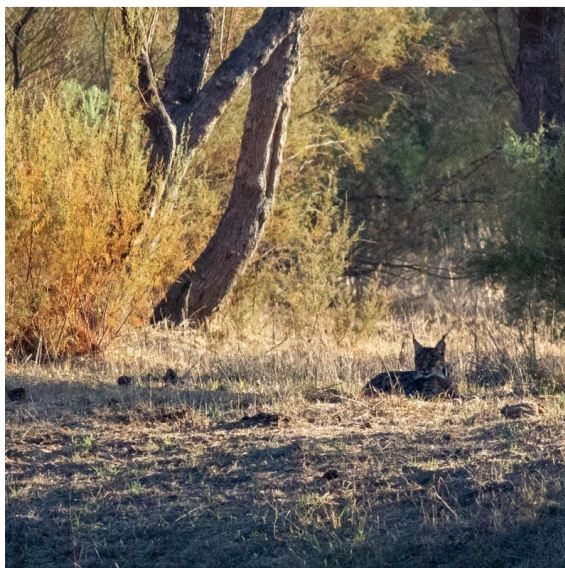


Tour Report

Spain – Iberian Lynx Quest

9 – 16 October 2022

Iberian lynx



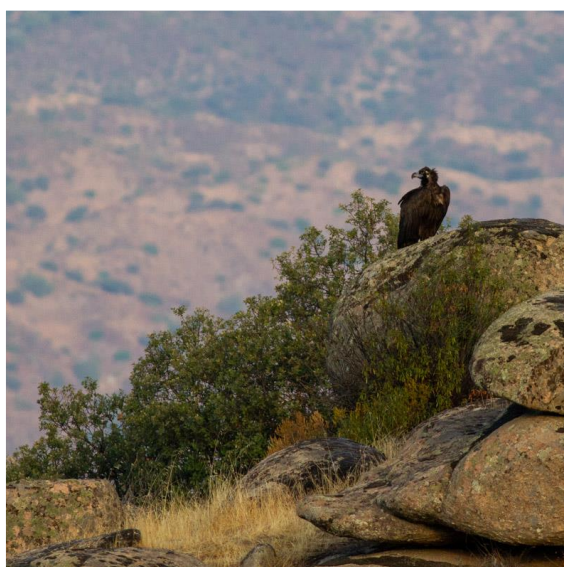
Fallow deer buck



Eurasian spoonbill



Cinereous vulture



Compiled by John Muddeman

The Iberian lynx is still one of the rarest wild cats in the world, though fortunately, the sad accolade of being the rarest now pertains to another species elsewhere. Following a critical situation in 2002 deriving from the collapse in wild rabbit populations across the Iberian Peninsula from the 1980s onwards, just two separate populations plus a few other dispersed individuals totalling up to 100 individuals survived. Thankfully, following intensive conservation measures, there are now officially almost 2,000 free-living individuals. This number is rising year on year, and the species is being successfully returned to former haunts and, to a much lesser degree, dispersing to former haunts by its own means.

Naturally, with so few individuals still, it remains a challenge to see one in the wild, with just the areas of Andújar and Doñana in Andalucía currently accessible with a realistic chance of viewing them. Consequently, basing the tour around a visit to both sites to see their differences and similarities is doubly rewarding. Firstly, to experience these two areas directly, which physically look so different, but in floristic and wildlife terms are surprisingly similar. Secondly, to give financial support to the local communities of the respective areas where the animal survived in the wild state via our group visits there. Of course, if there's no lynx activity in one area compared to the other when we visit, we also stand better opportunities for seeing one!

Lynx watching can be a frustrating activity though! Plenty of observers now visit the countryside in their search for this gorgeous animal, meaning that better patterns of sightings and so likely occurrences while searching are available to the visitor. Still, at the same time, the notoriously fickle nature of the species in terms of its activity patterns means that more random sightings are now made, making it appear easier than a visit should see one. This year also, significant numbers of females still have cubs in tow and tend to be shier, adding to the complexities of sighting one, plus the drought continues. So perhaps, apart from being such an incredibly attractive animal, it's also what makes any sighting of one so very special.

Day 1: Arrive Seville & transfer to Andújar

Sunday 9 October 2022

Weather: Very warm and sunny with some cloud, mostly to the north-west and temperature peaking late afternoon at 29°C.

The group arrived slightly early on their flight from London to meet me and given delays with the hire car people, I only came into the arrivals hall just after they'd all come through!

The timing of arrival was just on our side, so, with everyone happy, we started the very warm and sunny two-and-a-half-hour drive to Andújar. We stopped at a roadside service station for drinks and lunch for those who wanted them! A few red kites and common buzzards had livened up the journey for those not taking a catch-up nap. At the same time, it was also interesting to see how Andalucía is using the very sunny weather, which predominates at this latitude, with a series of different solar power harvesting schemes.

We finally reached our accommodation in the hills near Andújar. After check-in, followed by a short break to unpack, we headed down to the Jándula River to enjoy the beautiful warm conditions and get a first feel for the area and its habitats. The access road snakes its way down through umbrella pine-clad slopes, with rough granite crags, rock outcrops, and patches of short grass under western holm oak and narrow-leaved ash Dehesa (wood pasture). The ravages of the ongoing drought were very evident, with the smaller bushes retaining only minimal leaf cover and the dry grass cooked to a pale yellow where it hadn't been razed to the ground by the herbivores present.

