-by hawfinches, in addition to the numerous Iberian magpies moving around. With no suggestion that any lynx were likely to appear in the near future, I decided that a warming drink and comfort stop was called for. While I went to buy a picnic lunch in the local supermarket, the group enjoyed teas or fruit juices in the adjacent little bar. Not the coffees as hoped as the water had been cut off so the coffee machine couldn't work - possibly as a result of the flooding. Hey ho!

We popped around to a rural hotel nearby since lynx have been seen hunting in their extensive grounds in the past but, while this seemed like a great option, ironically, it was closed to the public given a private event. Instead, we headed back to our prime spot. However, the news was still of no sightings, so we continued on and slowly through the section of flooded road, before heading out into the extensive pine forest and heath and onwards towards the rice fields and our next location.

A slightly odd-looking egret crossing the road in flight before landing on a stick under some trees stopped us dead in our tracks, and indeed it was a fine winter-plumaged squacco heron as hoped - a very scarce winter visitor in Spain and a great find! We watched until it finally crouched and stalked off towards a recently flooded channel, full of turbid water, presumably looking for any amphibians or other prey brought out by the rain.

A large water body ahead was interestingly two-toned, with bluer settled water at the far side contrasting sharply with the great majority now of a 'fresh' muddy, brown hue! It didn't seem to make much difference to the enormous number of birds though, with thousands of northern shoveler and Eurasian coots forming the bulk of the water birds and probably several thousand smart black-winged stilts lining virtually the entire far shore! Plenty of red-crested and common pochards added to the waterbird colours, while a large number of the rather more subdued marbled ducks were also present, along with a handful of deep maroon-coloured ferruginous ducks. With mallard, a few gadwall, northern pintail and Eurasian teal also present, plus two or three black-necked grebes, it was an impressive sight! A smattering of pink greater flamingos and seemingly black glossy ibis in a flock also added to the variety, though they remained distantly along the far bank. With white storks already on nests in adjacent trees, a couple of gaudy and trumpeting purple swamphens, along with much more subdued common moorhens in the emergent reedmace, numerous common chiffchaffs and Eurasian blackcaps flitting between the wild olives in front with occasional western marsh harriers overhead, we made a fabulous set of short stops to enjoy this avian bonanza!

Our lunch was taken nearby and on some picnic tables in a lovely area of dehesa (wood pasture). Despite a few tiny drops of rain, it made a very pleasant break.

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Plans for a coffee and comfort stop as we returned were thwarted first at a bar, which was (unusually) closed and then again at a campsite (where the bar was also closed) but they kindly let us use the loos. A great relief! A remarkably varied assortment of cats was noted around the permanent accommodation but it did mean that we moved back down to the lynx-watching spot again a little earlier than planned. Indeed, just in time... Not only did we note how the water in one channel had risen markedly since we passed a few hours before, as we were still deciding exactly where to stand to look for any possible lynx on the move, Celia spotted one nipping across a track off to one side and into the bushes. Just a couple of minutes later it reappeared at close range and jogged off over a bridge away from us, its stumpy tail wagging in the air as it went!

We stuck it out at the site for a while longer but as spitting rain turned to light rain and then to heavier rain, it was clear that the (much longer than expected) dry window during the day had ended. After sticking it out for 15 minutes longer than I had planned, it eased a bit, we finally called it quits and headed back. A local man passing in his small jeep stopped to warn us that going back the way we'd come was now impossible; the rising waters having breached the channel bank behind us in just the last hour or so since we'd passed. My feeling that this would mean the road we came on would also now be too deeply flooded to pass was also borne out with some police signs at the beginning of the road saying that it was closed. So, we took the much better asphalted road to the north and while a moderate bit longer, we arrived safely back without any further complications.

Dinner at the same restaurant again required careful negotiation of the abundant potholes and streams adorning El Rocío's sand streets, but we made it there (and back) for another delicious evening meal without having to call for a small boat...

Day 4:

Wednesday 22 January 2025

Villamanrique area, Odiel Estuary, El Portil, El Acebuche, La Rocina

A much better day than forecast; almost no rain; warming, albeit hazy, sunny at midday and p.m. Max. 18°C, with moderate SW wind on the coast.

