

Tour Report

Spain - Iberian Lynx Quest

9-16 January 2022

Iberian lynx



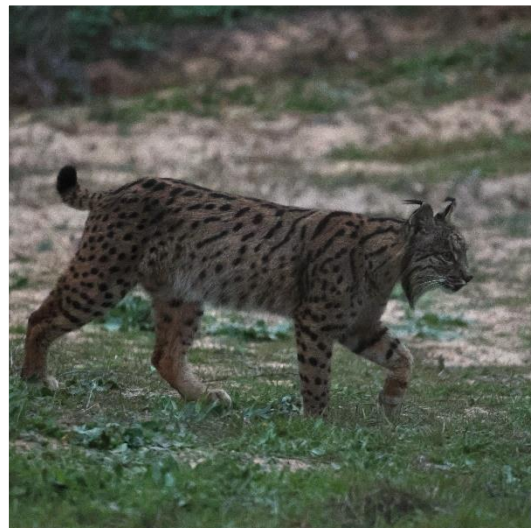
Red-legged partridge



Eurasian otter



Iberian lynx



Compiled by John Muddeman

Day 1: Arrive Seville, travel to Andújar**Sunday 9 January 2022**

We all met safely at arrivals in Seville airport, and were quickly away, heading east and then north past Córdoba towards our destination for the first part of the tour. A short stop at the Carrefour in Andújar on arrival was called for to pick up picnic goods for a couple of days, with the group having a relaxing drink while I did the shopping.

It was then a quite short, albeit winding drive up to our accommodation in the nearby hills, where we checked in easily and were soon down again for a drink before our first large and very tasty evening meal.

Day 2: El Encinarejo, la Lancha**Monday 10 January 2022**

It was cloudy and cool most of the day, but virtually without wind, clearing from 4 p.m. onwards and then becoming mild; 5-12°C.

After a 7:30 a.m. breakfast we were away an hour later, wound our way slowly down to the Jándula River and crept slowly along towards the El Encinarejo dam. Ripples in the river part of the way along revealed a superb family group of four Eurasian otters, which provided us with lovely extended views as they fished a series of long pools, with three hawfinches in a bare tree crown and a brief fly-over Spanish imperial eagle also of most note amongst the birds present.

Finally pulling ourselves away, we spent some time quietly watching from a footbridge over the river, where two more Eurasian otters were present, one of which also gave excellent prolonged views as it fished! Numerous common chiffchaffs, a few grey wagtails and a cracking common kingfisher below us were also present, while a brief rock sparrow near the dam was the most notable other bird seen.

The reservoir above the dam was very quiet, rather as expected, but a single great crested grebe was of note there and fine male northern goshawk perched on a pylon was a real treat. The group also began to get their eye in for long-distance mammal watching, with a few fallow and red deer picked out amongst the trees and scrub on the opposite slopes.

Following this terrific start, we returned for a coffee/tea break at our accommodation and then took another road out towards a different dam. A car going rather slowly in front actually helped us spot a few more red and fallow deer and, very unusually, even a young Spanish ibex, which trapped along the road by the deer fencing spooked, so we moved quickly on to let it find one of the gaps deliberately left open nearby for the larger wild animals to move more freely. Very surprisingly for the time of day and in broad daylight, just 200 metres ahead or so, a pair of immature wild boar were feeding close to the roadside and also allowed great views until they also finally got wind of us and ran in ungainly fashion off up the slope and into the scrub. All this and it was still only just after midday!

Turning off onto a track, we paused for a photo opportunity of a pair of gorgeous little owls on some boulders and as we watched, a fine Iberian green woodpecker flew in to then hop across the grass nearby, giving fine views. An unseen raptor spooked a huge and impressive flock of around 150 Iberian magpies from the trees just beyond, along with two Eurasian hoopoes, though a few red-legged partridge stayed put in the fields and a lovely 'pastel shades' male common stonechat and a dapper black redstart, complete with white wing flash, were further attractive additions.

We continued in the van gently down to the Jándula valley ahead, with its steep rocky slopes which tumble down towards the river, noting increasing numbers of other hopeful Iberian lynx watchers as we went. Here we stopped and spent some time on the side of the track scanning over the huge expanse of scrub-rich grassy wood pastures below in our search for lynx, but also walked down to one point overlooking a different area to the majority, eventually even hearing a male Iberian lynx which was calling way off in the distance. OK, so we couldn't see it, but after also hearing a red fox making its double-bark here, the mammal list was still rocketing up on day one of watching!

Despite a cooling breeze, a tasty picnic lunch was taken at a fine viewpoint, with two curly-horned male Spanish ibex down near the reservoir of special note, and the sun even started to creep out from behind the curtain of grey cloud as we finished. Indeed, by the time we'd gone down to the Jándula dam, it was an almost clear sky and with a further six Spanish ibex working their way across the boulders beside the river, it was turning into a very special mammal day! Three single southern Daubenton's bats and a single greater mouse-eared bat roosting or hibernating in a tunnel were excellent further sightings (and the former is yet to be formally described for science as different from the more northern Daubenton's bat!) and a nearby rock face was perfect habitat for a fine blue rock thrush male, who sat completely still for all to admire as well.