The road down was busy, thankfully in the opposite direction, with the track, we then took parallel to the river rather disturbed by various weekenders. Our first Iberian magpies put in a show as they careered around in unruly style over the picnic tables near the river, looking for table scraps! Their black crowns, powder-blue wings, and tail smartly offset their beige bodies, though as often, as quickly as they appeared, they were gone!

Barely a ripple stirred the river's surface as we peered down from a raised viewpoint a little further ahead. However, we were quickly distracted by the 'bellyache bellowing' of rutting red deer, while a few other deer chasing under the holm oaks were male fallow deer. Some distant 'barks' alerted us to the presence of Spanish imperial eagle, though it remained unseen, and we contented ourselves with hearing a few smaller birds of the river, including singing (or is it yelling?!) Cetti's warbler, plus calling hawfinch of most note, the latter seen briefly by one of the group.

Viewing from a footbridge near a small dam revealed more birdlife, including an elegant grey wagtail or two on the emergent rocks in the river and shrilly whistling common kingfishers, which even sped underneath us like an electric blue bolt on one occasion. European robins flicked across, a few of the very darkly coloured local irbii race long-tailed tits fed in the bushes below, a couple of Sardinian warblers rattled from the bushes, and even a Eurasian wren singing from the depths of a large willow bush excited another. It flew quickly up towards it before diving deeply into the same bush, presumably for a quick fight!

We returned at dusk after an exciting final part of the visit when another observer came up and informed us that a female Iberian lynx and cub had been seen walking towards us just a few hundred metres downstream and just five minutes before. Not that we saw a thing, however, despite a slightly nervous wait!

We climbed back up the valley to go quickly in for the first of our huge and delicious meals here, celebrating our arrival with the local red wine!

Day 2: Andújar

Monday 1 October 2022

Weather: Basically cloudy throughout the day; mild to warm; still; max. 25°C.

We awoke to find that the rain forecast had not materialised, and we were met by mild, overcast and almost dead-still conditions outside, which largely stayed that way for the rest of the morning.

After our 'near-miss' the evening before, we headed back down to the same riverside site, hoping more than expecting. Just one other observer, another 'lynxer' was there, but there was no sign of the local otters or, not surprisingly, Iberian lynx. However, the other lynxer suggested that the female plus the cub had crossed the bridge the night before, giving cub footprints near the far end of the bridge.

The birding was slow too, so when a common magpie started rattling away in an area of mixed scrub and trees on a nearby slope, I began to take a look, just in case. Magpies are often seemingly upset by the lynx, calling loudly and repeatedly in response and, with luck, alerting observers to their presence. The bird soon flew off, rattling elsewhere instead. Still, fortunately, most of the group started following up behind me. Just seconds later, two of the group spotted a fine adult Iberian lynx walking across the slope under the trees. However, it disappeared, never to reappear!

We spent about half an hour waiting and watching, to no avail, but it was still a good omen, especially following the previous evening's 'miss'. We continued to a nearby recreational area overlooking the reservoir, with the very flat water even partly reflecting the mountain slopes and trees in the huge estate opposite, with a chance to start getting our eye in for spotting mammals off at range thanks to a couple of red deer on the other side. A few high-flying vultures started passing over, including a couple of cinereous and several griffons, with a mistle thrush pitching into the top of a tall eucalyptus and a grey heron crossing the calm waters of most note.

We stopped back at the bridge again for a last look before moving on, with a lovely common kingfisher sitting quietly amongst some dead twigs providing great views and yet more of the very characteristic Iberian magpies generally getting up to mischief in the riverside vegetation!

Coming back late morning allowed me first to stop at the Pilgrim's viewpoint en route to contemplate the depth of the Jándula valley and, as it turned out, see a few raptors. We saw black and griffon vultures again, plus brief common kestrel, a Eurasian sparrowhawk, two common buzzards and, of most note, a high-flying osprey, circling up with vultures and presumably on active passage southwards!

I dropped everyone back at our accommodation before heading off to Andújar to buy picnic goods for the next two days' lunches, refuelling as I went, and after returning just after 13:00. We were quickly off again. This time we drove out quite slowly on a different narrower and even more winding road than the one the day before, principally traversing pine forest, with a few scattered buildings and their gardens varying the texture of the views. It always makes me wonder what it might be like to own one and watch a lynx wander across your lawn! The air was still hazy from the Saharan dust, hampering the view.

Plenty of red deer were spotted close to the road as we progressed. However, it was very noticeable how few big males there were and how a few of the hinds were escorted by still relatively small fawns, suggesting that the drought had affected last winter's rut too. Some had mated in the spring and given birth correspondingly much later. This is presumably an adaptation to the variable Mediterranean climate. As we witnessed last year, it does appear to happen in the continued absence of autumn rain, but with sufficiently wet spring weather.