With no rain at the start of the day, I held my word and we headed out again towards the last accessible lynx-watching site. A couple of interesting booted eagles perched on the pylons as we went but we didn't stop in order to reach the site as early as possible. Walking out from the vehicle and over the bridge, we discovered that virtually the entire far side and also further along our side had been completely flooded by the water overflowing from the river. Apparently, this was due to water being released from a dam upstream in order to alleviate potential problems there. Clearly, there was not going to be any lynx still in the usual site with wet ground. Even with the water level now receding, streams of bubbles were bursting on the surface, as the water penetrated deep into the excessively dry ground, which was actually a relief to see since it will last much longer into the spring rather than the great bulk of it just flowing out into the Guadalquivir.

We headed across towards Huelva into and through what looked like very light rain but it was just extremely humid air. We stopped to find surprisingly bright conditions, reaching the top of the salinas with two hours to enjoy the show! The first salt pan where we stopped held a fine range of birds including eight roosting Caspian terns, two Mediterranean gulls and a common shelduck of most note, in addition to black-winged stilts and greater flamingos amongst others. We continued on as quickly as possible in order to enjoy the rest of the site.

The vast extent of the estuary had been visible even before we'd reached the outskirts of Huelva, including some of its abundant breeding Eurasian spoonbills. The muddied brown waters of the river were in stark contrast to the beautiful blue of the clean pre-existing brackish sea waters in increasing quantity as we headed south.

A few western marsh harriers and little egrets were noted as we progressed but we aimed for the far end first, despite the odd stop for close Eurasian curlew, Eurasian whimbrel, Kentish plover and one or two

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other waders. Indeed, with the light behind us, one spot yielded a flock of roosting Audouin's gulls on a sand bar with a pinky-tinted adult slender-billed gull feeding in a pool in front. Superb!

A dirty sea was roaring in, making a fine sight and sound, though not a seabird other than distant gulls was noted from the shell-strewn beach and we spent little time there as a result. A couple of flighty crested larks and mobile fishing black-necked grebes were enjoyed as we started the return along with a fine selection of waders including common sandpiper, sanderling, common redshank, common greenshank, Eurasian oystercatcher, bar-tailed godwit and ruddy turnstone. After a little searching amongst the numerous lesser black-backed gulls, plenty of the paler-backed yellow-legged gulls were also noted. Several more harriers were noted hunting as we returned, with one of these catching my eye turning out to be a juvenile hen harrier which we successfully followed along the road allowing us great views of its brown colouration, white rump and long tail.

We left in record time, just after two hours, to not have lunch too late given the still uncertain forecast. I opted for a local restaurant in the small seaside town of El Portil nearby. This, was a great find, despite the short extra distance and in addition to a fine mixed salad, we tucked into a huge and very tasty platter of mixed hot meats. Although mild outside it was good to have a hot lunch, especially with a heavy rain shower falling just after we went inside.

Passing the port of Huelva, its enormous (and smelly) petrochemical plants and then some 40 kilometres of road through the heath and pines of the Natural Park bordering the Atlantic and acting as a buffer to the National Park, we headed to Doñana's largest official visitor's centre where, in addition to a small bar and shop, we enjoyed seeing our only Iberian lynx of the day! OK, so these were on CCTV in the captive breeding centre but they were still very interesting to watch for a little while. The large flock of Iberian magpies we had seen when we arrived outside had, of course, moved off by the time we came out through the pines, along with a colourful Eurasian hoopoe and much more discrete short-toed treecreeper.

We still had just enough time to slowly cruise the road to the La Rocina visitor's centre and back shortly before dusk, with a few red deer moving in the shade of some trees which made me skip a heartbeat! But nothing further was seen, even though I saw a brief Eurasian goshawk racing off over the forest.

El Rocío was now lively, with numerous people having come in for the coming weekend's festivities (the huge Triana romería). However, I learnt that the processional route, through the edge of the Doñana Park, had been cancelled given the flooding and unsafe conditions. This was actually great news for the lynx and other wildlife, which is normally badly disturbed by the thousands of pilgrims as they head to El Rocío cross country.

Our final large meal was taken at the restaurant again, with a superb gluten-free meat and vegetable paella continuing from either *salmorejo* or scrambled eggs with flaked cod. This was followed by a surprising, but very appropriate desert which I won't detail in order not to ruin the surprise for future visitors!