We started back, only to find that a pair of Iberian lynx had walked up a very distant hillside and disappeared over the ridge top just 15 minutes before, but the distance had been huge and the light frankly terrible as it was against us, so after a short wait, including spotting another fine male Spanish ibex with terrific horns, we decided to start back early and try and strike it lucky, using the return as a transect in our search. We stopped at another spot where lynx have been seen on a few occasions recently, to no avail, but a red deer stag silhouetted against the orange sky as the sun set with the Santuario de Nuestra Señora de la Cabeza as a backdrop made a superb end to the day.

After an hour's break in our respective rooms, it was time for the call-over, where a request was made for mouflon first and then Iberian lynx next for tomorrow, to complete the suite of larger mammals in the checklist (!) and then another enormous, delicious dinner before we finally turned in for a good and well-earned night's sleep.

Day 3: La Lancha, Baños de la Encina track

Tuesday 11 January 2022

Crystal clear all day. Chilly start but warm afternoon

We started with a relatively slow drive out to the main lynx-watching area, stopping on the way for various furred and feathered creatures, including a very fine adult male mouflon up on a rocky slope above us and affording lovely views, and not just to us, but also to one or two other grateful observers who paused to take a look as well. Further on, a small covey of relatively tame red-legged partridge pecked around on the track itself and then hopped or flew up on the slopes beside us, while a couple of Iberian green woodpeckers and plenty of Iberian magpies were noted in flight too, plus a good flock of corn buntings, so terribly scarce in most of the UK nowadays, too.

The sunny conditions meant it felt much warmer than the previous day out on the track, and we settled down to scanning the pleated hillsides, green with the flush of fresh winter grass following a week's rain over Christmas. The search was really now on, given that we had again arrived a little late again, this time about 30 minutes or so, to have possibly seen a single lynx which had been seen for a few seconds by just one or two observers and some way off. However, a ripple of excitement then went up with the discovery of a really fine male Spanish ibex down on a firebreak below us and, to my amazement just moments later, I overheard how one watcher discovered a lynx, lying down sunbathing in full view! There's always a touch of nervous anxiety as you try to locate an immobile animal in such a large area, and especially at range as was the case here, but after taking careful note and lining up the scope, there it was, albeit looking for all the world like a rounded boulder!

One by one we took turns to look through the scope, trying as well to see it with binoculars, though even with excellent 10x magnification optics it was all but impossible to see! Another ripple of excitement went through the group, partly as more observers joined the gathering and couldn't find it, but especially when it lifted up onto its forelegs to watch two estate vehicles which drove up a nearby track past it, and then again, as one of these returned a few minutes later. Another guide suggested in private that we move and try to see it from much closer, and after moving, though we could locate where it was, whichever way we moved we were screened by a large lentisc tree (bush, in reality). We also worked out that we would be able to see it move in three of the four possible directions, so we started a waiting game. Would it come out and walk

up the track towards us, or go off to the left, or down the track, or, worst of all, off to the right amongst the scrub and trees and so be invisible?! It was now 1 p.m. and an hour after we'd first seen it, so we asked ourselves repeatedly how long it would stay there before moving? Since some have been known to sleep under bushes for eight hours, it was tough to know what to do and as the doubts increased, so a phone call from the other side noted that it had stood up and walked into the bushes to the right ... Oh no! We quickly hurried along the track on foot along with virtually all the other people present, trying to get an angle down one or other of the gullies where it might have entered, only to see nothing, and then after ten minutes be called again to say that it had returned and fallen asleep in the same spot as before!!

So, back to the original position we went, this time relying on being called if it moved again and given the advancing time, I set up the picnic lunch in the back of the van, which we enjoyed at leisure in the lovely sunshine. Indeed, we had just finished clearing it away when the call came through and rushing back to look down at 'that firebreak' again, I saw a horde of alarm-calling Eurasian magpies descend towards the western holm oak we believed that it had been sleeping under. Correct! I saw how it dropped down the trunk out of the crown of the tree! It was 3 p.m. and it finally made a move, ambling out across on the back of the firebreak, over the grass to the track, which it crossed and then headed up a ridge through scrub and was gone...

The views had been clear but a bit distant still, especially as it had been in shade, but despite the numerous watchers gradually expanding out along the track and searching for it, with an ever-increasing number of theories of what it was going to do as time went on (!), all looking into the quite strong and fairly low sun was particularly tricky. Fortunately, having heard one the day before, and in a break in noise amongst those assembled, I heard one calling, but then also another higher-pitched call too! Scanning hard on a bare grassy slope deep in the valley opposite I struck lucky as one hurtled down the slope and out of sight beside the tiny stream at the bottom. It took a few stressful minutes to refind it, but not just one appeared, but THREE! It seems that a male was following a female with a well-grown cub, even though I first assumed that it was two males following a female. As they started moving up the hillside, we watched them on and off over the next 45 minutes or so, not without difficulty given the sunlight coming from in front, with broken views as they appear sporadically between the trees and scrub, before finally crowning the hill and going over the other side. BRILLIANT!

