

# Trip report: Spain, Aug 2017

We visited the area around Riano in northern Spain for 4 days in August 2017, searching for wolves, wildcats and bears. We saw 9 species, including 3 lifers for us.

Riano (whatever mammals you see, this is a beautiful place to be!)



Plenty of advice suggests that your only serious chance of seeing wolves in Cantabria is to go with Wild Watching Spain, and I'd agree; the sites they took us to are all along difficult 4WD-only roads deep into mountainous cattle ranch country, often with a 20-40 minute walk at the end. There are no dependable sites easily accessible from a public road (that anyone seems to have found).

Even then, luck plays a big part. We went out to two apparently dependable sites. At the first site we got a 2 minute view of a single **wolf** a kilometer away before the rain poured down in buckets and cancelled our morning. At the second site we got no wolves at all after 3 hours watching. We saw a couple of walkers returning home on a track nearby and our guide Maria theorised that their presence had moved the pack away from its normal area.

No wolf or bear photos, so here's some more beautiful landscape



We also went out twice for bears, but didn't see any. Our guide Bernardo says it's a tough year for spotting bears (bad berry crops two years running apparently), although it didn't help that on the second trip we were accompanied by the president of the Spanish bear society and a family he had invited along. Their daughter had a cough that sounded like a shotgun and the father fell asleep and snored like an angry lion. It's hard to tell whether we'd have had better luck in the more popular bear area around Somiedo.

As a consolation, Bernardo demonstrated the power of a good scope by showing us three wolves on a ridge nearly 5km away (it's a known location, he didn't spot them by chance!). Nice trick, but hardly a great viewing experience. Conclusion: Cantabria isn't Yellowstone.

I was much happier with our 3 life list additions.

As everyone else reports, the road south from Boca de Huergano is great for **wildcats** once the grass has been cut; we went out along it four times (the 2 hours after dawn and the 2 hours before dusk are apparently the right times) and saw three cats. Older trip reports mention more sightings, and I wonder if growing popularity may be having an effect? The cats are described as shy, often fleeing when a car pulls up. We generally found that there were 2 or 3 other cars cruising the same road looking for cats. The maths is pretty obvious; the first person to find a cat is going to scare it off for anyone coming along later.

Wildcat on our first morning





**Pyrenean chamois** are found throughout these mountain ranges, though obviously some luck is needed. Maria told us about one consistent location: the huge white mountainside above the village of Horcadas, which you can get closer to by following a hiking trail that starts behind the church (though you'll still need a scope for good viewing). We had a much better sighting while searching for bears with Bernardo, but Horcadas is supposed to be consistent.

Chamois



**Iberian ibex** are less common, apparently mange almost wiped them out a couple of years ago, but we got two good tips. The first is the Valle de Anciles, a stunning spot accessible via dirt road (okay for 2WD if the weather has been decent), though the ibex on the huge white mountainside will only be visible through a scope. The second site are rocky crags just below the village of Llanaves de la Reina. There's a wooden bridge over the gorge a few hundred metres down the road from the village, and if you cross the bridge you can look back over the road at the crags. We picked up three ibex after a patient 20 minutes of scanning in the late afternoon.

Ibex at Anciles (what do you mean you can't see it, it's right in the middle!)



Here you go:



We also saw a **red squirrel** crossing the road in Picos de Europa NP, a **red fox** in the meadows above Barniedo de la Reina, **red deer** on several occasions while looking for bears, **roe deer** on a couple of occasions, and some **European rabbits** on the way back to Madrid. So that's a grand total of 9 species including 3 for our life list.