Returning to our hotel, there was a marked increase in visitors to the town with several of the local bars now open playing rather loud *flamenco* music, though thankfully this didn't penetrate as far as the rooms.

Day 5:

Thursday 23 January 2025

Transfer to Andújar; El Encinarejo in the afternoon/evening.

Murky, almost threatening conditions throughout the drive and with occasional showers. Mild at our accommodation, with a light rain shower at the end of lunch, clearing to leave stunning still and sunny conditions in the evening.

We bade farewell to a rather wet El Rocío, even though conditions were drier than forecast. A quick glance as we left the town revealed a deep, muddy brown lagoon devoid of birds except for a single Eurasian coot bobbing on the waves. A stark contrast to the thousands of birds present up until Sunday, though it's great to think that they can finally disperse out across vast swathes of flooded marsh to last this winter.

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Extra care taken during the drive was the order of the day, especially relevant as we passed five or six active accident sites, almost certainly a result of underestimating the heavy rain showers and slippery road conditions.

We stopped for a comfort break on route and then again in Andújar to buy picnic food for the next couple of days as well as to refuel, before continuing the final 20 minutes of winding road up into the hills to our accommodation. Picnic lunch was taken with the food set up inside but eaten out in the back garden, although it was slightly truncated by slightly heavier rain at the end which brought it to a natural end.

After settling in a little, we headed down to the nearby river for a relaxing walk and, in particular, to start our search for one or two more of our target species. A great egret was noted as we crossed the road bridge, which then flew upstream and landed just opposite us close to two little egrets gracing the rocks. Egrets and herons will often feed close to feeding otters. As we stopped and got out, the great egret called grumpily as it flew off. However, a series of large ripples in the water seemed to confirm my suspicions. Indeed, a fine Eurasian otter was feeding in the river amongst some fallen logs, soon crossing before moving upstream. We followed silently on foot, looking through gaps in the riverside vegetation, catching clear but short-lived views as it moved onwards.

The conditions were fabulous, dead still and tranquil after the recent rains. We continued slowly upstream, either on foot or in the vehicle, finally reaching another large pool where a family of otters regularly fish (although we found it full of noisy great cormorants)! It was fun to watch their antics, despite many flying out of the river and out of sight, only to return and pitch into a large tree opposite, their loud guttural calls echoing off through the *dehesa*. Indeed, it was a mesmerising situation and given the beautiful light and relaxing nature of the moment, we stayed to simply observe and enjoy the moment.

A client broke us out of this daydream, however, when he suddenly called out “LYNX”! And there, just a couple of metres away, was a stunning male Iberian lynx walking straight towards us!! Only he and I could see it at first as a large bush was hiding it from view from the rest of the group. It then turned and went up round the back of the turpentine tree to sniff and then scent-mark another bush, before turning back on itself. Trying to get the group into position to be able to see it was consequently tricky. When it appeared below the bush again, this time to the right, it rapidly went into jogging mode, quickly passing below the seven or eight people scattered across the grassy viewing area and down the little bank towards the river making it hard to see except from behind.

We tried to move up and away from it, moving parallel to it, to give it the space to relax and hopefully slow down. However, once it entered into the scrub at the far end, we could only track its movements for a minute or so as a group of Iberian magpies alarm-called at its presence. Suddenly all went silent. Sometime later a French observer came back noting he’d seen it further ahead. Although we moved even further ahead along the track, to a point where I considered it couldn’t pass without being seen (at a respectful range), there was simply no further sign of it.

We rounded off with a good look from the nearby footbridge before calling it a day, and a good one (!) and heading back to our accommodation for a short break before our first, impressive meal in our new hotel.

Day 6:

Friday 24 January 2025

Los Escoriales, Jándula Dam, La Lancha, Los Escoriales

Generally a very fine day after moderate fog until noon, though with a cooler light breeze mid-afternoon.

After our previous successes with the lynx, we were able to take it easy, though still full of hope to find another, of course! It was also time to turn our attention to the smaller birds of the area, some of which were new compared to our time in Doñana. After heavy rain during Tuesday and Wednesday night, numerous small birds were enjoying the good weather and there seemed to be something of a revival of the flora as well.