With it being quite late, we headed straight out to the main viewing area, seeing a few typically skittish fallow deer as we continued to where lynx is most often observed. We paused and met a local guide who was told that a female Iberian lynx with two cubs was sitting on a path below us, visible from about 100 metres further along the track! And indeed, they were, plus another cub of the same mother from the previous year!!!

Several equally happy lynx watchers were enjoying the views of the cats, and in warm, almost dead-still conditions under a cloudy sky, we were rewarded with surprisingly good watching conditions, despite the distance! While the distance to the animals made photography a challenge, two of the group were even offered the use of a monster lens belonging to a French watcher, allowing them to obtain reasonable results even despite a little heat haze.

Lunch was taken from the back of the minibus, and while we continued to watch, it was a relatively late affair, but no one cared! Things then came to a surprising end when a small white van started down the track the lynx were resting beside. Another lynx, a male called Rafiki, suddenly appeared beside the family group and rushed across the track ahead of the approaching vehicle, along with one of the cubs, while mum and the last cub did the same after it had passed ... What was going on?! It turned out that 2-3 times a week, supplementary food is offered to the lynx here in the near-absence of wild rabbits given the prolonged drought and difficulties in maintaining the rabbit population, with the white van being the delivery vehicle!! As they were all now out of sight around a sharp bend in the track, we couldn't see what was happening, but one experienced watcher nearby commented that it would take them around 40 minutes to eat the rabbit and then they'd go to sleep somewhere quiet and that that was it for the rest of the day!

I admit to being slightly sceptical, but after getting no sign of the animals for 20 minutes, we moved further along the track to a viewpoint with a better view of the next section where they had disappeared and waited. Strangely, our concentration had drifted off watching the spot until I glanced back and saw Rafiki sitting on the side of the track in full view! He then turned before suddenly lying down sideways, giving us lovely scope views. We watched him for a while, panting from the exertion of eating a clearly very large rabbit before just as suddenly, in another lapse in our concentration, he was gone, without trace, again!

A few red deer stags still bellowed from the shade, but those few were lying down in the deep shade to keep as cool as possible and remained invisible! A couple of wild boar piglets however decided to put in a show. It's unusual to see tiny, almost black piglets out without the safety of large adults, so I assumed that they'd lost their mother, but they were surviving by foraging under the western holm oaks, presumably snuffling up the first of the autumn's fallen acorns.

A few birds became more evident, with scattered Eurasian magpies, small flocks of Iberian magpies filtering through the trees and various small birds, including European robin, Sardinian warbler and even a fine male blue rock thrush up on some boulders.

After patiently waiting, however, there was no further sign, so we soon decided to move on and try something very different, and we took the winding track down to the large Jándula Dam. A few spots of rain were falling, threatening greater things, but it turned into nothing more so we took a short walk out to try and get better views of the huge rock faces opposite. Several Eurasian crag martins were flying around at various heights. A few barbel in the reservoir way below us must have been pretty big, given the impressive drop to the water's surface. Given the important drawdown, the huge area of exposed rock meant the visible rock formations were interesting, including a gargantuan turtle 'fossil' and a live Spanish terrapin sunbathing on the shore for good measure!

Our final sighting was of a small Iberian ibex which after first giving most of us excellent views as it sat on a low wall, suddenly spooked at our presence and rushed off headlong down the slope to the cover of some large trees at the bottom.

It was now quite late, so we headed back up past the viewing area, actually not stopping to look at the now even more distant female and cubs on view (according to other observers present), and decided to take the evening drive back mostly in good light. Both red and fallow deer were out in a little more number than earlier, but still not the greater number expected.

Another huge meal was taken after a terrific day and we went to bed wondering what was in store for the following day!

Day 3: Andújar

Tuesday 11 October 2022

Weather: Very little cloud until 17:00, very pleasant in the shade to hot in the sun, max. 27°C

We were greeted with almost clear blue skies, much cleaner than the previous day, and while it was a cool start, it would get quite a bit hotter!

After another filling breakfast with delicious freshly-squeezed orange juice of particular note and the doorstep toast, we headed directly to the La Lancha area today. We only paused to check a couple of possible stops for a perched black vulture and enjoy the fine scenery.

Several groups of observers were already along the first part of the track today. Though none were intently watching anything earnestly and talking to a few, 'nothing' had been seen yet; in other words, no Iberian lynx so far! We watched and waited for some time before moving on a little, heading down towards the dam much earlier than the day before to see it in different conditions. The now hot sun was producing quite different conditions to the day before. The move was particularly worthwhile when one of the group spotted a small group of animals trooping along the opposite slopes of the huge reservoir below us. We leapt out and grabbed to scope to contemplate three lovely Iberian ibex walking steadily across the gravelly slopes, led by a superb adult male with impressive horns and smart black leggings! As I drove the bus to the end, everyone else walked, enjoying a bit of a leg stretch. Once we'd reunited, we headed across the dam, with one of the group refinding the large male ibex opposite us. Numerous Eurasian crag martins wheeled around below and occasionally above us, giving us lovely views and almost another interesting photographic challenge!

