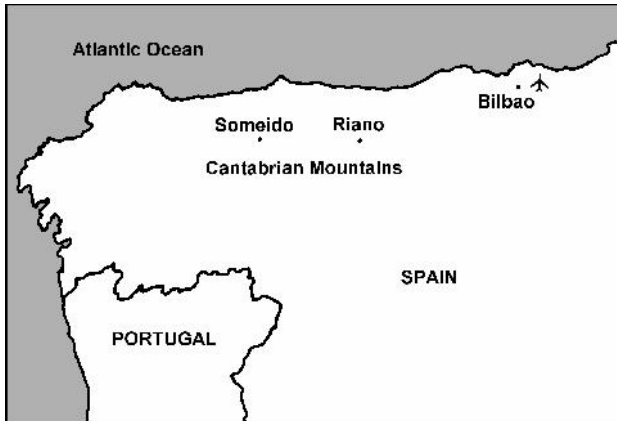
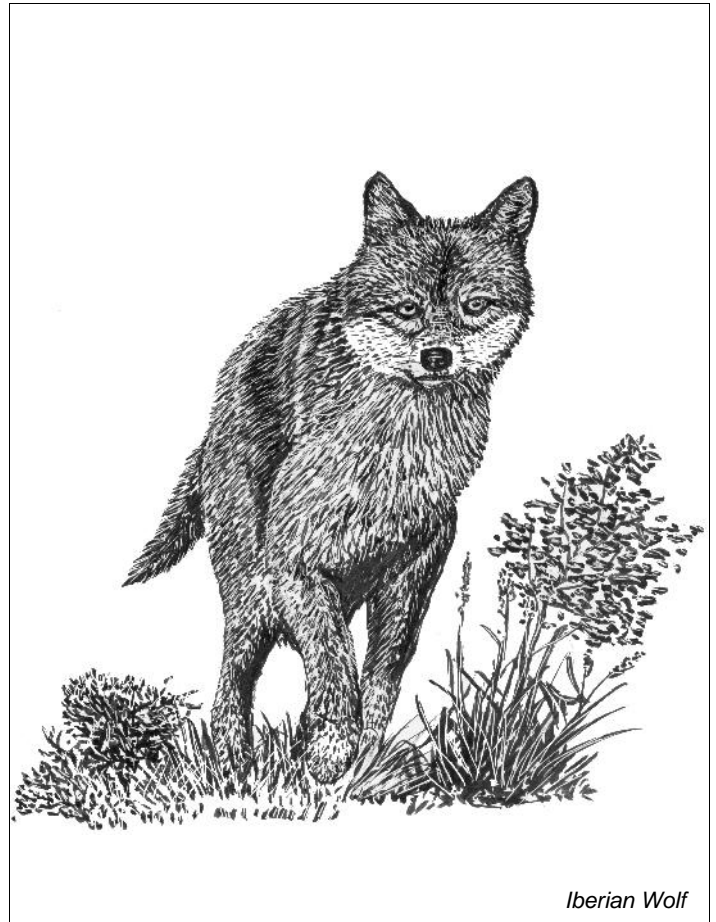


NORTHERN SPAIN'S MAMMALS

wolves, bears and wildcats in the Cantabrian Mountains



Spain is home to a wealth of rare birds and mammals. Over the years we have developed more itineraries to this rich country than anywhere else. Now we have a new tour, on which we can show you three special mammals, Iberian Wolf, Cantabrian Brown Bear and Wildcat. What may surprise the visitor is that these mammals are very reliably found, with the help of our knowledgeable local guides. The wild and unspoilt habitat that supports these endangered mammals is also home to masses of birds, so this itinerary should appeal to all. Wallcreeper, Alpine Chough, Alpine Accentor, Snow Finch, Golden Eagle and Griffon Vulture are among the avian highlights.



Iberian Wolf

After arriving at Bilbao airport we will drive to our first hotel, at Riano, in the Picos de Europa. A healthy population of Iberian Wolves live in the mountains here, while Wildcats can be found in the daytime in fields near our hotel. On day four we will drive west, to the pretty village of Pola de Somiedo, in the heart of the Parque Natural de Somiedo. This is the stronghold of the Cantabrian Brown Bear, an endangered subspecies of the widespread Brown Bear. Usually hidden in the vast beech woods, they venture onto the open hillsides to gorge on autumn berries at this time of year. On the afternoon of day seven we will drive back to Bilbao, staying in a hotel next to the airport in advance of our flight home.

ITINERARY

PICOS DE EUROPA

Arriving around lunchtime, we will soon be on the road heading west from Bilbao. A new motorway offers spectacular views along the coast whilst allowing us to cover the miles quite easily. Once we head inland the scenery quickly changes and the stupendous limestone peaks of the Picos de Europa appear on the horizon. We will make our way to Riano, at the south end of the national park, our base for the first three nights.

The next morning we will make our first excursion to look for wolves. There are some 18 to 20 packs of Iberian Wolf in the area. Every spring our local guides try to locate four or five of the most accessible packs, getting to know their daily routines. They make a special effort to find the places where the adults leave their young when on hunting trips, and it is to one of these spots that we will head. So the hard work will have already been done. All we have to do is get up quite early, go by 4x4 into the mountains, walk the last bit to get into position, then wait. The whole operation is so well organised that our chances of seeing these normally

secretive creatures is very high. Sooner or later the adults should return and we will watch them engaged in their social activities such as feeding, playing, territory marking and bonding.