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A “mystical scene” was set by the morning’s fog as we left but where it started to randomly break, I suggested that it should really be termed a “fogical scene” - haha! This had lifted completely in a higher area as we passed, allowing us to stop and enjoy the far more rugged terrain here when compared to Doñana. A little owl adorning a rock in a fighting bull pasture was beautifully backlit, a small covey of red-legged partridge walked nervously under a fine spreading western holm oak and a few tuneless singing corn buntings and marvellously sonorous mistle thrushes in the surrounding trees provided a fine soundtrack. This was augmented by a single woodlark, its whistling cadences raining down over the scene. A colourful male European stonechat surveyed the scene from a small stick which had miraculously been left standing amongst the extensive destruction wreaked by wild boar.

A little ahead of some huge ancient bull feeding bowls, hewn from solid granite, we stopped to look out over a small streamline with innumerable rounded granite boulders interrupting the otherwise somewhat rolling landscape of grazing pastures in western holm oak *dehesa*. Common chaffinches, a single pale black redstart (or grey orangestart in this case), nervous common chiffchaffs and a few Eurasian blue and great tits were scattered throughout. Yet, as we continued and dropped towards a huge valley, the fog thickened to the point that I couldn’t see anything, so I turned back for us to enjoy the sun. We hadn’t enjoyed that much of it during the trip so far anyway!

Plenty of time was spent watching here, including sighting red and fallow deer and a few small birds including our first very flighty Iberian green woodpeckers (even though we’d heard a few already) and a large and rowdy group of Iberian and Eurasian magpies, in addition to a couple of raucous Eurasian jays. A group of griffon vultures spiralling up on a thermal also made a fine spectacle and once it had started to disband a little, with plenty of the birds disappearing up into the rising fog, it attracted the first of an adult pair of Spanish imperial eagles, plus a displaying common buzzard. Two enormous cinereous vultures came in to contemplate the fray, drifting through the bottom of the thermal and gliding past, almost overhead...

A comfort break beckoned for a few of the group so we made as rapid a trip as possible back to the accommodation, including a quick drink, before returning as the fog had finally completely lifted.

We continued onwards definitively this time, working our way right down to the impressive Jándula dam jammed between towering rock faces, where a fantastic cloud of Eurasian crag martins resting on the upper dam to catch the sun, two pairs of red-billed choughs loudly called and flew around and more vultures cruised over the upper edge of the valley.

Beautiful views were afforded by the deep river valley carving its way through these mountains, while a male Spanish ibex sleeping atop a huge moss-covered rock was great to find, followed by a lovely adult male blue rock thrush on some boulders above the reservoir!

A tasty picnic lunch was enjoyed at a fine viewpoint with a couple of stone picnic tables, before we spent a short spell back amongst the small crowds along the La Lancha track to search for possible lynx and other goodies, before we returned to our own and much quieter viewpoint, as in the morning, passing several fallow deer en route.

A couple of colourful Iberian green woodpeckers finally put themselves into photographic range, though a client’s second battery ran out just beforehand... Arghh! A large flock of mostly pure rock doves suddenly appeared, wheeling around some old abandoned mine buildings where they were presumably going to roost. Calling common firecrests and little owls were the most interesting species during a couple of short walks along the track.

The drive back, shortly before sunset, was enlivened by the glowing red orb of the fast-dipping sun, plunging towards the horizon as the cloud broke just in time.

Day 7:

La Lancha, Jándula Dam, Los Pinos, Gorgojíl

Saturday 25 January 2025

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A poor forecast; light patchy fog to start; cloud base lowering and mizzle; increasingly heavy rain by midday; drier start to the afternoon; persistent light to moderate rain, starting to clear just at sunset.

A couple of hawfinches scoped high in a bare poplar after breakfast making it an interesting start to the day. Just after we'd started to head off again towards La Lancha, a stop was required almost immediately, as two young red squirrels were spotted chasing around on the road and a couple of roadside trees before they crossed just ahead of us. I had to move on rapidly before we could try to get pictures, with two other vehicles just behind me probably wondering why on earth I'd stopped in the middle of the road close to a junction!

We moved on noting a few fine red and fallow deer as we progressed, before finally disembarking the vehicle once we'd reached the first extensively open area of the valley side. We checked the slopes below and opposite, where plentiful red deer and a few European rabbits were found (especially with the thermal visor), though our second new mammal of the day for the tour was soon spotted: a superbly chubby, curly-horned male mouflon resting quietly on a fine patch of brilliant green grass in the shade, giving us great views.