A famous tunnel here enabled us to walk through and observe a few roosting bats, which included the very distinctive greater mouse-eared and a dense cluster of what looked like 'fur-ball' Schreiber's bent-winged bat. It wasn't clear if any southern Daubenton's or other species were present, but we didn't delay too long to keep possible disturbance to a minimum. A pair of adult Spanish imperial eagles wheeling around displaying over a nearby mountain was excellent to watch. Still, it was quiet otherwise and with time

marching on, we decided to return to our accommodation and take lunch there, despite stopping, of course, for a fine male mouflon spotted foraging under some oaks in a pasture.

Apart from the odd bothersome wasp, lunch was lovely and relaxing outside our accommodation, and with the sun still beating down, despite a nice breeze having arisen, we took a siesta and met again at 17:00.

Searching for lynx requires considerable patience and a degree of stoicism. As one guide, a former researcher working on the species once pointed out to me that the more he knows about the lynx, the less he knows about when and where they'll be. Sightings are nearly always random and, eventually, almost inevitably down to luck. So, we tried with a drive to a new area, along yet another track that I enjoy as much for the views as for the (good) chance of seeing Iberian lynx, with the added bonus that it's not as well visited as the other two main sites. Not before watching and taking pictures of a lovely short-toed treecreeper inching its way up a fine western holm oak beside the car park, however! Our drive led us through relatively more open habitat than in the morning, plus some stunning views to the east over the vast swathes of olive groves in Jaén province to the mountains way behind. However, the main interruptions on the way were for yet more red-legged partridge, our first Eurasian hoopoe and then scat, LOTS of lynx scat! We had already passed a couple of cars on the way, which surprised me, but then we met three mountain bikers before hitting more cars. What was going on? Well, it suddenly dawned on me that the 12th is the National Day of Spain, or Hispanic Day and the public were out for a drive the evening before to look at the deer rut! Of course, we persisted, seeing a couple of lovely little owls as a reward, but decided to return relatively early, in good light. Numerous red and fallow deer were enjoyed again, but it was not quiet along the track, given the other vehicles and some cyclists, so it was hardly a surprise that we drew a blank for our main quarry.

We returned in good time for our last - typically huge and very tasty - meal at Los Pinos in high spirits and looking forward to a change of scenery and perhaps luck the following day.

Day 4 : Andújar, then transfer to El Rocío + Doñana National Park

Wednesday 12 October 2022

Weather: Very fine, with some light high cloud p.m.; cool 10°C start, in the high 20 °C in Doñana.

We headed out shortly after our planned 07:45 pre-breakfast trip, partly given the very fresh conditions! It was still chilly in the crystal clear and still conditions when we got down to the valley bottom, and it was 10°C down by the river. Given some large puddles and the damp vegetation, it had clearly rained hard during the night just here, without a drop falling at our accommodation, however!

A hoped-for Eurasian otter was present almost below the bridge as we arrived, but it was clearly unhappy with our presence so close and went immediately into stealth mode, barely leaving a trail of small bubbles to mark its path underwater. We could see its ghostly form underwater for several metres - and it only reappeared on the water's surface when it reached a quite considerable and safe distance downstream, crossing the middle of the river as it headed directly for its holt.

Plentiful small birds tried to make up for its unwillingness, however, including several colourful grey and dapper white wagtails, two or three gorgeous common kingfishers giving us various photographic opportunities as they perched below us, a hawfinch, rock sparrows and a few song thrush all on the wing passing overhead. Cetti's warblers were calling loudly from the depths of the riverbank vegetation and a few other migrants, including furtive common chiffchaff and a remarkably large group of silent blackcaps feeding on the small red fruits of the terebinth bushes, added to the sense of it being busy. A small unruly crowd of Iberian magpies was fun to watch, particularly when the sun rose sufficiently to set off the lovely reflective blue colours in their wings and tail.

We returned for breakfast shortly before 10:00 and, despite coinciding with a large coach party, were quite quickly served another very welcome-filling breakfast. Plenty of time for final packing was provided. We were quite smoothly away at about 11:45. The long drive was relatively uneventful and relatively clear of traffic,

despite it being a national holiday, and first punctuated by a stop for a welcome drink and comfort stop. Then, after circumnavigating Seville and failing to find bars open with adjacent parking, we took a rather late but very enjoyable sit-down tapas-style lunch of a series of local dishes at a motorway service station, which worked very well. A few observations of red kites, common buzzards, Eurasian kestrels, western marsh harriers and even a cinereous vulture also jollied up the journey.

We reached our remarkable destination, El Rocío, late afternoon and after checking in, took a break given the very warm conditions. We met again for a short session quite late, walking out to the edge of the national park in the hope of seeing a lynx, though it was not to be. Four feral dogs wandering around on the main track hunting rabbits or scratching about in the undergrowth kept us on our toes and might have been responsible for no signs of lynx, though who knows?! We certainly did see mammals though, with a European rabbit or two and finally, as we were returning on foot, an Egyptian mongoose for some as it dashed across the track. We also saw many dozen (probably soprano) pipistrelle bats pouring out of the town before heading along the tree-lined track to the mixed woodland beyond. Very few birds were noted, despite a few great tits, calling Cetti's warblers and, as the light dropped, a couple of hesitant tawny owls hooting from the depths of the woodland.

We rounded off the day with a tasty meal at our local restaurant, with the portions rather more modest than in Andújar!