It was clear that they weren't going to return, so having spent more time out in the main lynx area than expected, instead of returning for a break, we headed part of the way back and then out along a totally new section of track to enjoy not only new wildlife watching opportunities, but also some stunning views to the east, looking down from the Andújar ridge and across the vast swathes of olive orchards across to the Sierras de Cazorla, Segura y Las Villas to the north and east, Sierra Mágina to the south-east and way in the distance, the snow-capped peaks of Sierra Nevada over 100 kilometres away!

Several impressively large Eurasian griffon and a few cinereous vultures were on the wing, as was a fine juvenile golden eagle soaring amongst them, though small birds were relatively quiet already quite late in the afternoon. Numerous Eurasian magpies were rattling away from a holm oak near a farm but appeared just to be in idle late afternoon banter, rather than warning of a predator! So, with the sun, and temperature, dipping, we started back with plenty of light just in case we came across any lynx. This wasn't the case, but a few more mouflon, including a quite colourful female amongst a small herd of red deer was worth a stop to 'complete the set' and a fine sunset rounded off a superb day out!

Day 4: La Lancha, transfer to El Rocío (Doñana)

Wednesday 12 January 2022

After a normal 7:30 a.m. breakfast the plan was a little different. I was forced to head down into Andújar to check a tyre issue, while I sent four of the group with a local contact out to the main lynx-watching area and one of the group decided to stay at the apartments until I returned. Fortunately, the vehicle issue was resolved quite quickly, even enabling me to also shop for a few more picnic bits and refuel, before heading back to pick the client up. And so it was that as we were gently cruising out to meet the rest of the group when a beep from a car behind me prompted me to pull over and a French contact, who had been chatting

with us on and off over the last few days, pulled up level and called out that those at the main viewing site were watching lynx!

We headed as rapidly as we could to the site, only to see a line of people standing on the side of the track - including the rest of our group - or walking rapidly ahead, indicating that the lynx was on the move below us. After getting the group member out as quickly as possible, I finally managed to park the vehicle safely and out of the way and even saw the 'culprit', a fine male Iberian lynx stroll across a gap below us for a couple of seconds, rabbit in mouth! But little was I prepared to discover that two of the group had been lucky enough to have been watching it almost from the moment it was discovered, including watching it leap high into the air and crash down into a lentisc bush, only to reappear moments later with a rabbit in its mouth and then proceed to eat it before rushing off again to catch another, the one that I'd seen!!!

We hung around for about an hour, along with everyone else, in the hopes that it would reappear, but it had dropped down from some rocks into a dense lentisc bush and was clearly not coming out in a hurry, so we eventually called it a day and apart from one of the group, who opted to walk, headed down for another short look from the Jándula dam, ostensibly to check for Spanish ibex. The very fine conditions had enticed a few of the local raptors to circle up on thermals over a nearby mountain, and we enjoyed a superb adult Spanish imperial eagle as it circled up amongst the cinereous and Eurasian griffon vultures, the leading white edge of its inner wings gleaming in the sun as it turned. Two resting male Spanish ibex off to one side were quite a way away, though four or five females and kids also appeared on some rocks quite close above us, rounding off a successful search.

We started our return to the accommodation, passing all the watchers still waiting for the male to emerge (and I still wonder how long they had to wait!), and cruised gently back to our accommodation, where we set out six chairs and a couple of tables in the lovely sunny conditions and enjoyed a very relaxing and celebratory lunch!

We finally left around 3:15 p.m. and started the 300 kilometre journey to El Rocío, in Doñana, pausing for a drink en route before Seville and finally reaching our destination with just enough light to admire the outside of the church and catch one of the Doñana Nature staff, returning from an evening excursion, to finalise plans for our trip out with them the next morning.

Job done, we checked in to the hotel with an hour before dinner, then headed across the square to the restaurant for a good meal before pitching in for a good night's sleep. Indeed, this was the case despite fears that the loud flamenco music in the bar just opposite would keep going all night, though it suddenly stopped around 11 p.m. to our relief!

Day 5: Raya Real, Coto and Palacio del Rey, the FAO, Aznalcázar area

Thursday 13 January 2022

Chilly start with heavy dew, but rapidly warming in very fine conditions from midday; 6-15°C.

Having arrived quite late the previous evening, today was our first proper taste of Doñana. Irene from Doñana Nature came out to meet us at 8 a.m. sharp and we soon started the somewhat tortuous drive out into the north part of the Doñana marshes and forest complex along the sandy tracks so characteristic of the area. Looking more for shapes in the low light as we started revealed plenty of red deer and even a couple of wild boar. It's quite hard to see Iberian lynx here, even if they are probably going to be quite close given the very flat nature of the ground and quite dense vegetation in places with dense shade under the canopy of stone pines. The similarity with the plants in Andújar was quite striking however, with stone pines, western holm and cork oaks, narrow-leaved ash plus wild olives predominating, even if the physical nature of the terrain couldn't be more different and the bushy ground cover was much more dense and varied in Doñana!