With a chilly, light and damp breeze blowing into our faces, we (and most of the others present here) soon moved on though. We'd found a pair of binoculars and, despite stopping numerous times to inform nearly all the watchers around, we could find no owner with no news of any lynx being seen we continued down to the dam. A car pulled up shortly after we'd arrived and a grateful watcher reclaimed his binoculars. Job done!

The walk was very quiet again, except for a fine herd of Spanish ibex, plus other individuals scattered across the hillside which we again enjoyed in the scope. A Spanish imperial eagle called briefly but quickly drifted off and several griffons and a couple of cinereous vultures were wheeling around over the cliffs opposite. They were presumably drying off after a damp night but perhaps also drying off in preparation for the approaching weather...

A walk across the dam was similarly rather unrewarding, despite plenty of Eurasian crag martins that wheeled overhead at one point. As the rain started falling with more intent we headed back to the car and drove slowly back to Los Pinos for a hot drink, followed by a picnic lunch in one of the apartments. This was not without pausing briefly en route for a golden eagle which cruised over all too fast.

We left again at 1430h, more in hope than with great expectation, of seeing another lynx given the poor weather and so retraced our steps to Los Escoriales before taking an alternative track to the north. This was in good condition and we passed through a much richer area of native scrub and woodland in addition to large swathes of quite heavily grazed western holm oak dehesa, before dropping down into and through the middle of a large and quite steeply sloping estate. Lots of red deer were present including one or two really fine stags, plus I could see plenty of rabbits visible too using the visor. But as the conditions slowly began to deteriorate cruising in the minibus and stopping only to check out interesting things, turned into the norm.

That said, we were significantly below the cloud base here, unlike the western side of the ridges such as at La Lancha which had become engulfed by the cloud. We continued searching up and down the tracks well into the evening. A scan of a fine old olive orchard off to one side at one point also turned up trumps in the form of three young Iberian hares crouched immobile in their surface lairs, though seeing them in the scope required considerable patience and time!

Large numbers of tiny recently born lambs outnumbered the ewes in a couple of small flocks as we passed through the main estate and we asked ourselves how they could survive a potential lynx attack. Not to worry though, as a couple of large mastiff dogs appeared around the corner and tried to chase and bark us back into submission!

The other lynx watchers had largely packed up and had started heading back but the cloud still hadn't dropped much on our side, even though the rain was a little tiring to work with. We finally returned at sunset, with the low cloud and fog visibly pulling away to the east and gaps in the cloud cover starting to

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appear for a quite colourful last-minute sunset.

Our final dinner of four starters and a main course choice was again delicious and once we'd finished, including running through the checklist at high speed, we were still in good time for a decent night's kip!

Day 8:

Sunday 26 January 2025

El Encinarejo, Mirador del Peregrino

Low cloud to start with and wisps of fog in the valley. Still, quite bright and very pleasant, albeit overcast.

We left Los Pinos at our usual 9 o'clock hour, though it was again shrouded in moderate early morning fog. As we dropped towards the river, however, it soon became clear that we were actually in cloud on the top of the ridge and the evocative wisps of fog clinging to the valley sides were few and far between and disappearing fast.

A movement I caught out of the corner of my eye required a little backtrack and as we stopped at the only spot with a gap between two holm oaks, so my suspicions were confirmed. A second adult Spanish imperial eagle flapped in and landed beside the first, their white 'epaulettes' showing well and even the straw-coloured crown and nape when they turned to look at us, despite their being a little obscured. What a great start!

Once again we took our time to drive along the track at the bottom, especially having heard that a female Iberian lynx had been seen there on Wednesday, quite close to the entrance. Of course, it's not at all normal for an animal like this to reappear in exactly the same place twice over the course of just a few days but the search was fun and with a couple of rabbits spotted: if the prey's about, why not the predator? A great egret near the start was again a good spot as well, with an Iberian green woodpecker showing as it sat in a treetop, despite being at a distance.

Large ripples on the river where we'd seen an otter on our first visit reaffirmed its continued presence (although it stayed out of sight), with our second, starkly and contrastingly white great egret also present. Several small groups were present watching at the main otter pool. Three otters were fishing out in the open as we pulled up. Despite disappearing intermittently for a short while, they all reappeared having moved along the far riverbank. Periodically one would surface with a small fish which it took to the bank to noisily eat, with all three climbing out onto the bank at one point to squabble over one fish, sniff around, spraint and then move on... Fantastic!

