



## North Spain trip report

August 2015

*by tour participant  
Richard Howard*



**Guide:** Karl Van Ginderdeuren

**Pre-amble:** I was enticed into taking this trip by John Wright, who had made a similar trip last year. The main object was to see mammals, and in particular Wolves, Bears and Wildcats. I was particularly interested in seeing the Wildcats as I had never seen them before, and although I live in a region of Spain where they supposedly exist, they tend to be night-time animals, and have probably interbred with feral domestic cats. I wanted to see the 'real thing' and in daylight!

Obviously, because of the places we would be going to, there would be plenty of opportunity to see some good birds – in particular a trip to Fuente Dé in the Picos de Europa, and a pelagic boat trip from the northern fishing port of Gijón. It was to be a guided trip in a mini-bus, with Karl acting as our guide and chauffeur. The food (breakfast and main evening meal) was also perfectly adequate although typically Spanish. All the hotels had WiFi internet (to varying degrees!).

**15th August** We met at Madrid Barracas airport terminal 4 when my bus from Cartagena got in – the rest of the group had come via Ryanair from the UK and had arrived earlier and been picked up by Karl. Then a 4 hour (400km) ride to Picos de Europa. I learnt the hard way that being the last in the mini-bus was not the best option - being in the middle of the bus I didn't get to see hardly any of the birds as we travelled north! Alongside the **River Esla** we had two separate short sightings of **Wildcat** - on our first afternoon – even if we saw nothing else, I could go back home now happy!





Arriving at the hotel, we unpacked and then had a little time to have a look around locally. At the back of the hotel was a river, and in front, cultivated fields and then mountains. We then went for an evening excursion in search of Wolves, in. After a few km we cut into a mountain track, and after another km. or so had to dismount the 4x4's and walk a last short although hilly grass track. Stopping at a viewpoint, across a valley with our 'scopes, we saw a male and female **Wolf**, and two cubs which appeared to be playing. We spent about an hour here watching them – distantly but well – until the light began to go and it was time to return to the hotel.



**16th August** First thing, instead of a trip to see the **Wolves** again, I stayed birdwatching around the hotel and was rewarded with **Dipper** in the river. The rest of the crew drove out for a few kilometres and then had an hour's walk up hill in a beautiful scenic but hilly area where a wolf was seen plus 6 **Red Deer** stags and a **Roe Deer**. Arriving back at the hotel late morning where we met up. We spent the rest of the day checking out the area around the hotel - finding **Red-backed Shrike** and **Wryneck** and then the nearby **Riaño reservoir** and the **Valle de Valdeón** returning to the hotel in the late afternoon. In the early evening we again drove by the riverside pastures in a concerted effort for Wildcats - we saw 3 **Wildcats**, but this time relatively closely and at our leisure, as they didn't disappear as soon as we got out of the mini-bus!



**17th August** we had an early morning trip to the valleys around the **Riaño Reservoir** where we had Fox and both Iberian **ibex** and 'Cantabrian' **Chamois**. Andrew and Karl however decided to look for the wolf family we saw on the 15th instead but unfortunately drew a blank but did have a good view of a Wildcat. After breakfast we made an 80km dash on the N-621 and CA-185 to **Fuente Dé**, stopping en route at **Potes** to refurbish supplies (and having a group of 100 or so **Red-billed Chough** in a field, and, apart from several Griffon, also an adult **Egyptian Vulture** fly overhead). At **Fuente Dé** at around midday we took the famous cable-car to the mountain top to search for **Wallcreeper, Snowfinch, Rock Thrush, Alpine Accentor, Alpine Chough, Lammergeier**. On a cloudy day, we didn't have much luck with the birds – I lagged behind and struck it lucky seeing a single **Wallcreeper** flying around the Cable-car station which the others didn't get, and of the other specialities we only saw **Alpine Chough** and **Alpine Accentor**. Coming back down with the cloud dropping, we made our way to the fishing port of **Gijón**, which was to be our base for the night, staying not at Carreño in the hotel Carmen as originally planned, but in the centre of **Gijón** itself, in the hotel **Begoña Centro**.



