

I visited Sierra Andujar in late June of 2023 but didn't bother writing a trip report because I was smarting after having missed the Iberian Lynx. We went as part of our family vacation to Scotland and Spain. Our day and a half at Sierra Andujar were the only ones focused on mammal.

We stayed at Villa Matilde <https://villamatilde.org/en/> which is well situated for access to JH 5002 and JF 5004 as illustrated in Tomer's report. Due to flight delays and rental car difficulties in Madrid we didn't arrive to Villa Matilde until nearly 2:00 AM. Apple Maps led us on a number of backroads from the NW through large olive groves where we saw dozens of rabbits which I figured boded well for finding the lynx. Gratefully Mercedes' husband Roland woke up for our arrival and helped us get situated.

Mercedes was a helpful and patient guide answering our many questions and teasing our kids as they deserved. Fortunately our 9-passenger van had one extra seat so I drove and she navigated and commentated from the other front seat as we explored the park. We stopped at the numerous view points and scanned the hillsides but saw only red deer, rabbits, and a family of wild boar cross the road far in the valley below. Mercedes had access through one of the locked gates to explore the bottom of the valley but we also took the public road all the way down to the dam. From the viewpoint overlooking the dam where the ruins of the temporary construction settlement still stand we saw our first Iberian Ibex far below us on the rocks at the river's edge. A couple of boar crossed the road in front of us on the steep switchbacks descending to the dam. We drove across the dam where Mercedes showed us the bats roosting in the tunnel on the far side.

We enjoyed an excellent up close sighting of a couple of male ibex just off the road our ascent. Fallow deer were also seen in the private ranch lands that are passed through before reaching the park. Rabbits were everywhere but we failed to find a lynx. Despite being the off season for lynx watching there were other vehicles at most of the laybys and several were clearly guided attempts to find lynx.

Mercedes and her husband cooked us an excellent dinner and packed us food for our day exploring the park. We also took route A-6177 to the Encinarejo trail and dam where we unsuccessfully searched for Eurasian River Otters. Our final morning I arose early and took a final drive with my more animal committed kids but we saw no lynx or other new species. It was a lovely area and we quite enjoyed the stay at Villa Matilde but we missed our target and didn't see any of the lesson common species.



Iberian Ibex

Fast forward to 2025 and I was planning a trip for our 25th anniversary. Originally I mapped out a route through Eastern Europe for the fall of 2026 but called an audible in order to use a couple of international flight upgrade certificates that expired the end of January 2026. That time of year was a bit more limiting but I remembered that it coincided with mating season for the lynx so I outlined a trip beginning in Lisbon that explored parts of southern Spain we had missed before and conveniently allowed for 2 days back at Sierra Andujar. My wife approved the itinerary and I began to make reservations.

To increase my odds this time and thanks to the numerous more recent reports, I reached out to Gato Clavo <https://www.gatoclavo.com/> to secure a room and time in their hide. Antonio, the owner, has developed the property as part of his personal conservation efforts for the lynx. He's a veterinarian who lives elsewhere but is deeply engaged with the lynx conservation and the lodge. He responded promptly and personally to my inquiry sending me numerous pictures and videos to whet my appetite and answering all of my questions. I booked the first Monday and Tuesday in February hoping that the weekdays would be less busy in the park. The plan was to arrive Monday afternoon spend time in the hide then do two shifts Tuesday and two Wednesday before driving on to Toledo.

The weather wasn't cooperating as a storm had passed through recently falling trees and swelling the rivers beyond their normal banks. The forecast was for rain throughout our stay though the guides on site had said that wind was a larger deterrent for the lynx than the rain. We had plenty of wind as well. We arrived at 14:00 and joined a group entering the hides at 15:00. Antonio has essentially designed a stage where the only actors are rabbits, lynx, and whatever birds decide to make an appearance. The main stage is a flat open area with a man made fountain that offers fresh water year round which I'm sure is attractive during the summer but unnecessary during the wet winter. Large boulders have been strategically placed that act as perches for the lynx. Flatter rocks offer hiding places for the rabbits. The grass is thick and green offering plenty of forage for the rabbits who in turn offer plenty of prey for the lynx. Off the back the stage the ground drops away quickly into native forest but not much of that can be seen due to the slope and angle. A commanding view extends far down to the distant valley when not obscured by clouds. You can clearly see the transition from the pine dominated mountain forest to the cultivated olive vineyards that eventually give way to the cities in the flats below. To the right of the clearing is a slope with numerous shrubs and trees that leads up to the forest beyond.