Birds, apart from the always colourful and smart red-legged partridge, were largely ignored until we moved out into a much more open area en route to the north marshes, though growing interest was shown throughout the day in the plentiful colourful common stonechats and other common birds, including

wintering meadow pipits and white wagtails, plus a few corn buntings on an adjacent fence as we headed out along 'The spittoon', though I was far more excited by the rather drab lesser short-toed larks buzzing as they passed over or, indeed, as one flock of them crept about on the ground below us as a crested lark gave the photographers a run-around!

The first of two very distant young Spanish imperials seen on the drive was on the crown of a small western holm oak, with the second on a fence, but the heat-haze, especially given the blazing sun heating the ground but chill light breeze constantly mixing the air, made them impossible to see well. A few family groups of cranes were enjoyed as they strolled through the (currently still dry) saltmarsh, as were an excellent flock of European golden plovers, with perhaps a thousand wild migrant greylag geese lining the back of the immense open 'field' on one side behind them.

A few more birds appeared as we approached a couple of artificially maintained lagoons at the FAO visitors centre, which are so important during the autumn in a normal year until the rains arrive and particularly so now given the drought conditions suffered by the area for almost the last two years (and despite plenty of rain over the Christmas 2021 week). These included a superb purple swamphen running alongside a water channel adjacent to the track as we progressed. Indeed, this was the first of at least five, since four more were present in the flooded pools along with an abundance of other species including numerous mallard, gadwall, Eurasian shoveler and Eurasian teal, common coot and common moorhen. A few greater flamingos were peacefully sleeping, while the tiny little grebes diving amongst the duck looked tiny in comparison. After a comfort stop and also drinks from a tiny bar here, we started back, noting a couple of hundred common cranes well off to one side, corn bunting and crested lark of most note on the fences and, nearer to the woodland, a fine female hen harrier drifting low over the scrub in hunting mode, showing off its white rump as it went.

We turned on the Raya Real again, but this time headed right and towards the *Coto del Rey* (King's Estate). Apart from a few birds including flighty Iberian grey shrike and Eurasian hoopoe, little else was seen, though our eyes were always on the lookout for either lynx or any other interesting mammals, and we soon made our way through a very sleepy herd of lovely *retinta* cattle and took a look at the outside of the Palacio del Rey (King's Palace), which is in reality just a very fine example of a traditional estate house, albeit the oldest in the Doñana. The lovely 14th century entranceway at the north end complete with Borbon family coat of arms over the traditional (and original) Moorish archway is the most tangible reminder of the age and how the area was reconquered from Moorish occupation so long ago.

A quite early picnic lunch was taken out in the now very warm sun at the La Garvija hunting post, with a mix of rice fields off to one side and a shallowly flooded area to the other out in front, both with numerous birds. Though the heat haze made viewing difficult, we took a quick look once we had fed, and in addition to numerous black-tailed godwit in the rice fields and both northern lapwings, white storks and plenty of glossy ibis in the flooded saltmarsh area, we also enjoyed a series of butterflies, including western dappled white, red admiral, an incredibly worn painted lady and a smart large white loping along, all enticed out on the wing by the very warming sun. I wasn't able to get any of the group on any of the three dragonflies I saw en route, but at 16°C, it was no real surprise that they were on the wing!

We finally wound our way back along various tracks, noting Iberian lynx pawprints in the sand in one spot (which were not too well marked given how soft it was and nowhere near as clear as the various badger tracks we'd enjoyed earlier), reaching the hotel shortly after 2:30 p.m. and in good time for a break until 4:30 p.m. when we headed off again.

Being Thursday, with many fewer people out in the field than at the weekend, we headed through the north buffer zone of the park, and after negotiating a few trickier bits of track, came out to a spot where a couple of cars were parked and two men were standing quietly, clearly waiting for possible lynx. A quick chat with them however revealed that numerous hunters were shooting right across the area and the chance of sighting a lynx was consequently hugely less, even though hunting would end at sundown. We still took a

short walk next to an area of native scrub and open areas, finding an impressive gathering of Iberian lynx droppings on the side of the track at one point, though that was the closest that we got to one!

With time running out, we started a slow drive up another track nearby with a quite large open grassy strip alongside it in the hopes of maybe seeing a feline, but apart from just one European rabbit, nothing showed, so with the light now too low, we headed back to base, arriving with 45 minutes before going to dinner.

Day 6: Odiel Salinas and marshes (Huelva), El Portil, Raya Real (dusk)

Friday 14 January 2022

An 8 a.m. breakfast was followed by us leaving an hour later (and even giving me time to finally take a quick look at the lagoon in front of the hotel in daylight!) and we headed first off south, towards the coast, then west and parallel to it, through the seemingly endless Doñana Natural Park, the buffer zone to the National Park.

Time was apparently on our side, with a prediction of high tide at Huelva at 1:30 p.m., so we headed off along a track and deep into the sea of stone pine and low scrub characterising this part of the park, also allowing us to contemplate some of the damage wreaked by a tremendous fire some six or seven years ago, and also see what regeneration experiments were being undertaken in the burnt areas and the overall regeneration has been remarkably good. While Iberian lynx was clearly high on the wish list, very little at all was seen as we progressed, with a few red deer the only mammal seen and so we were quite soon back on the road and on our way again.