#### **Birds and Mammals seen on the 17th August**

Red-billed Chough; Egyptian Vulture; Wallcreeper; Alpine Accentor; Alpine Chough; Black Redstart; Linnet; Peregrine; Griffon Vulture. / Ibex; Chamois; Fox.

**18th August** Eventually a 7 hour trip from **Gijón** harbour, on a catamaran, so very stable, on a fairly windless day. However by the end of it we all thought it had been worthwhile with both birds and mammals: - for me the star sightings of the day were a couple of adult **Sabine's Gulls** still in breeding plumage.





Late afternoon travel on to **Somiedo National Park** (100km, on the AS-227, approx. 1hr 35 mins), to spend our next couple of nights at the **Hotel** in **Pola de Somiedo**. We quickly dumped our bags and were off again in the van heading for a bear watchpoint. We had to drive past another bear watchpoint en route and on seeing that there were a lot of animated people with 'scopes we stopped for a look – and had our first bears, mother and cub. Also while there, we had **Goshawk** and **Griffon Vulture**.

**Birds and Mammals seen on the 18th August (pelagic from Gijón 20 nautical miles into the Bay of Biscay, and later en route to Pola de Somiedo)** Yellow-legged Gull; Great Black Backed Gull; Whimbrel; Common Sandpiper; Turnstone; Manx Shearwater; Cory's Shearwater; Gannet; Common Tern; Lesser Black-backed Gull; Herring Gull; Sabine's Gull; Storm Petrel; Arctic Skua; Balearic Shearwater; Goshawk; Griffon Vulture.

**Common Dolphin; Bottle Nosed Dolphin; Minke and Fin Whale; Cantabrian Brown Bear.**



**19th August** An early morning in the Somiedo park to search for more **Cantabrian Bears**, but the only mammals we got to see were more **Chamois** in the mountains, although Bob had a brief view of a Pine Marten. However we did have a good variety of birds while waiting at our watchpoint, such as **Griffon Vulture**, male **Blue Rock Thrush**, male **Bullfinch**, **Garden Warbler**, **Black Redstart**, **Red-backed Shrike**, **Tree Pipit**, **Pied Flycatcher** and **Alpine Chough**.

We spent the most of the rest of the day at the **Lagos de Saliencia**, an area of outstanding beauty about forty minutes from **Pola de Somiedo**, where there were some very interesting butterflies, and in the evening returned to the previous evenings bear watchpoint where we had good views of a **Golden Eagle**, but bad weather - low cloud - brought an end to that without any bear sightings.