Day 5: Doñana National and Natural Parks

Thursday 13 October 2022

Weather: Largely clear and very fine all day, with some afternoon cloud, reaching almost 30°C mid-afternoon.

A 07:15 breakfast meant a good early start. 45 minutes later, we were duly picked up by our guide from a local company who took us into and around the northern part of the national and natural parks in a 4x4 minibus for a long morning plus midday tour. Driving along a seemingly chaotic series of sandy tracks, we only noticed a few red deer, almost all being hinds with relatively small calves, though we paused twice to see Iberian lynx tracks in the sand. After a good preliminary search up and down the first main part, we continued on and into the lovely Coto del Rey estate for a good walk.

The drought conditions experienced by the region for the past three years were very evident, with the dry grass cropped almost to the ground in many areas and a wildlife and cattle waterhole dug out deeper than ever before to reach the water table. Numerous small birds were in the trees here, including a flighty Eurasian hoopoe, our first common redstart, a couple of common stonechats (the first of many for the site), European greenfinch and a flock of common chaffinches. A partially devoured red deer fawn close to the pool was of great interest, with it having been killed by something, yet the lack of teeth marks in the throat and only red fox footprints in the sand lead us to assume that the 'culprit' was indeed a fox.

A common kestrel perched high on a tree for photographers to try and get a shot, while the first of at least three Iberian grey shrikes was calling from the next tree along and gave good views, as did another very pink-breasted bird shortly afterwards. We walked adjacent to the national park, with a few tracks visible in the sand. Unfortunately, another vehicle had already been down, wiping out most of the night's movements. It was fun to see even red-legged partridge tracks left here as they ran off before us.

After a good leg stretch, including observing Spain's oldest Spanish imperial eagle, a female ringed as a chick in 1990 (!) at great distance, we hopped back in the bus and continued towards the eagle. We got out on foot and obtained much closer and nicer views, with its white 'braces' clearly visible in the telescope.

We now took a shortcut across the bone-dry marshes, linking with the Escupidera track. This led us quickly, especially in the near-absence of anything to see, to the rather lonely and seemingly out place visitors centre in the middle of the Doñana northern marshes. I say there was a near-absence, but we did pause on the way for a distant griffon vulture on a fence (!), an adult male hen harrier which floated off across the saltmarsh

and a superb male common kestrel which sat tight enough for all to enjoy its gorgeous plumage and take pictures. In addition to a few northern wheatears noted in passing and, most noteworthy, a delightful barn owl perched deep in the tamarisks, which did move a little given our presence, but went deeper into the vegetation, still allowing us views in the scope and cameras.

A good relaxing break was taken in the centre. Apart from loos, there was also a small bar for a refreshing drink and a series of display boards with maps of the Doñana area and information on Iberian lynx. Time was moving on, though, so we headed north along dusty tracks, with a surprise black-winged kite circling up overhead as we went until we finally reached a few channels with water and birds!

A great egret graced a channel along with a little egret and grey heron for a good comparison, while a small flock of black-winged stilts returned and sat tight along the bank after a brief fly-round. A couple of harvested rice fields not much further ahead were a magnet for birds, though, with dozens of white storks, great cormorants, Eurasian spoonbills, little egrets and even four black storks hunting for frogs, crayfish and other food, plus lots of lesser black-backed and black-headed gulls also in attendance. Some 20+ glossy ibis were foraging here, too, with a few northern lapwings mixed in, making a fine sight!

It was getting rather hot, though, at around 30°C outside, so we decided to commence the return, looking for lynx on the way (though at this time of day, it's improbable), actually returning a little before our predicted 15:00 arrival. This allowed us plenty of time for our picnic lunch (taken outside at a restaurant table as we enjoyed drinks from indoors), and then we took a good break to avoid the worst of the heat.

We met again at 17:45h to try a site a little way from the town. It was rather hot when we arrived, though it was also clear that there had recently been a terrific downpour at and just adjacent to the site. In silence, we walked quickly along a sandy track to position ourselves roughly in the middle of a wide, open area, with a slope rising up in front and trees behind for backdrop and with the sun behind us. The wait was tricky, with numerous flies and then a few mosquitoes bothering us. Still, the site was lovely and the conditions too, and it was fun to hear an increase in tawny and then little owl calls as we finally called it a day and left, again as silently as possible, to start the journey back!

Dinner was naturally a little later than normal, but it had been a great and varied day, including a few new habitats in the Doñana area.

Day 6: El Rocío, Huelva

Friday 14 October 2022

Weather: Fine morning, with cool start, then windless and hot in the afternoon. Max. c. 29°C.

