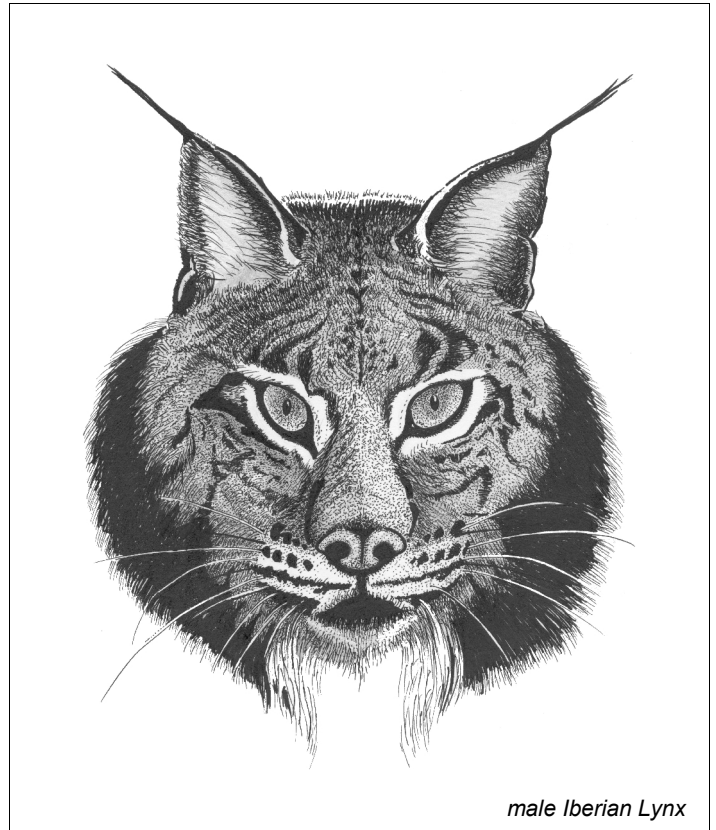
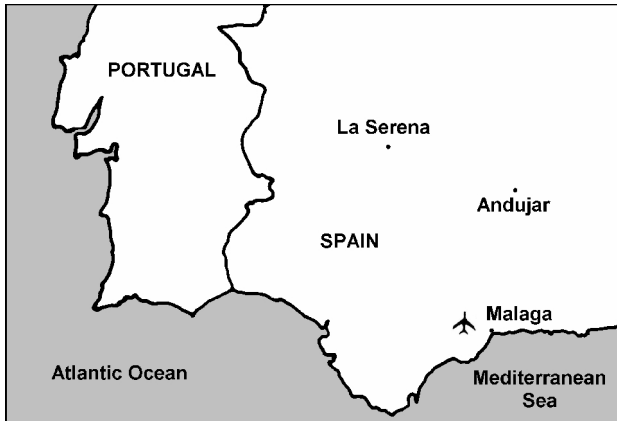


SPAIN'S SIERRA DE ANDUJAR

a search for the world's rarest cat



male Iberian Lynx

Until quite recently, anyone hoping to see Europe's rarest and most endangered mammal would have needed privileged access to strictly protected sites *and* a huge slice of luck. A few years ago, however, news started to emerge that visitors to Andujar were connecting with wild Iberian Lynx with a regularity that was previously unheard of. A combination of the terrain (open woodland and scrub which is not too difficult to scan) with a high local population resulted in some fantastic sightings and amazing online photographs.

More recently, the peak months and most productive viewing points have been identified. Nevertheless, every sighting is still precious.

We have increased our chances by gaining special permission from the owner of the land to join researchers working with the Iberian Lynx. There is a private area where rabbits are bred to provide an abundance of food for them. Animals visit this place on a daily basis, so our chances of seeing one could not be higher. It still takes a great deal of patience and a sighting is in no way guaranteed.

In our quest to see this special felid we will spend four nights at Andujar. Whilst watching and waiting, we should also see a variety of exciting birds, such as Spanish Imperial Eagle and European Black Vulture. In this unspoilt dehesa landscape, there are many other mammals too, from Red Deer and Mouflon to Wild Boar and perhaps even an Otter.

On day five we will drive a couple of hours west to La Serena, a vast area of steppe teeming with birds. Great Bustard, Little Bustard, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and Black-bellied Sandgrouse are all numerous and occur in big flocks at this time of year. Summer visitors have been replaced by birds from further north such as Hen Harrier and Merlin, attracted by the huge gatherings of Skylark, Meadow Pipit and Lapwing. Common Cranes will be here, and can be watched feeding in small flocks and perhaps flying to roost in big numbers. After two nights in La Serena we will drive back down to Malaga for our flight home.

ITINERARY

SIERRA DE ANDUJAR

Having arrived on our morning flight, we will drive north from Malaga to the Parque Natural Sierra de Andujar. Forming part of the Sierra Morena, a 250 mile long chain of hills that run east to west through southern Spain, we will spend four nights in this unspoilt place. The next morning will give us our first chance of seeing an Iberian Lynx. Just 94 individuals survived in the wild in 2002, but concerted conservation efforts have raised this figure to around 400 by 2016. An incredible 70% of these are found at Andujar. The park covers some 70,000 hectares, where habitat is protected and

landowners are encouraged to safeguard them. Amid rolling hills dotted with holm and cork oaks, thyme and rosemary, the world's biggest population of Iberian Lynx is now thriving.