This headed first through the extraordinarily extensive petrochemical plants, and then over the Río Tinto (of mines fame) and past the large Columbus Monument on the edge of Huelva, before finally turning over the impressively wide Odiel River estuary and down into the Natural Park of the same name.

Birds were immediately evident in quantity, with hundreds of common ringed plover and smaller numbers of dunlins out in the middle of a completely bare and flat salt pan, while dozens of other waders and gulls were present ahead where there was water, both in the salinas as well as in a freshwater pool close by. Numerous duck in the pool including colourful northern shoveler and Eurasian teal, with the white wing patches of gadwall easily seen too, while two black-tailed godwits slept amongst the also sleeping ducks almost alongside some dapper black-winged stilts. We soon switched our attention to the salt pans just over the road though, where dozens of pink greater flamingos were scattered widely across the pools happily feeding in the super-saline water, and numerous waders, including curlew sandpiper, ruddy turnstone, common redshank and sanderling fed along the edges of resting on the bunds. A short distance ahead revealed a line of roosting gulls, including numerous black-headed and lesser black-backed, plus a few yellow-legged, while the stars were four fantastic Caspian terns, their huge red beaks standing out from the crowd! Good numbers of dapper common shelduck were also paddling happily around, adding further variety.

Moving quite quickly on once more given the relatively high water levels, we headed down to the southernmost point possible - making a brief U-turn at one point for a juvenile hen harrier hunting the saltmarsh - , the works on the final spit meaning that it is still closed to traffic even after four or more years since commencing! A few stops were made en route though to enjoy some of the special birds of this huge saltmarsh area, including good numbers of Eurasian curlew and Eurasian whimbrel, which when side by side makes them much easier to identify, the first of several flocks of roosting Eurasian spoonbills were enjoyed in addition to a group of common greenshanks and a trio of Eurasian oystercatchers. On a small sand bar, two wintering Sandwich terns added yet further variety. A couple more excellent groups of Eurasian spoonbills were also enjoyed, the Odiel marshes containing one of Europe's largest breeding colonies.

A short walk along a boardwalk over the dunes led us to the quite tranquil but actually very unappetising-looking Atlantic, with gentle waves but a visible undertow running clearly along the beach and the cool breeze confirming that a quick paddle was definitely out!

We pulled off on our return to be able to scan through a small group of waders now up on the edge of the saltmarsh on the high tide, with a single bar-tailed godwit coming to land amongst the whimbrel and curlew (one of the latter with a yellow leg flag, though it promptly walked down into the water to hide it once I trained the scope on it!), and our first black-armpitted grey plovers added to the already excellent wader list. Some gulls nearby were also carefully checked, with the small plunge-diving gulls a small group of very dapper slender-billed gulls! Another species which is now starting to winter this far north and an excellent sighting.

At least three great egrets were noted further up the road as we headed for a welcome pre-lunch drink break, enjoyed in a local village, before returning to the reserve's visitors centre to eat our picnic lunch - with fresh bread - in the now warming sun. A couple of barn swallows going over might have suggested summer, but actually Huelva is the warmest place overall in Spain in winter and where even the first swifts (but which species still remains uncertain) reappear from late January onwards.

We moved just a little further west to another small lake, this time hemmed-in by trees and scrub and despite awkward viewing due to the foliage, managed to add a few more species to the day's burgeoning tally, including a black and white black-necked grebe – the brown-toned little grebes nearby providing an excellent comparison - a small flock of five little stints alongside a single little ringed plover, a brief common waxbill flying off and even a small flock of Eurasian crag martins which passed over, the first for the group since they'd eluded us in Andújar! The numerous northern pintails felt a little out of place in the 16.5°C, which naturally felt very good with the sun on our backs, but even that heat sadly wasn't up to bringing out a Mediterranean chameleon as hoped, though it was fun searching!

We returned directly to the hotel, where one of the group members hopped off for a rest, while the rest of us continued out to the far edge of town and walked out, in delightful mild and dead still conditions, to the edge of the National Park. Most of us took a gentle stroll along the Raya Real, noting red-legged partridge, an ill, so very approachable common kestrel, plus numerous small birds such as long-tailed, Eurasian blue and great tits, common chiffchaffs, European robins and black redstarts, plus a very few blackcaps, common blackbirds and song thrushes for extra variety. A grey wagtail on a stream was lovely to see at close quarters too. Perhaps, given the disturbance by noisy public, it was no surprise that no lynx were visible, but it was still an immensely enjoyable walk in fantastic conditions and we even arrived back earlier than the previous two days for a little more time to organise things (including passenger locator forms for most), before heading off for our usual 8 p.m. dinner.

Day 7: Aznalcázar area twice, Dehesa de Abajo, Isla Mayor rice fields

Saturday 15 January 2022

So, it was really make or break with Iberian lynx in Doñana day! OK, so we'd had great views in Andújar, but to add a sighting here in Doñana as well, even though it's much more difficult given the very flat and often densely scrubby terrain and meaning that any sightings will be close and are simply much scarcer to come by, would be a treat!

