

Wolf Watching in the Sierra de la Culebra, Spain

23 – 27 February, 2013

By Mike Richardson

Introduction

Once heavily persecuted across its range, numbers of the Iberian Wolf (*Canis lupus signatus*) plummeted to an all time low of 400-500 individuals by the end of the 1960s. Most of the Spanish population survived in the Sierra de la Culebra, a 95km long mountain range in north-west Spain (Castilla y Leon).

Increased protection, enlightened attitudes and changes in the countryside (mass migration of rural populations to the cities to find work) has seen Iberian Wolf numbers gradually increase over the last few decades and now numbers are estimated to be between 2,500 and 3,000.

Although still extremely elusive and distrustful of humans (wolves are still hunted, both illegally and by permit), the Sierra de la Culebra still offers the best chance of observing a wild wolf in Europe. Over the past few years a small ecotourism industry has developed with several well known wildlife tour companies offering trips to the region.

In February 2013, myself, John Sadler, Rob Jackson and James Spencer organised our own short trip to the area. Below is a summary of our results.

General Information

We flew Luton to Madrid with Easyjet and hired an Opel Zafira from Advantage. It was an easy 3.5 hour drive from Madrid to the wolf watching areas.

An alternative would be to fly to Valladolid reducing the driving time to the Sierra de la Culebra by at least a third.

There are two hotels in the area which are both well suited to wolf watchers. We opted for the basic but comfortable Posada El Tejar, located in the village of Villanueva de Valrojo. The owners are used to the unusual requirements of wildlife enthusiasts and are happy to work meals around dawn and dusk visits to the watch points.

Contact: eltejarvillanuevadevalrojo@hotmail.com

Another popular hotel is the CTR Veniata (www.ctrveniata.com) situated in the pretty village San Pedro de las Herreras. Again, the hotel welcomes wolf watchers and is happy to provide information on recent wolf sightings etc. The woodland behind the building would be great for small mammals and herps later in the spring.

Wolf watching

The only realistic chance of seeing wolves is from one of several watch points dotted around the region. Each one overlooks the territory of a particular wolf pack.

The wolves are usually active in the two hours after sunrise and again a couple of hours before sunset. A powerful telescope is recommended to spot animals which are often distant. Needless to say patience is essential.

The Sierra de la Culebra is also home to good numbers of Red Deer, Roe Deer and Wild Boar. Any anxious behaviour demonstrated by these prey species often portrays the presence of wolves.

I've supplied details of the two most popular watch points below (names taken from the map which is freely available from both hotels).

Pista de Linarejos (Manhide) (Lat: 41.922840 Lon: -6.400073)

From the small village of Boya head SW on the ZA-912 for 2-3km until you reach a sharp hairpin bend going over a railway line. Take the first dirt track to the right immediately after crossing the railway (*not* the dirt track *before* the railway). The track runs parallel to the railroad and is suitable for 2WD vehicles.

Follow the track for approximately 1.5km until you see a large firebreak running vertically from the far side of railway line and up the hillside (If you reach a steep track going up from the left of the road you have gone too far). There is parking for several cars at the watch point and the wolves can appear (often distantly) anywhere in the valley before you.



Guardalaba (Otero de Bodas) (Lat: 41.918246 Lon: -6.196847)

This popular watch point is near the village of Villanueva de Valrojo where the Posada El Tejar is based. Passing the village on the N-631 (heading SE), turn right when you reach the AV-263 (labelled Ctra de Otero de Bodas a Ferreras de Arriba on the map). Wolf sightings are possible from now on.

Up this road, and past the first small block of forest, take a right on to a track). Park up when you reach the trees and walk to your right until you get to an area with a panoramic view over the valley, with scrub below you, a plantation behind, and further plantations to your right. The village will be ahead of you in the distance and the minor road you came up visible off to the right. Wolves can appear anywhere in the area in front of you.



I should mention that some people have come across unfriendly rangers, especially at the latter site. The area is a hunting preserve and presumably these guys are trying to justify their wages by hassling tourists. In the past they have asked to see wildlife watching permits (although no one can explain where one can obtain such a permit), but more usually it's inconsiderate parking that gets their back up.

On the flipside some rangers are friendly enough to stop for a chat and pass on their own recent wolf sightings.