We will still have to work hard for a sighting. We will find an optimal spot to scan from and must be prepared to wait... and wait... and wait. Luckily, while Iberian Lynx are most active early and late in the day, they continue to move around their territories throughout the day. They are not particularly shy either, and can often be seen walking in plain sight, oblivious to an appreciative audience. A big male, weighing over 25kg, makes for an awesome sight.

Whilst waiting for a cat sighting, there is plenty more to occupy us. As the day warms up, Eurasian Griffon Vultures appear above the crags, joined by smaller numbers of rare Eurasian Black Vultures. If Iberian Lynx is the iconic rare Spanish mammal, then the iconic rare bird must be the Spanish Imperial Eagle. Several pairs nest at Andujar and sightings are frequent. Small birds are not at their best at this time of year, but do include noisy bands of Azure-winged Magpies. Other species we are likely to come across include Dartford Warbler, Cirl Bunting, Wood Lark, Chough, Thekla Lark, Crag Martin, Black Redstart, Stonechat and Blue Rock Thrush.

This pristine habitat is frequented by many other mammals too. Red Deer are the most conspicuous, with smaller numbers of Fallow Deer and Mouflon. Evidence of Wild Boar is all around, and sightings are fairly regular. More difficult is European Otter, which has a thriving but typically elusive population.

We have three full days at Andujar, which gives us a great chance to see an Iberian Lynx. If we see them early on, and are satisfied with our views, we will have time to visit other sites. One such is Laguna de Fuente de Piedra, a huge salt lake to the south. The lake is home to Europe's biggest Greater Flamingo colony, and plenty remain through the winter. We can also expect numerous wetland birds such as Avocet, Black-winged Stilt, Little Egret, Gadwall, Shoveler, Purple Gallinule and Common Crane, whilst attendant raptors include Red Kite, Marsh Harrier and maybe a wintering Booted Eagle. In the dry surrounds there are Hoopoes, Stone Curlews, Sardinian Warblers and Spotless Starlings.

LA SERENA

On day five we will drive west to the town of Castuera, at the southern edge of the vast plains of La Serena. Covering some 100,000 hectares, La Serena consists mostly of stony pastureland and gently rolling hills; the most extensive area of steppe in Spain. We will spend two nights at Castuera, giving us an afternoon and full day to explore.

Many species here form large flocks during the winter. Great Bustards are conspicuous residents, at home in this treeless landscape. Some 2500 pairs of Little Bustards breed here, and in winter these numbers are boosted by the previous year's young. It is also a good time of year to find both sandgrouse. Flocks of Black-bellied and Pin-tailed are regularly seen, both flying over as well as on the ground, when their beautiful plumage becomes apparent. Stone Curlews are very common, again forming large flocks which are easy to find. Wintering Common Cranes feed on acorns in the extensive dehesa to the south of La Serena. Flights of these birds are a regular sight in the afternoon as they make their way to roosting lakes in the middle of the plains.

The area is hunted over by Merlin, Common Buzzard and Hen Harrier, plus occasional Golden Eagle from the surrounding hills. Little Owls are very much at home here, and it is not unusual to see double figures in a day. Huge flocks of Calandra Larks, Skylarks, Meadow Pipits and Corn Buntings occur throughout, alongside wintering Lapwings. Hoopoes linger into November, whilst Southern Grey Shrikes and Rock Sparrows add to the variety.

After two nights here we will drive back down to Malaga, arriving in good time for our flight home.

CLIMATE AND PACE

The weather is changeable at this time. There is a good chance of mild, clear days, but we have also experienced rain, when it may be quite chilly. It does not get light early, so our quest for the Iberian Lynx will not necessitate very early starts. Breakfast will be taken at about 7am most mornings. Basic fitness is all that is required. Day long birdwatching excursions will be made. Walking through the Iberian Lynx habitat is a waste of time. In order to see one we must be prepared to stand or sit and wait. This can result in long spells where patience really is a virtue. Your leader will be working hard to spot one. You can do the same, or you can read a book, or simply relax. When that all important sighting is made, it is crucial that you haven't wandered off out of earshot. There might not be a second chance. At other times, we will walk through pleasant habitat, birdwatching at a sensible pace. In La Serena we will drive the many back roads, stopping and scanning regularly.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

Full-board accommodation is provided, with four nights at the Los Pinos Resort, Andujar, and two nights at the Hotel Los Naranjos in La Serena. Both hotels are of good quality and all rooms have en suite bathrooms.

PRICE INCLUDES

All birdwatching excursions with Bird Holidays leader, full-board accommodation (starting with dinner on 14th, ending with breakfast on 20th), soft drinks at meal times, bottled water throughout, local transport by mini-bus and international flights.

WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Return flights from Leeds/Bradford and London Gatwick to Malaga using the scheduled services of Jet2 and Easyjet respectively. Outbound flight departs mid-morning, return flight arrives back late afternoon. It is also possible to join this trip on direct flights from other UK airports. Please call for details.

6 nights:	14th to 20th January 2019
Principal leader:	Paul J Willoughby
Maximum group size:	7 clients with one leader or 13 clients with two leaders
Cost with discount (if you book before 1st October 2018):	£1420 per person sharing (£160 single supplement)
Full Cost:	£1520 per person sharing
Deposit:	£300 per person