

# Spain – Cantabrian Mountains



## Iberian Wolves, Brown Bears & Wild Cats

**Wednesday 30 August – Wednesday 06 September 2017**

Leaders: David Walsh and local guides

2017 Cost: **£1,899** single room supplement **£120**



**T**his holiday will be a Natural History tour of Northern Spain, but will be focused mainly on the observation of two of the great carnivores of the Cantabrian Mountains, the Iberian Wolf and the Brown Bear. We will visit some of the best preserved habitats, as the Cantabrian range is an unexplored part of Spain, yet is a wild natural landscape with a rich mixture of rugged terrain and extensive forests. The Riaño mountain range, in the Picos de Europa, is one of the best places in the world for observing family groups of Iberian Wolves which, at the end of the summer, strive to feed their young in the vicinity of the den. Wolf watching in the Iberian Peninsula is a very exciting and intense experience, requiring patience, but providing fabulous rewards, as these iconic creatures astonish us with their sharp eyes fixed on the lenses of our telescopes. Riaño is now famous because from late July to mid October, wolf observation is virtually guaranteed because of the high density of animals in this area. Whilst we wait and scan for our target species, we will also have the opportunity to watch other interesting mammals, abundant in certain areas of the mountains, such as the Cantabrian Chamois, Iberian Ibex, Wild Boar and Red and Roe Deer. We will also have the opportunity to observe the Wild Cat in the valley meadows, when they are hunting rodents during the early hours of the morning. For these observations we will be employing local wolf experts who have spent much time locating dens and who will take us onto private land not normally accessible to the general public. It will be necessary to use 4x4 vehicles to visit some of these sites.

Later we visit the western Cantabrian Mountains, looking for Brown Bears. The Brown Bear Foundation patrols will help us to locate these animals and we can enjoy watching them while they feed on bilberries or Rhamnus alpine berries. Again, the observation of bears during this period in the year is virtually guaranteed, and it will be a wonderful end for our trip to the Cantabrian Mountains.

We will hopefully enjoy perfect weather conditions in the mountains at this time of year, with pleasant temperatures and sunny days with good light conditions for observation and photography – both in the early hours of the morning and during the afternoon.

When we are not looking for wolves or bears, we can spend some time observing the other fauna and flora of the area.



Iberian Wolves



Brown Bear



Wild Cat

**Outline Itinerary**

- Day 1** Fly to Bilbao and transfer to Riaño
- Days 2-5** Riaño
- Days 6-7** Villablino
- Day 8** Depart Bilbao

**Party Size**

Maximum of 10 clients.

**Accommodation**

Comfortable accommodation in twin/double and single rooms with private facilities.

**Transport**

Small coach, minibuses and 4 x 4s.

**Includes**

All flights, meals, accommodation, transport, entry fees, services of the leaders, VAT, airport taxes and tips.

**Gradings**

- Good
- 80
- Warm
- Low
- Normal
- Moderate
- Good
- Moderate
- Scheduled



Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush

**ITINERARY**

**Days 1 to 5**

We fly from London to Bilbao and meet Steve West. We then drive up scenic mountainous roads, with fast-flowing streams, to our hotel near Riaño, where we meet with our local guides, and where we stay for the next five nights. Right outside the hotel we have a rushing stream and alpine meadows. We can look for White-throated Dipper here and walk a short distance down the road to scan the cliffs for Blue Rock Thrush, Eurasian Crag Martin and the group of Iberian Ibex that live here.

We can spend the early morning and late evenings on our quest for views of the Iberian Wolves. Our local guides will know of a few dens where there should be small pups at this time of the year. The pups will not be venturing far from the mouth of the dens yet, so we should be able to take positions where we can view the comings and goings of the packs as they bring food back to the dens.

In some of the more open riverine meadows we can look for Wild Cats, which have a large population here. They can often be seen hunting small rodents and birds and we will hopefully obtain some good views.

When we are not looking for mammals we can spend time on the other natural history aspects of the area. This will be a great time to look for butterflies and there should be Apollo, both Common and Scarce Swallowtails, Spanish Festoon, Bath White, Mountain Dappled White, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Cleopatra, Ilex Hairstreak, Scarce Copper, Short-tailed and Baton Blues, Southern White Admiral, Large Tortoiseshell, Cardinal, and many other interesting fritillaries, skippers and browns. Birds should include Eurasian Honey Buzzard, Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Alpine Swift, Blue and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes, Middle Spotted Woodpecker and Western Bonelli's Warbler. We will make a journey to one of the higher elevation areas in the Picos de Europa, where we can hope to find Wallcreeper, Citril Finch, Alpine

Accentor and Snow Finch all together in a relatively small area where they all breed. There is also the chance to see Lammergeier, as part of the reintroduction programme. In the flower filled alpine meadows there will be Red-backed Shrikes hunting and along the banks of the streams there will be Pied Flycatchers, Melodious Warblers and Crested Tits.

**Days 6 & 7**

Today we make the transfer to the village of Villablino where we stay for the next two nights. From here we can join up with one of the guides from the Brown Bear Foundation who will take us to areas where we can scan for the bears as they begin to feed up on berries before they hibernate during the winter months. Bear conservation in Spain has been amazingly successful and the population of the country is now in the low hundreds and will probably reach the maximum population that the habitats can carry in the next decade or two.

The mountain scenery around the area is very beautiful and we should also find Chamois, Red Fox, Red and Roe Deer and if we are lucky perhaps a sighting of a Common Genet. Birds should include Golden and Short-toed Eagles, Peregrine Falcon, Eurasian Griffon Vulture and a bevy of buntings, including Rock, Cirl, Ortolan and Corn. Both Alpine and Red-billed Choughs can also be found in the area.

The small villages we pass through are great examples of a way of life that is fast disappearing in rural Spain. The houses are stone built, with thatched roofs and windows that seem ill-equipped for the cold that the winter must bring. Farming is still carried out as it has been for centuries with sheep grazed on the high summer pastures, tended by shepherd and dogs, with the flocks being brought lower as the cold weather arrives.

**Day 8**

We leave Villablino, hopefully with some time to do some more observations before we return to Bilbao for our return flight to London.