Once again, we wound our way out across a series of public and semi-private roads and also tracks in varying state of repair, this time naturally noticing a few more people around, given that it was the weekend of course! Walkers appeared in the depths of the woods and mountain cyclists likewise, meaning a 'stealth' approach by us was correspondingly more unlikely to work! That said, and as stressed throughout the tour, they are rather special creatures, often seemingly completely ignoring some human presence (as the last sighting at point blank range for some in Andújar had shown) and so capable of appearing in the most unlikely situations, always keeping that random element in their favour.

We slowly cruised along the most likely tracks, taking our time, and then given notable numbers of mountain bikers, took a stroll across one of the largest open areas in the vicinity, at a known lynx-watching site, but where the animals currently are apparently only coming in to feed at night. The sand was absolutely riddled with footprints and diggings from a large number of rabbits present (a good sign), even though not one was visible (!), but finally, and after rescuing a very cold and completely torpid large psammodromus lizard from the middle of a track –goodness knows what it was doing there!– as we strolled back up another track, so we

came across a terrific series of Iberian lynx tracks as it too had walked perhaps 200 metres or more right up the same path! This was definitely encouraging, as were a series of surprisingly large lynx scats in small groups towards the highest part of the site, these being much fresher than those we'd seen not far from here a couple of days before.

Discovering that it had actually just gone 12 p.m. by this time, we headed for a drink break, leaving behind the large number of picnickers and day-trippers along the way at levels where it just seemed all but impossible to see anything! This was also to book a lunch spot at a local visitors centre nestled in a superb *dehesa* (agricultural wood pasture) on the edge of the intensive agricultural area of the rice fields and with a large adjacent lake. Despite large numbers of staff and my attempt to book a table for 2 p.m., there was a bit of a mix-up and apparently all tables had been booked in the half hour we were there! However, the boss saw my displeasure and 'fiddled' the bookings to get us in, thankfully, and we finally headed off for the remaining hour down to the lake.

A plethora of waterbirds greeted us, including excellent numbers of close red-crested and common pochards amongst the abundant northern shoveler, gadwall and Eurasian teal, both the former being new for the trip tally and lovely birds to compare. A strange little bird zipped past calling, which we were later able to confirm as a yellow-crowned bishop, one of a series of escaped birds which are now establishing large feral populations in the area, but after continuing our scans through the amassed waterfowl, also added a few lovely Eurasian wigeon and, to my particular delight, a small group of the endangered marbled duck quite close, which afforded lovely views. Five pied avocets, bobbing on the water in the distance were yet another wader to add to the list, and a fine one to boot!

We returned to find the car parks almost completely full but walked in to find the table ready for us and after ordering, were pleasantly surprised by the rapid service of a series of excellent dishes which we shared out 'tapas style' and more than made up for any earlier hassle over the booking.

With the mid-afternoon lull upon us, I decided to take a circular route through the rice fields nearby, ostensibly to look for black storks, and especially since I'd not stopped for three earlier in the week as we were in a bit more of a hurry than usual that time! A dearth of birds was first noted, but bit by bit as we traversed the seemingly innumerable paddies (which are mechanically prepared, sown and harvested, in case you were wondering!), so a few came to light. A few green sandpipers popped up from the drainage channels where grey herons and great egrets also fed, with first three, and then two more rather confiding adult black storks giving us excellent views. A small flock of 'sparrows' were actually yellow-crowned bishops again, while first a female, and then two separate gorgeous male hen harriers graced the tracksides, being far more elegant-looking than the small numbers of western marsh harriers around. A huge flock of glossy ibis got up and swirled around in starling style off in the distance, while a wetter paddy beside us was attractive to at least three western yellow wagtails (which could -or is that should?- just have easily been in pre-Saharan north Africa), plus our only ruff of the trip, picking its way alone across the middle of the flood.

Time soon began to run on though, so we eventually worked our way round towards the lynx area, taking the winding road up through the pines and staring almost open-mouthed at the sheer numbers of weekend picnickers on the roadsides and in the multiple picnic areas, including some with their mobile barbecues or making small fires to cook on! How grateful I was to quite quickly leave nearly all of them behind at these 'honey-pot' sites though, and indeed, as we progressed, there was a positive mood on the bus in the beautiful sunny and still conditions. Once again, we worked our way slowly along a particular track with a little rather open and grassy gulley beside us for a couple of kilometres, though apart from a couple of European rabbits on the move and the Iberian grey shrike on its tree again, nothing else stirred.

Finally reaching the road again, we turned and headed for the 'hotspot' highlighted by friend and colleague Sergio, who usually co-leads with me on the tours, finding his van parked where expected. We got out, noting how he was walking back with a couple of clients and also talking to two local photographers. As we reached him, it was our turn to discover that they'd turned up, walked 100 metres down a track and a large male Iberian lynx had walked out and then sat down to drink from a puddle for about 10 minutes in full view!! But

that was almost half an hour ago. He told me where it had walked off though, when disturbed by a car, and so it was decision time.