Originally planned as a 'break from looking for lynx' day, we decided to try again on the edge of El Rocío. This is a site where a female Iberian lynx regularly passes, though, of course, it's impossible to know whether it'll happen when you're there or not! It was lovely and cool at 08:00 when we set off from the hotel, the walkout even seeing a tiny bit of dawn mist, and we soon settled into watching the various open areas around us. Patience and persistence are virtues when looking for Iberian lynx, and despite enjoying the antics of a lovely female lesser spotted woodpecker overhead for several minutes, we'd almost reached our "OK, let's go back" moment when I took a final scan through the scope. Incredibly, a gorgeous female Iberian lynx was lying out in the grass at the end of the track, smack in the middle of the view! After our first views, with the scope and then with the cameras, and realising that the light wasn't any good, plus showing it to a walker who had happened to appear on the scene just as we found it, we started a waiting game. Surely it would move? Indeed, after 15 minutes, it suddenly went into crouch mode and flattened itself down to the ground. Would it rush out after a rabbit or red-legged partridge? We waited impatiently, only to suddenly become aware that a local couple was walking through the bushes off to one side, talking as they went, and the lynx was hiding from them whilst not taking its eyes off them or a split second! Remarkably, it then relaxed back into its original pose after they'd passed. It closed its eyes repeatedly and allowed the couple, as they passed us

on their early morning constitutional, to look through the scopes at what they just HADN'T seen, or, thankfully, disturbed as they passed!

Learning that this was a local footpath, we decided to get closer, walking up carefully in stages to approach the still completely relaxed animal, getting some lovely views and photos. We finally pulled ourselves away just after 10:00, when no less than four vehicles full of tourists turned up en masse to enter the park for the morning! Our guide actually led the first vehicle from the day before, and after instructing him (successfully, as it transpired) where it was, we started walking out as they headed off, single file, to try and get views. But while our approach had been fine, theirs clearly was not, and the animal very soon stood up, stretched and then turned and slowly strolled down the little bank it was on and off into the scrub behind it.

Unfortunately, only four clients had come out on the trip, but we soon met at breakfast. Once I'd done a little shopping afterwards, we headed off to look at some different habitats and sites outside Doñana 'proper'. We had excellent opportunities for a different suite of birds, especially given the huge area of salt pans and tidally flooded saltmarsh, which predominate in the Odiel Marshes Natural Park.

Given that it was quite late, we headed off down the motorway, quickly reaching the edge of the huge estuary and spotting our first spoonbills for the day and the first greater flamingos of the trip. We veered down along the long road cutting through the lovely Odiel Estuary, which eventually leads to the river's breakwater and lighthouse. The second-biggest colony of Eurasian spoonbills in Europe breeds here (Holland, has the largest, if you were wondering!), while the biggest concentration of wintering black-necked grebes used to occur here (some coming from West Russia)! With warming winters I suspect that they stay further north and east now, but they're always on the inaccessible part of the pans and it's perhaps now more famous as the first site in mainland Iberia where western ospreys were successfully introduced as a breeder after the last native pair disappeared from the cliffs in south-west Portugal in the late 1980s. It's also a site for breeding greater flamingos, many of which were present some way back from the road, especially with a large area of the salinas abutting the road having vast quantities of salt actively extracted on an impressive and industrial scale as we passed.

Our first stop was at the visitor centre for a comfort break and an update on the tides (which they got wrong!). A couple of brief stops as we progressed showed that it was still low tide, though rising, and most of the waders were out on the mud flats. However, a fine great egret was off to one side, and we added a fine variety of waders at a series of 'from the minibus' stops on sandy and muddy areas visible from the raised road.

Feeding Eurasian curlew unusually strongly outnumbered Eurasian whimbrel, while abundant dunlin and numerous common ringed and grey plovers, plus several bar-tailed godwit and a few common greenshanks were good additions. The sad-sounding calls of grey plover are a very evocative saltmarsh sound and the livelier calls of common redshank or 'tew-tew-tew' common greenshank. A small group of Sandwich terns sat on a sandbank where a couple of sanderlings and half a dozen Eurasian oystercatchers fed.

Having taken our preliminary fill, we continued to the end and walked out onto the beach, where the onshore breeze was very welcome in the nearly cloudless sky. Even though there was virtually nothing moving out to sea, except for a couple of very distant Atlantic gannets, which come to winter here from the North Atlantic, a little bit of beach-combing amongst the immense numbers of shells thrown up included lovely classic scallop shells.

The return was rather more interesting, despite the lack of a sufficiently rising tide, as we walked out and over to another small beach, including over a boardwalk across a channel filled with the very active local West African fiddler crabs. The numerous waders on the vast mud flats included a few bar-tailed godwit to practice identifying again, plus a couple of dapper Kentish plovers. A crested lark sang almost continuously from the dunes behind, his song made up of a medley of imitations of other birds, even down to including sandwich tern calls!

With the temperature now rather high, we dropped back to the visitor centre, where fortunately the outside gate was open, and enjoyed another tasty picnic on some large picnic tables. A few birds were noted both as we lunched and immediately afterwards, including two fly-by Caspian terns and plenty of Sandwich terns down by the river. At the same time, a common kingfisher sped by, and a few waders, including plaintively calling grey plovers, were on the mud.

It was hot in the sun, but a small uncovered hide nearby needed checking, providing us with excellent close-range views of mallard, northern shoveler, gadwall, northern pintail and a couple of common teal, with waders including black-winged stilts and plenty of 'low-kneed' black-tailed godwits, while a couple of colourful greater flamingos stole the show!