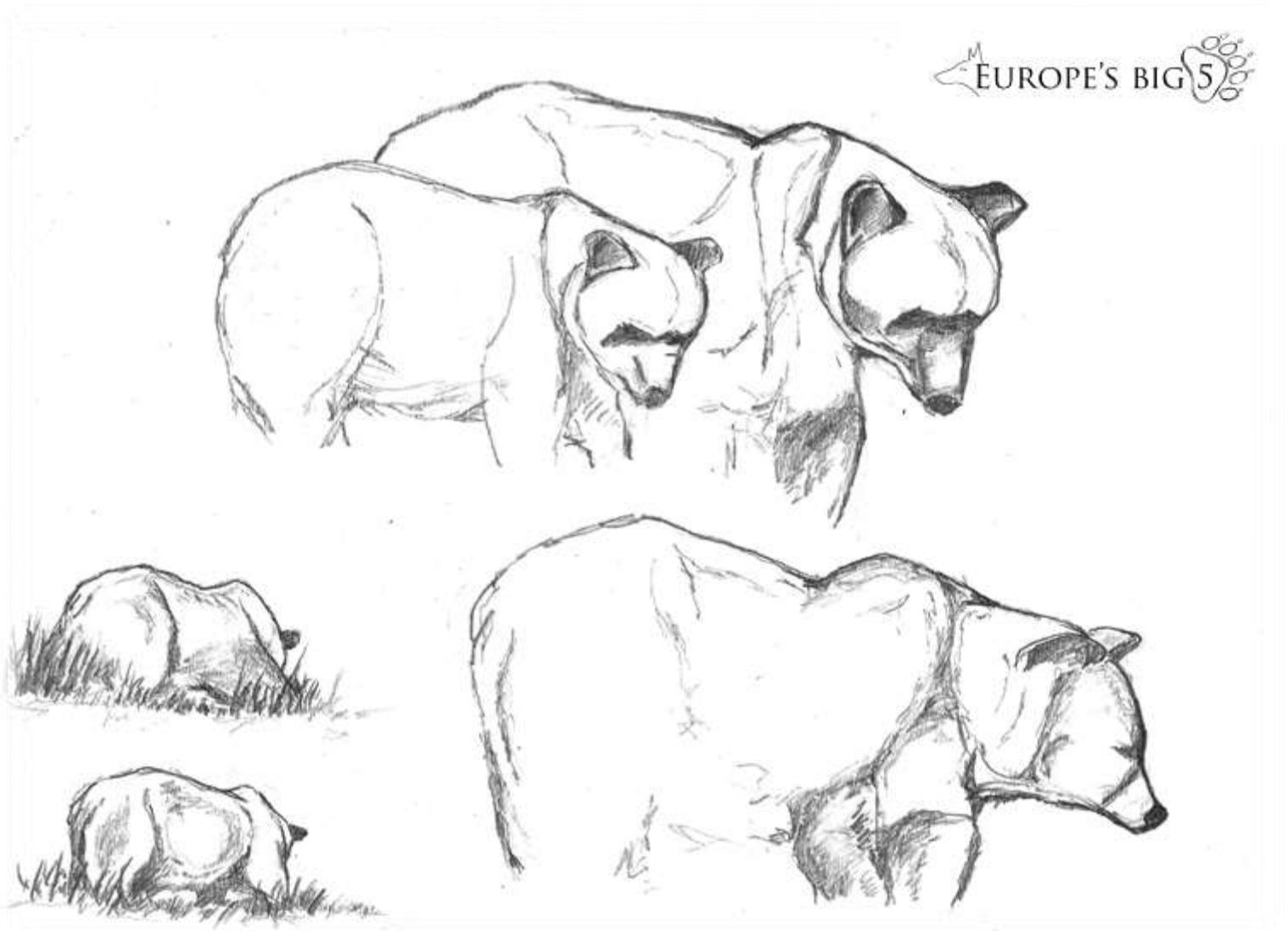


**20th August** Another early morning trip to look for **Cantabrian Bear**, but again drew a blank, the only mammal seen being a **Stoat**! We did however do better with birds of prey, with around 20 **Griffon Vultures**, a **Short-toed Eagle** and male **Montagu's Harrier** and a **Honey Buzzard**. In the afternoon we moved on to the Municipality of **Cangas del Narcea**. Here we went on to another well known watchpoint where apart from Chamois and a mother **Cantabrian Bear** and its cub, there was a variety of woodland birds.



**21st August** A morning excursion for **Cantabrian Bears** drew a blank, although the sighting of **Pine Martin** proved popular, and **Chamois** were seen on the distant peaks. The middle of the day was spent in the region of the **Reserva Natural Integral de Muniellos** (the largest Oak forest in western Europe) and the **Puerto de Conio** where with clear skies and no wind, the most interesting living things were butterflies which included Tree Grayling, a male Lesser Purple Emperor and several Wall. In the evening we all took the long walk to another supposed Bear watchpoint, which produced no bears, but we did see more Chamois and our only Wild Boar of the week.

**22nd August** Taking our leave of the excellent **Hotel**, we stopped off one last time at the bear watchpoint where we had final good views of the mother and cub **Cantabrian Brown Bears** we had seen the previous day. From here we tore back south to Madrid airport, stopping off briefly to watch 17 **Great Bustards** and for a sandwich lunch at the **Villafafila** reserve, where being more meridional, we had some bird species that we hadn't seen all week. The watching concluded with us having an Iberian Magpie fly across the motorway in front of us as we approached the airport.



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