The grass and other low vegetation were still very wet and with little sign of it drying in a hurry, so instead of hanging around with the moderate numbers of lynx watchers, photographers and other weekend visitors milling around the bridge, we continued along the track into a quieter area. Here we took a couple of short walks among the trees and with lovely views over the mirror-like reservoir. A couple of Eurasian nuthatches at least showed and called well!

A little look back at the bridge coincided perfectly with the arrival of two Eurasian otters, though they dived to pass underneath and disappeared into a hole buried within the rocks somewhere. Two white and a single grey wagtail, plus perhaps a dozen common chiffchaffs were visible on the river, catching invisibly small flies as they acrobatically cartwheeled over the water.

With time running out, we started to head back but stopped to take in the fabulous view over the river and estate opposite. The thermal imager picked out a dull hotspot a long way off. No, it wasn't a lynx, but the introduced European bison known to roam the estate and the first time I'd ever seen it here! Certainly an interesting way to round off the tour.

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Checklist for Iberian Lynx Quest, January 2025



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	MAMMALS								
1	RED FOX	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>					✓		
2	EURASIAN OTTER	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				✓			✓
3	IBERIAN LYNX	<i>Lynx pardinus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
4	RED DEER	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
5	FALLOW DEER	<i>Dama dama</i>				✓	✓	✓	
6	MOUFLON	<i>Ovis orientalis</i>						✓	
7	SPANISH IBEX	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>					✓	✓	
8	RED SQUIRREL	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>						✓	
9	WOOD MOUSE	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>						✓	
10	EUROPEAN RABBIT	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	IBERIAN HARE	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>						✓	
12	SPANISH IBEX	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>							
13	EUROPEAN BISON* Int.	<i>Bison bonasus</i>							✓
	BIRDS								
1	GREYLAG GOOSE	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓						
2	EGYPTIAN GOOSE	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>					✓		
3	COMMON SHELDUCK	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				✓			
4	NORTHERN SHOVELER	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓	✓				
5	GADWALL	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓	✓				
6	MALLARD	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
7	NORTHERN PINTAIL	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓					
8	EURASIAN TEAL	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓					
9	MARBLED DUCK	<i>Marmaronetta angustirostris</i>		✓					
10	RED-CRESTED POCHARD	<i>Netta rufina</i>		✓	✓				

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11	COMMON POCHARD	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		✓					
12	FERRUGINOUS DUCK	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>		✓					
13	COMMON QUAIL	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>		H					
14	RED-LEGGED PARTRIDGE	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	ROCK DOVE / FERAL PIGEON	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	COMMON WOOD PIGEON	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	EURASIAN COLLARED DOVE	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	COMMON MOORHEN	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
19	EURASIAN COOT	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓				
20	WESTERN SWAMPHEN	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		✓					
21	COMMON CRANE	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓						
22	LITTLE GREBE	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		✓	✓				
23	BLACK-NECKED GREBE	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		✓	✓				
24	GREATER FLAMINGO	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	✓	✓	✓				
25	EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			✓				
26	BLACK-WINGED STILT	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	✓	✓	✓				
27	PIED AVOCET	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	✓						
28	NORTHERN LAPWING	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓					
29	GREY PLOVER	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			✓				
30	COMMON RINGED PLOVER	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			✓				
31	KENTISH PLOVER	<i>Anarhynchus alexandrinus</i>			✓				
32	WHIMBREL	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			✓				
33	EURASIAN CURLEW	<i>Numenius arquata</i>			✓				
34	BAR-TAILED GODWIT	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>			✓				
35	BLACK-TAILED GODWIT	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓						
36	EURASIAN SNIPE	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓						
37	RUDDY TURNSTONE	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓				
38	SANDERLING	<i>Calidris alba</i>			✓				
39	DUNLIN	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			✓				
40	COMMON SANDPIPER	<i>Actitis hypoleuca</i>			✓				
41	COMMON REDSHANK	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓				
42	COMMON GREENSHANK	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓				
43	CASPIAN TERN	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>			✓				
44	SANDWICH TERN	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>			✓				