While waiting and watching for wolves, there are lots of other things to see. Red Deer are numerous on the mid-elevation slopes whilst Cantabrian Chamois, a type of alpine antelope, is found higher up. Griffon Vultures soar overhead, whilst both Golden Eagle and Peregrine are occasionally seen. This is passage time too, so groups of Honey Buzzards, plus occasional Marsh and Montagu's Harriers, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, and Black Kites should be seen passing overhead. A few Egyptian Vultures should also remain after the breeding season.

We can venture higher up into the mountains to look for both Alpine Accentor and Snow Finch. Wallcreeper, too, is reliably found in these high mountains. Citril Finch is rather scarce, but following a productive breeding season we have a good chance of finding them. At lower altitudes we can walk through beech woods that hold Black Woodpecker, Firecrest

and Crested Tit. Middle Spotted Woodpecker is possible too in the cherry orchards.

A special mention should also be made of another star mammal here. In late summer local farmers, practicing a very traditional method of farming, cut hay from the fields in the lush valley bottoms. This exposes the burrows of countless numbers of small rodents. The normally shy Wildcats come out of the beech woods in the afternoon and can be seen hunting in broad daylight. There is a very healthy population here, and studies have shown that they are not subject to hybridization with domestic cats. With care and patience we can expect great views of this fantastic predator.

PARQUE NATURAL DE SOMIEDO

On day four we can do some final birdwatching, or perhaps try our luck with another wolf pack, before heading west towards Asturias. The Parque Natural de Somiedo is located in the central area of the Cantabrian Mountains and covers over 40,000 hectares. As in the Picos, farming methods are very traditional, leading to it being declared a UNESCO biosphere reserve in 2000. We will spend three nights in the heart of the reserve in the village of Pola de Somiedo.

The park is most famous for its population of Cantabrian Brown Bears. Of approximately 200 bears that live in the mountains of northern Spain, more than 30 individuals live around Somiedo. Normally shy and reclusive, the chances of seeing one is almost nil. However, for a few weeks every year the population ventures from its beech forest home onto open hillsides to feed on the fruits of blackberry and bilberry. When the *Rhamnus alpina* (a type of buckthorn) fruits, they lose all self control and gorge themselves silly. Our local guide knows all the best spots to find one, and during our time here we can expect sightings of adult males, adolescents and females with young.

We shall not neglect the birding here either. Crag Martin, Black Redstart, Red-billed Chough, Red Kite, Goshawk, Rock Bunting, Dipper and Firecrest are amongst the assorted birdlife that can be found. If Wallcreeper eluded us in the Picos we can try again here. Migrants crossing the high passes will include many northern species such as abundant Meadow Pipits, Skylarks, Willow Warblers, Redstarts and Pied Flycatchers. Common Chiffchaffs will arrive in numbers, testing our identification skills when trying to pick out an Iberian Chiffchaff. Butterflies will still be on the wing, including Swallowtail, Cleopatra and Queen of Spain Fritillary.

After three days we will reluctantly head for Bilbao, where we will spend the last night before our flight home. En route we can stop off at Santana Marshes on the north coast. This is an important stop-over site for migratory Spoonbills. The saltmarsh is also a temporary home for Avocets, Grey Plover, Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Pintail, and Shoveler. Then finally, after a night near Bilbao airport we will head home with memories of some of the best mammal watching in Europe.

CLIMATE AND PACE

The weather in this part of Spain is quite different to the rest of the country, being cooler, with a higher chance of rain. That said, this is a lovely time of year to visit, and we can expect warm dry days. It will be cooler at high altitudes. Breakfast times will vary depending on what our plans are for the day. When looking for wolves and bears it may be necessary to have an early breakfast. On these days we will have a long rest in the middle of the day to compensate. At other times, breakfast will be around 7.30am. Basic fitness is all that is required. In order to look for wolves, there will be a certain amount of walking. The terrain depends on where the wolves chose to den, but we will take the easiest options. The

walking can be done at your own pace, with no pressure of time. When looking for birds, bears and wildcats, the pace will be relaxed.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

Full-board accommodation is provided, with three nights at the Hotel Presa, Riano, three nights at the Hotel Casa Mino, Somiedo and one night at the Holiday Inn in Bilbao Airport. All hotels are of a good standard and all rooms have an en suite bathroom. Packed lunches will be taken every day.

PRICE INCLUDES

All birdwatching excursions with expert leader and local guides, full-board accommodation (starting with lunch on 30th, ending with breakfast on 6th), soft drinks at meal times, bottled water throughout, local transport by mini-coach and 4x4 and international flights.

WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Direct flights from Manchester to Bilbao, using the scheduled services of Easyjet. Outbound flight departs early morning, return flight arrives back midday. It may also be possible to fly from London. Please phone for details.

7 nights:	30th August to 6th Sept. 2015
Principal leader:	Paul J. Willoughby
Local guide:	Bernardo Canal (wolves) and Luis Fernandez and Marcos Simon (bears)
Maximum group size:	11 clients with one leader and local guides
Cost with discount (if you book before 17th May 2015):	£1680 per person sharing (£140 single supplement)
Full Cost:	£1780 per person sharing
Deposit:	£300 per person



Cantabrian Brown Bear