We boarded the van and started a seemingly impossible task of trying to work out where it would reappear. The road was checked first, then a section of track in the rather closed forest nearby. Too far it seemed, so we turned around again and then headed off on my favourite track, making a U-turn on this at the end of the best section and returning to the start point. Perhaps it was time to join Sergio who had gone off to look for a different male lynx in the area, but as we went further and further along the winding tracks, so it became more and more evident that this was a wild goose chase, plus we didn't find him. We came out near the entrance to my favourite track again, and, with the light starting to go, decided to make one last 'up and down' along the road to see if we could find it, or indeed, another one, before heading off towards the hotel... Driving up I speculated on where it might have moved after leaving the drinking pool, though expectations were just about zero by now. We turned around, crept very slowly down the road and, as if by magic, right out in the middle a grassy area off to one side, there was a stunning male lynx strolling calmly and purposefully along, close to and parallel to the road, and completely ignoring us! We stopped for a few pictures, seeing it scent spray a small pine tree, then moved on again to let it keep just ahead, seeing how it turned towards us and then, after sniffing around some long grass, dropped down into a culvert to cross the road almost below us! Out on the other side it strolled up to a tiny ridge, where it emptied itself, then moved forward and down into a tiny gully, at which point we moved ahead, and off the road, got out silently and waited. It must only have a couple of minutes, though it felt longer, but suddenly its head appeared around the side of a bush, where it stopped dead still to scrutinise us, before carrying on and over a small track, then up into the scrub, disappearing as quickly as it had appeared! While this seemingly was the end of it, as one of the group and I went back up the road to successfully recover a camera memory card which had fallen out his camera while having to change a battery mid sequence, the rest of the group again saw it return towards the road, even stopping one car to avoid the risk of an accident, before it vanished for good over a little ridge on a firebreak and probably into the thick scrub on the other side. WOW! I guess the whole sequence was just ten minutes long, but what a fantastic show it had given us and what a cracking animal it was too!

We took a slightly longer, but more familiar (to me) route back to our hotel, and to our delight, also watched not only three different barn owls hunting along the roadside in the van's headlights, but then also a long-eared owl which glided across, before banking and continuing, just in front! With little owls in Andújar, the Eurasian eagle owl seen by chance in flight one evening near El Rocío, calling tawny owls in El Rocío and also just after seeing this evening's lynx, we'd managed to record five different owl species on the trip as well!!

Day 8: La Rocina, El Acebuche visitors centre, transfer to Seville airport

Sunday 16 January 2022

To be honest, there was literally no point to trying to go and actively look for lynx again after the previous day's success, but I used the opportunity to show a couple more of the Doñana National Park's corners where they are also present to the group. That said, one of the group had gone off on a pre-dawn start to walk along the Raya Real, picking up another calling tawny owl, a barn owl hunting before sunrise and even a fresh set of Iberian lynx tracks not far from where the locals were saying that there weren't any this year!

Picking him up en route shortly after 9 a.m. we drove along the small access road, without a soul in sight, towards the Acebrón Palace. Lots of forestry work has clearly been done, increasing the amount of light reaching the undergrowth, where stone pines were present, and even replacing an old decrepit orchard with native trees and shrubs. The first surprise was a lovely black-winged kite crowning a tall electricity pylon, though it moved off when we returned to try and get pictures, but two pairs of Thekla's larks on the roadside ahead were far more approachable and three red deer looking fine in the relatively low morning light.

The park's main visitors centre, El Acebuche, lay some ten minutes' drive away, and it seemed only fitting to go and take a look, with a couple of nicely produced Iberian lynx items also bought by the group in the shop there.

There was no water in the large lagoon still however, so after a short stroll round we soon headed back to El Rocío and after taking pictures across the lake towards the very attractive church, most then jumped out to

visit and see it inside and also enjoy the nearby town while a couple of us went back for final packing and/or a drink in a local café!

At 12:30 p.m. we loaded up and were off spot on time and, given a dearth of Sunday 'morning' (this is Spain!) traffic, reached Seville airport five minutes earlier than planned where we said our goodbyes. One of the group and I returned to Seville though, since our respective flight and train journeys were much later, and we parted our ways at the main train station as she went to look around Seville for a few hours before her flight home.

Having tried to bring the winter departure forward to the peak of the mating season for a couple of years now, it was great news that despite the ongoing Covid pandemic, five intrepid travellers came to try their luck to search for what is still one of the rarest cat species in the world. OK, so there are now over 1,000 in the wild, but of course they are scattered over increasingly vast areas, and both the Andújar and greater Doñana areas still hold some of the best and most visible populations of the species, summing almost a third of the total. But seeing a free-ranging Iberian lynx in the wild, especially close, always requires local knowledge, perseverance and, simply, a huge slice of luck. As a former researcher once told me, "The more I learn about them, the less predictable they get!". However, the stars aligned, the three factors came into play and we were blessed with seeing at least five different individuals on the tour, including stunning observations of two males, Rafiqui in Andújar and Queo in Doñana. This was also accompanied by a wealth of other excellent mammal and bird sightings (OK, so the Mediterranean chameleon will need warmer weather!) and many memorable moments.