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45	SLENDER-BILLED GULL	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>			✓				
46	BLACK-HEADED GULL	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓				
47	AUDOUIN'S GULL	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>			✓				
48	MEDITERRANEAN GULL	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>			✓				
49	YELLOW-LEGGED GULL	<i>Larus michahellis</i>			✓				
50	LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			✓				
51	WHITE STORK	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
52	GREAT CORMORANT	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	GLOSSY IBIS	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓	✓					
54	EURASIAN SPOONBILL	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		✓	✓				
55	LITTLE EGRET	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
56	SQUACCO HERON	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>		✓					
57	GREAT EGRET	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓
58	WESTERN CATTLE EGRET	<i>Ardea ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓
59	GREY HERON	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
60	BLACK-WINGED KITE	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		✓					
61	GRIFFON VULTURE	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>					✓	✓	
62	CINEREOUS VULTURE	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>					✓	✓	
63	BOOTED EAGLE	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
64	SPANISH IMPERIAL EAGLE	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓
65	GOLDEN EAGLE	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>						✓	
66	EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓			✓		
67	NORTHERN GOSHAWK	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>							✓
68	WESTERN MARSH HARRIER	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
69	HEN HARRIER	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			✓				
70	RED KITE	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
71	COMMON BUZZARD	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	LITTLE OWL	<i>Athene noctua</i>	✓				✓		
73	TAWNY OWL	<i>Strix aluco</i>				H			
74	EURASIAN HOOPOE	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
75	COMMON KINGFISHER	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				✓			
76	GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				H			✓
77	IBERIAN GREEN WOODPECKER	<i>Picus sharpei</i>				✓	✓	H	✓
78	COMMON KESTREL	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

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79	IBERIAN GREY SHRIKE	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		✓	✓				
80	IBERIAN MAGPIE	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	EURASIAN MAGPIE	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	RED-BILLED CHOUGH	<i>Pyrhcorax pyrrhcorax</i>					✓	✓	
83	WESTERN JACKDAW	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓			H	✓	
84	NORTHERN RAVEN	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
85	CRESTED TIT	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>				H	✓		
86	BLUE TIT	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
87	GREAT TIT	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
88	WOODLARK	<i>Lullula arborea</i>					✓	H	H
89	CRESTED LARK	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
90	BARN SWALLOW	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓		✓				
91	EURASIAN CRAG MARTIN	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>					✓	✓	✓
92	COMMON HOUSE MARTIN	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
93	CETTI'S WARBLER	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H	H	H			H
94	LONG-TAILED TIT	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
95	COMMON CHIFFCHAFF	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
96	ZITTING CISTICOLA	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>			✓				
97	BLACKCAP	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			✓	✓		✓	
98	SARDINIAN WARBLER	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>			H		✓		
99	COMMON FIRECREST	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓			H		
100	EURASIAN WREN	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				H	H		✓
101	EURASIAN NUTHATCH	<i>Sitta europea</i>				✓	✓		✓
102	SPOTLESS STARLING	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
103	SONG THRUSH	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓		H	✓	
104	MISTLE THRUSH	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>					H	H	✓
105	REDWING	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		H	8				
106	COMMON BLACKBIRD	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
107	EUROPEAN ROBIN	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		H	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
108	BLUETHROAT	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>			✓				
109	BLACK REDSTART	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
110	BLUE ROCK THRUSH	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>					✓		
111	EUROPEAN STONECHAT	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓			
112	HOUSE SPARROW	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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113	GREY WAGTAIL	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				✓		✓	✓
114	WHITE WAGTAIL	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓
115	MEADOW PIPIT	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓				✓	✓	
116	EURASIAN CHAFFINCH	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓		H	✓	✓	✓
117	HAWFINCH	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		✓				✓	✓
118	EUROPEAN GREENFINCH	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓					
119	EUROPEAN GOLDFINCH	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
120	EUROPEAN SERIN	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓				
121	CORN BUNTING	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
	BUTTERFLIES								
1	SMALL WHITE	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			✓				
2	WESTERN DAPPLED WHITE	<i>Euchloe daplidice</i>					✓		
3	CLOUDED YELLOW	<i>Colias crocea</i>					✓		
4	SMALL COPPER	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>				✓	✓		
5	RED ADMIRAL	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓		✓			
	REPTILES								
1	SPANISH TERRAPIN	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>				✓			
2	GENIEZ'S WALL LIZARD	<i>Podarcis virescens</i>					✓		

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