Opinions vary as to when the best time of the year is to search for the Iberian Wolf. Late February seemed a good time providing the weather isn't too severe. Early mornings were a little chilly at -7°C and daytime temperatures never exceeded 6°C . However, the light was great most of the time allowing us to pick out detail on distant hills through our telescopes. On the negative side four inches of snow caused a few problems on our last morning and we were too early in the year to find any reptiles or amphibians.

I would suggest avoiding the summer months when heat haze would greatly impair visibility at the watch points. Also wolf activity is mostly restricted to the early hours and later in the evening.

Sites visited

Although it wasn't the nearest site, Pista de Linarejos was our watch point of choice. This was mostly down to the fact that we had trouble finding Guardalaba on our first evening! In total we spent three mornings and three late afternoons looking for wolves, each session usually lasting around two hours.

When we wasn't at the watch point we explored the local countryside, including areas frequented by the Iberian Wolf. We also drove the local roads for an hour or two each night although we decided against spotlighting as it's prohibited in the hunting preserve and in all Spanish national parks.

A day trip was made to the nearby Villafafila where we spent several hours birding the saline lagoons and surrounding farmland. Great Bustards and Black-bellied Sandgrouse were the highlights, although the site does attract hungry wolves in winter which come to feed on the huge flocks of Greylag Geese.

We also visited the Portuguese border where we saw many raptors including impressive numbers of Griffon Vultures and a pair of Bonelli's Eagles.



Record shot of Iberian Wolf. Photo courtesy of Simon and Karen Spavin. www.sandkspavin.blogspot.co.uk

Mammal list

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| Iberian Wolf | <i>Canis lupus</i> | <p>-Three individuals seen on the morning of 25 Feb at some distance. Anxious Red Deer initially alerted us to their presence although they showed no interest in hunting. The wolves appeared to be sunning themselves for several minutes before wandering off into the scrub.</p> <p>- A pack of seven watched just after first light on 26 Feb. The wolves were seen on and off for approximately ten minutes as they made their way down the valley in single file. Again, nervous deer gave them away. They eventually disappeared into thick heather and were lost to view (see photo above).</p> <p>-Wolf scat and prints seen on many dirt tracks in the area, including very near to our hotel.</p> <p>NB: Wolves were not seen in the previous week according to other observers. They are far from guaranteed.</p> |
| Red Fox | <i>Vulpes vulpes</i> | <p>-One animal seen on first night drive while driving through Ferreras de Arriba.</p> <p>- Individual seen in daylight walking passed hotel in Villanueva de Valrojo.</p> <p>-Third fox seen crossing road early afternoon near Portuguese border.</p> |
| Wild Boar | <i>Sus scrofa</i> | <p>-Single animal seen on second night drive near Ferreras de Arriba.</p> |
| Red Deer | <i>Cervus elaphus</i> | <p>-Common throughout area and observed from the watch point daily.</p> |
| Roe Deer | <i>Capreolus capreolus</i> | <p>-Small numbers seen from watch point daily.</p> |
| Iberian Hare | <i>Lepus granatensis</i> | <p>-One individual seen crossing road on first night drive.</p> |
| European Rabbit | <i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i> | <p>-Singles spotted on all three night drives.</p> <p>-Several observed at Villafafila</p> |

Stuff we missed

Mammal wise we didn't miss a great deal. It was too cold for small mammal trapping and a little early for bats. Eurasian Otters are commonly seen on local rivers but the nearest we came was an old spraint at the swimming hole/boating area just outside of Cional.

Southern Water Vole and Miller's Water Shrew are often seen in the stream below our hotel but we saw no sign of either despite checking it several times a day.

I guess Beech Marten, Wildcat and Common Genet were possible on the night drives but without a spotlight chances of seeing them are limited.

Conclusion

We visited the Sierra de la Culebra with only one target in mind and we enjoyed considerable success with two prolonged Iberian Wolf sightings. Although both views were distant, excellent light and powerful telescopes meant we could observe every detail of the encounter. The fact the wolves were so far away meant they were behaving naturally without any knowledge of us watching them from the other side of the valley.

The supporting cast of other mammal species was never going to break any records, but we saw some interesting species nonetheless. Our bird list was pretty impressive considering the time of year, although sadly it was far too cold for reptiles and amphibians to be active.

Although the Sierra de la Culebra is never going to match Yellowstone National Park for guaranteed, prolonged and close-up views of Grey Wolf, it does offer the best chance of observing this shy and elusive predator in Western Europe.