

Spain 1st - 4th September 2023 – Ben Balmford, Andrew Balmford, Sarah Blakeman

I had a conference in Spain, and so took a long weekend – in which my parents joined me – for a long weekend in the Picos d’Europa area. On the back of advice from mammalwatching.com and the European mammal watching Facebook group, we decided to base ourselves in Riano. Our key targets were **broom hare** and **wildcat**. While we managed really good views of both, we also had rather nice sightings of some other real highlights (including **wolf** and **brown bear**) across the 3 days.

From a Facebook recommendation, we managed to link up with **Luke Massey** to guide us. Luke is a tour guide and wildlife photographer, and has now settled in northern Spain where he is rewilding a farm on the edge of the Picos, through a project called [WildFinca](#). If time had allowed, I think it would have been a really interesting place to spend a bit of time. We very highly recommend Luke. He is super enthusiastic, hard-working, with great eyes and knows the area like the back of his hand. He can be contacted through this [form](#).



Clockwise from top left: If only all wildlife were this obliging – Luke had already found this wildcat at our meeting point before we arrived; one wolf takes a stroll up the road, while another goes to the toilet; mother and bear cub on a hillside; fire salamanders are simply stunning.

My conference was in Santiago de Compostela, and so we left there mid-afternoon on the Friday, and had a stop in Somiedo National Park en route to Riano for **bear** (3h20 to the lookout, 3h from there to Riano) We arrived at the lookout site to people hastily repositioning scopes and reaching for cameras as a female and two cubs had just come in to view. We watched them on and off for the next twenty minutes or so, before setting off again for Riano so as to arrive not too late. Having quickly dropped our bags, dad and I then drove the road north of Riano with the occasional thermal scan. The only (non-livestock) mammals were **red deer** on the hillsides and a probable **wood mouse** crossing the road. (Note: spotlighting is illegal in Spain, and at least where we were seemed to be quite strongly policed as there is a real problem with poaching in the area).

The next morning we met Luke pre-dawn, and he was already thermal-ing a **wildcat**, which we were then able to watch through the thermal until it was light enough for decent binocular views. Around dawn, there was also a bat circling near the old farm building, likely a **common pipistrelle**. Once the cat had moved off, we drove around the Riano/Prioro Boca de Huergano area searching for further wildlife, and saw a few **red deer** and single **roe deer**, plus a nice view of a **red squirrel** as it crossed the road in front of us. Returning to Riano, we set off post lunch to look at an ancient wolf trap about 50mins from Riano. While there were a few nice birds and more **red deer** in the area, the highlight of the excursion was another **wildcat** on our way home, about 2km from the first. We had ace but brief (~2min) views as it quite hastily made its way out of the meadow and back into the wooded hillside. That evening we tried without success for **broom hare** in a site that Luke knew for them in the Prioro area. Although there were no hares, we did see a pair of **wolf** cross across the valley clearing and wander up a road, before crossing back about 20 mins later. Plus two groups of **wild boar** and many **red foxes**.

On Sunday morning we returned to the **broom hare** site pre-dawn and quickly found three individuals in the thermal. As it got a bit lighter, we had reasonable binocular views, before the hares went and settled down in the broom (about 15 minutes before dawn). One individual was about 100m from the road, on the edge of the broom. Despite being extremely clear through the thermal it took us a good 10 minutes to locate it through the bins it was so well camouflaged. That said, once in the scope, we got extremely good views of the animal's face and ears. From the nearby layby, we also had more **red deer** and one chamois.

After a pitstop at our apartment for breakfast, we headed to Fuente De in search of alpine birds. The top was unfortunately rather misty – and wet! – but we did still pick up a few alpine specialists (**alpine chough**, **alpine accentor**). Plus, a **snow vole** briefly came on to the path before disappearing back into its burrow. This burrow complex is about 3 mins from the cable car drop off – the path ascends up a short hill with a building on the left, before a relatively wide left arc. Just as this arc ends, the burrow was on the left. We finished the day with an evening looking up to a **wolf** den site again back in the Riano area. Despite a short spell of heavy rain, at about 8pm two pups emerged from the vegetation to each cross a stony clearing. At about 9pm we said goodbye to Luke after a really rather successful two days. As we arrived home, Luke sent us a message saying that he had seen multiple **fire salamander** north of Riano, brought out of the beech woodland on to the road by the rain... and so off we went to look for those. These beautiful creatures were really rather easy to spot once we'd arrived in the area Luke had described. On our return to Riano, a **pine marten** crossed out in front of us, and then as pulled up, cross back behind and disappeared into the vegetation.

All in all a really rather great short trip, made possible by Luke's knowledge and hard work.

Mammals

1. Broom hare
2. Wolf
3. Red fox
4. Pine marten
5. Wildcat
6. Brown bear
7. (probable) Common pipistrelle
8. Wild boar
9. Red deer

10. Roe deer
11. Chamois
12. Snow vole
13. (probable) Wood mouse
14. Red squirrel

Notable other: Fire salamander