Thank you for your perseverance during the long hours of searching and for being such good company, but just a quick look at the pictures above show why every minute was worthwhile! It's going to be (almost?) impossible to beat this in the future now!!

Here's to more trips as successful as this and perhaps for seeing you again in the not-too-distant future!

Checklist



	Common name	Scientific name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
	BIRDS	AVES								
1	Greylag goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					✓			H
2	Common shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>						✓		
3	Northern shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>					✓	✓	✓	
5	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</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>							✓	
11	Common pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>							✓	
12	Red-legged partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Rock dove / Feral pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓			✓	✓	✓



14	Common wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
15	Eurasian collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓		✓	✓		✓
16	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>					✓			
17	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>					✓		✓	✓
18	Western swampen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>					✓			
19	Common crane	<i>Grus grus</i>					✓			
20	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>					✓	✓		
21	Great crested grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓						
22	Black-necked grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>						✓	✓	
23	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Eurasian oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>							✓	
25	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>							✓	
27	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>					✓		✓	
28	European golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					✓			
29	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>						✓		
30	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>						✓		
31	Little ringed plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</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	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						✓		
37	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>							✓	
38	Curlew sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>						✓		
39	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>						✓		
40	Little stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>						✓		
41	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleuca</i>						✓		
42	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>							✓	
43	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						✓		
44	Common greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						✓	✓	
45	Slender-billed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>						✓		
46	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>						✓		
47	Yellow-legged gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>				✓		✓		
48	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>						✓	✓	✓
49	Caspian tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>						✓		

50	Sandwich tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>						✓		
51	Black stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>					✓		✓	
52	White stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Glossy ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Eurasian spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Western cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>						✓	✓	
59	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>					✓	✓	✓	
60	Black-winged kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				✓				✓
61	Griffon vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
62	Cinereous vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
63	Spanish imperial eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		✓		✓	✓			
64	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			✓					
65	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			✓	✓	✓			✓
66	Northern goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		✓						
67	Western marsh harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

68	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>					✓	✓	✓	
69	Red kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>	✓			✓	✓			✓
70	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Western barn owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>							✓	✓
72	Little owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		✓	✓	✓				
73	Long-eared owl	<i>Asio otus</i>							✓	
74	Eurasian eagle-owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>					✓			
75	Tawny owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>							✓	✓
76	Eurasian hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
77	Common kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓				✓		
78	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓						
79	Iberian green woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>		✓	✓	✓				
80	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>								✓
82	Iberian grey shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	Iberian magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
85	Red-billed chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		✓	✓					

86	Western jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		✓					✓	
87	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓				✓			
88	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>				✓		✓		
89	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>				✓		✓		
90	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>		✓						✓
91	Eurasian skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					✓			
92	Thekla's lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>								✓
93	Crested lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>			✓		✓		✓	✓
94	Mediterranean short-toed lark	<i>Alaudala rufescens</i>					✓			
95	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
96	Eurasian crag martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>		✓				✓		
97	Common house martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>							✓	
98	Red-rumped swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>							✓	
99	Cetti's warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>						✓		
100	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓			✓		
101	Common chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓
102	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
103	Dartford warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>			H					✓

104	Sardinian warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
105	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓						
106	Common starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>					✓			
107	Spotless starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
108	Common blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
109	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓				✓		
110	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓	✓				
111	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
112	Black redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
113	Blue rock thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>		✓						
114	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
115	House sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
116	Rock sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>		✓						
117	Yellow-crowned bishop	<i>Euplectes afer</i>							✓	
118	Common waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>						✓		
119	Western yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>								
120	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		✓		✓		
121	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

122	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
123	Common chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓		✓			✓
124	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		✓						
125	European greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>					✓			✓
126	European goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>					✓	✓		
127	European serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			✓		H	✓	H	
128	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			✓					
129	Corn bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			✓		✓		H	
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA								
1	European rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Iberian lynx	<i>Lynx pardinus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
3	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓						
4	Eurasian otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		✓						
5	Greater mouse-eared bat	<i>Myotis daubentoni</i>		✓						
6	(Southern) Daubenton's bat	<i>Myotis (daubentoni) nathaliae</i>		✓						
7	Soprano pipistrelle	<i>Pipistrellus pygmaeus</i>						✓		
8	Eurasian wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		✓			✓			
9	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

10	Fallow deer	<i>Dama dama</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
11	Spanish ibex	<i>Capra pyrenaica</i>		✓	✓	✓				
12	Mouflon	<i>Ovis orientalis</i>			✓					
	REPTILES	REPTILIA								
1	Red-eared slider	<i>Pseudemys scripta</i>						✓		
2	Large psammmodromus	<i>Psammmodromus algirus</i>							✓	
	BUTTERFLIES	RHOPALOCERA								
1	Western dappled white	<i>Euchloe crameri</i>			✓		✓		✓	
2	Small white	<i>Pieris rapae</i>				✓				
3	Large white	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>					✓			✓
4	Clouded yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>			✓	✓				
5	Red admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		
6	Painted lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>					✓			
	OTHER									
1	A grey mullet sp.	Could be one of several genera!						✓		