It was rather hot here now, though, so we moved on the Laguna del Portil, a small freshwater lake just in from the coast and surrounded by coastal scrub and umbrella pine woodland in part. A very cursory look was all that was required since the entire lake bed was a bed of cracked mud, though we also put in a good search for a local speciality nearby, Mediterranean chameleon, but came up empty-handed. It looked like it was too dry at the site and the water-stressed bushes where they normally hide were looking very thin on leaves and not very suitable.

A good refreshing drink or even two at a nearby bar was an excellent remedy though before we started back along the scenic route. We visited the monument to Columbus on the junction of the Odiel and Tinto rivers after passing along the heavily relandscaped old port of Huelva. Then we simply took in the views as we headed east along the coast. Once we'd passed the extensive petrochemical plants and their storage facilities, the scene was almost entirely made up of a vast area of excellent stone pine forest and heath on the former dunes, stretching for almost 30 kilometres along the coast.

We returned to El Rocío a little later than planned after a very memorable and varied day.

Day 7: Doñana hinterland

Saturday 15 October 2022

Weather: Very fine and hot in the afternoon; light to moderate breeze p.m.

Wanting to show everyone a little more of the national park and surroundings, we went first to the nearby Palacio del Acebrón, a 1960s hunting lodge, or 'palace', set on grounds within some very rich woodland shortly upstream from El Rocío. The access is along a strip of heath and wooded areas, with various typical birds including Thekla's lark and Dartford warbler, which we only noted on our return later and even though a lynx or two are present here, they are extremely difficult to see.

We walked out in beautiful serene conditions towards the palace, with a few birds including some lovely local *irbii* race long-tailed tits and a super European crested tit for the more patient watchers. Down by a lake, a succession of other species made their appearances, including a great spotted woodpecker, feisty battling common moorhens, a colourful singing male cirl bunting, a loudly calling green sandpiper which gave a fly-by and even glimpses in the bushes and reeds beside us of Iberian chiffchaff and Eurasian reed warbler.

After buying fresh bread and water for lunch, we finally pulled ourselves away and headed east again towards the Guadalquivir River and its adjacent rice fields. Given the drought, only 30% of the fields have been allowed to be cultivated this year and this is where the immense majority of the birds would be! Harvesting was well underway, with several paddies already cut and ploughed in, with a thin lamina of water on top. These are ideal for waders and gulls, in particular, and indeed the first ones held northern lapwings, at least three spotted redshank and a single wood sandpiper of most note. While not far away, several hundred white and a few black storks and Eurasian spoonbills were present at some more. Plentiful western yellow wagtails, scattered meadow pipits, and black-headed and lesser black-backed gulls added to the variety.

Time was running on as we moved slowly along the area's access tracks. Still, near one little village, a fine flock of greater flamingos strutted serenely across the paddies and after considerable searching, we finally found a way in! The adjacent field also held over 20 common greenshank and a couple of little stints, but it was so hot that we decided to call it quits and head to a nearby visitors' centre where we could have our picnic lunch.

Much to my dismay and a change compared to the last 15(?) years, we were not allowed to eat indoors at a table if we bought drinks as well, so we had to go and find a couple of tables in as shady a spot as we could outside. This was OK, though, given a moderate cooling breeze blowing over the hilltop, and a couple of diminutive African grass blue butterflies were noted as a result, so not all was lost!

An hour-long break was then taken before we returned to our site buried in the Dehesa, where five of us walked out to scan over the dry sloping heath in front, but try as we might, and despite plenty of rabbits moving around, no lynx were seen. On the return, though, excitement was had, as a small, slender, and very fast snake slithered across the sandy track and turned out to be a lovely young false smooth snake, a quite uncommon and difficult-to-see species.

We celebrated with final drinks and dinner, including the signature 'Pink Flamingo' dessert, complete with sparklers to celebrate one of the group's birthday and anniversary the following day, before heading to our rooms for our final packing and night!

Day 8: El Rocío, then transfer to airport

Sunday 16 October 2022

After a slightly truncated breakfast, we made one last attempt on the edge of El Rocío, leaving the hotel at 08:45 and walking out to our usual viewpoint. It was not to be, despite being a lovely early morning, perhaps because of slightly higher numbers of passing vehicles, horse riders and carriage drivers. So, we returned with half an hour for final packing before our planned 11:00 departure time, leaving just a little later for a trouble-free journey to the airport. Saying our farewells to those flying home, I took the remaining four into part of Seville that I could reach, where they caught taxis to their respective hotels.

I rounded off the tour, very happy that it had gone so well, giving the minibus a deep clean for the imminent arrival of the next group, which I met at the airport under 90 minutes later.

I wish to thank you for making it a truly memorable (and record-breaking!) tour. I sincerely hope that you all enjoyed it as much as I did, not only for all of the wonderful moments shared in the field seeing such a fascinating and varied range of species, some of them very rare, including the Iberian lynx of course, but also for the fun and good humour shown throughout. It was a pleasure to guide you!

Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7
	BIRDS	AVES							
1	Northern shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>						✓	
2	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>						✓	
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>				✓		✓	
4	Northern pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>						✓	
5	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>						✓	
6	Red-legged partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	✓				✓	✓	
7	Rock dove / feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>					✓	✓	
8	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Stock dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>							✓
10	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Water rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>							H
12	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					✓	✓	✓
13	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>						✓	✓

14	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>						✓	✓
15	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>						✓	
16	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>						✓	✓
17	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>					✓		✓
18	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						✓	
19	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>						✓	
20	Kentish plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>						✓	
21	Eurasian whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>						✓	
22	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>						✓	
23	Bar-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>						✓	
24	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						✓	
25	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>						✓	
26	Little stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>							✓
27	Common snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					✓		✓
28	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleuca</i>						✓	
29	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>					✓	✓	✓
30	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						✓	
31	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						✓	

32	Slender-billed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>						✓	
33	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>					✓	✓	✓
34	Mediterranean gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus</i>						✓	
35	Yellow-legged gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>						✓	
36	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>					✓	✓	✓
37	Caspian tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>						✓	
38	Sandwich tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>						✓	
39	Black stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>					✓		✓
40	White stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>					✓		✓
41	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Glossy ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>					✓	✓	✓
43	Eurasian spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					✓	✓	✓
44	Western cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>				✓	✓		✓
45	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>					✓		✓
47	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>					✓	✓	✓
48	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		✓				✓	
49	Black-winged kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>					✓		

50	Griffon vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
51	Cinereous vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>				✓			
52	Booted eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>					✓		
53	Spanish imperial eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>	H				✓		
54	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓			
55	Western marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓
56	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					✓		
57	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Barn owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>					✓		
60	Little owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			✓	✓			
61	Tawny owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>				H			
62	Eurasian hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			✓		✓		
63	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓			✓	✓		✓
64	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>							✓
65	Lesser spotted woodpecker	<i>Dryobates minor</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓
66	Iberian green woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>	H		✓				
67	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓			✓	✓		✓

68	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>							✓
69	Iberian grey shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				✓	✓		✓
70	Iberian magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
72	Red-billed chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>			H				
73	Western jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>						✓	
74	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>					✓	✓	
75	Crested tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>							✓
76	Eurasian blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
78	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				H	✓	✓	
79	Eurasian skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>							
80	Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>					✓	✓	✓
81	Thekla's lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				✓			
82	Eurasian crag martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			✓			✓	
83	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓						
84	Red-rumped swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>						✓	
85	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

86	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓			✓		✓	✓
87	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>				✓			
88	Common chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
89	Iberian chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>							✓
90	Eurasian reed warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>							✓
91	Zitting cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
92	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
93	Sardinian warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
94	Dartford warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>							✓
95	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓			✓		✓	✓
96	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			H				
97	Short-toed treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>				✓			✓
98	Spotless starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
99	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>				✓		✓	✓
100	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
101	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
102	European pied flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>				✓			
103	Spotted flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>					✓		✓

104	Common redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>				✓	✓		
105	Blue rock thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			✓				
106	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
107	Northern wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>					✓	✓	
108	Rock sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>				✓			
109	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					✓		✓
110	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
111	Common waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>				✓		✓	✓
112	Western yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
113	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	✓		✓			
114	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓		✓			
115	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>					✓	✓	✓
116	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
117	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	✓		✓	✓			✓
118	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓				✓		✓
119	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓
120	Corn bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>				✓	✓		
121	Rock bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>			✓				

122	Cirl bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>							✓
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA							
1	European rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Egyptian mongoose	<i>Herpestes ichneumon</i>				✓			
3	Iberian lynx	<i>Lynx pardinus</i>		✓				✓	
4	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			✓				
5	Greater mouse-eared bat	<i>Myotis myotis</i>			✓				
6	(Schreiber's) bent-winged bat	<i>Miniopterus schreibersii</i>			✓				
7	Eurasian wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		✓	✓				
8	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Fallow deer	<i>Dama dama</i>	✓	✓	✓				
10	Spanish ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>			✓				
11	Mouflon	<i>Ovis orientalis</i>			✓				
	REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS	REPTILIA & AMPHIBIA							
1	Spanish terrapin	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>		✓	✓				
2	False smooth snake	<i>Macroprotodon brevis</i>							✓
3	Stripeless tree frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>	H						
	OTHER								

1	Andalusian barbel	<i>Luciobarbus sclateri</i>			✓				
2	Common carp	<i>Cyprinus carpio</i>		✓					
	SELECTED PLANTS								
1	Umbrella pine	<i>Pinus pinea</i>							
2	Western holm oak	<i>Quercus (ilex) rotundifolia</i>							
3	Cork oak	<i>Quercus suber</i>							
4	Western strawberry tree	<i>Arbutus unedo</i>							
5	Narrow-leaved ash	<i>Fraxinus angustifolia</i>							
6	Wild olive	<i>Olea europaea</i>							
7	(Gum) mastic tree	<i>Pistachia lentiscus</i>							
8	Terebinth	<i>Pistachia terebinthus</i>							
9	Gum tree species	<i>Eucalyptus spp</i>							
10	Hair-leaved snowflake	<i>Leucojum tricophyllum</i>							
11	Narcissus	<i>Narcissus serotinus</i>							
12	Sea daffodil	<i>Pancratium maritimum</i>							
13	Autumn squill	<i>Scilla autumnalis</i>							