The hides and stage lie directly below the lodge, a walk of less than 100 meters. There are 6 different hides or watching areas. From right to left the first is a comfortable block constructed hide set up for 4 guests. The single viewing opening is about 18 inches high and offers an excellent view of the slope to the right and a nice view of the right portion of the open flat and the fountain and pond but limited views of the left flat. There's a heating and cooling unit on the wall that provided welcome warm air in the cold conditions. The next hide is the main one that has a side and rear entrance. It is designed for 10 guests but would be better for 8 as most folks have tripods and large lenses which take up some space. The viewing openings are separated into a small opening on the right that is at an angle where you can only really view the slope and the open area directly in front of the hide to the right. Then there's a smaller opening and two larger ones that give prime views of the main stage but limited views of the slope or other hide. There are two a/c and heating units and a functional restroom. The back half of the space is still under construction. I'm not sure if there will eventually be rooms that offer an overnight option. Outside the door on

the left there are two small enclosed individual hides that weren't used during my stay and then two standing hides that were open backed which was pretty unappealing in the winter weather. The chairs are a combination of plastic chairs which are loud and a bit uncomfortable and softer rolling chairs that don't move well or quietly on the hard rough floors. Upgrading the seating would be an easy and significant enhancement for the hide experience.

Behind the hide on the far right is a fenced menagerie filled with chickens, other birds, a few visiting rabbits, and an enormous crane. I didn't ask but I suspect the crane may be a veterinarian project or rescue animal.



View of the stage from the stand up hide...

We settled in the right-most hide and had it all to ourselves. I had inquired in advance about potentially borrowing a tripod and they were able to provide one so I could travel a bit lighter. It wasn't particularly stable and the mounting mechanism wobbled no matter how I tightened or adjusted it but I wasn't in a position to complain. I had also asked what lens focal length would be best and Antonio suggested 200-600mm. That's always the conundrum for trips that require flying and space limitations. Which lens to bring. My 180-600 sounded ideal but it wasn't great in lower lighting. My 400 with the built in 1.4 teleconverter offered great zoom and performance in poor lighting, but would it be too much zoom? That combined with my 70-200 would cover the necessary ranges but would switching lenses in the moment be practical or disruptive? My Nikon lenses are a combination of Z and F series so there's an extra wrinkle of compatibility issues with my older D7500 DSLR and my newer mirrorless Z6ii. In the end I did what I usually do and packed as much as I could cram into my large camera travel pack. I brought both bodies so I could use both lenses without having to switch but there's a real difference in performance between the two cameras, especially in sub-optimal lighting. I also squeezed in some binoculars for my wife and fur use in scanning the hillsides in the park. I ended up taking pictures exclusively with my Z6ii and the F2.8 400 t 1.4 lens.

There were several rabbits eating when we first sat down and we initially amused ourselves watching them. The clouds broke briefly and the sun appeared but it didn't last long and the

rain soon returned After 30 minutes in the hide we were joined by a Spanish man and his father. As we were all trying to be quiet there was very little communication with them. The hide session schedule varies with the season, weather, and animal activity. The norm for our stay was 7:30 to 11:30 in the morning and then 15:00 to 19:00 in the afternoon. We were allowed to stay during the lunch break if we desired and also beyond 19:00 if we wanted to catch the last of the daylight and the prime active time for the lynx. I had not anticipated the lights set up above the hides that brightly illuminated the stage before us. The animals have grown accustomed to them and hardly seemed to notice. Despite the precision in the stage set up, the actors have no script. The rabbits are abundant and near omni-present but it's not quite like the hides in Finland where the predators just have to show up for the meat awaiting them. We stayed until it was fully dark (other than the artificial lights) using my thermal camera attached to my phone to extend our visibility up the slope. There were several visible movements that at first I thought were rabbits but when a large rabbit came bounding down the slope and I at first thought maybe it was a lynx I quickly realized the first things were smaller rodents. We left the hide just before 20:00.

The accommodations are what you might expect in a rural setting. Clean but a bit sparse. We had a room with a private bath but there were other rooms that had a shared bathroom. I'm not sure of the exact room count but I think they are geared to a maximum of 16-18 guests. There's a common kitchen with plenty of fridge capacity, a stove, and the basics you'd need for cooking and eating. We brought our own food for breakfast and lunch and ate dinner 7 minutes away at Los Pinos restaurant as did many of the other guests. No food is available on site at Cortijo Gato Clavo. At dinner we spoke with the men at the neighboring table as they had been in the larger hide that afternoon. They had briefly glimpsed a lynx catch a rabbit the night before through a thermal scope but seen no cats in the daylight.

Day 2 began at the hide at 7:30. We were in the main hide for both sessions, part of a group of 10. We were the last in the hide so had the openings furthest to the right. That seemed like bad luck, but of course you never know exactly where the lynx will appear and how it will enter the stage. These are surely the most photographed rabbits in the world as we all pointed our cameras at them repeatedly during the slow hours as we awaited our protagonist. There were several smaller rabbits to the left and a couple of much larger ones that occasionally showed themselves on the slope. A few birds diverted us at times from the rabbits with only a hoopoe causing anything approaching excitement. The initial hour you can almost feel the excitement, anticipation, and energy in the hide but after a couple of hours the damp cold weighed on everyone and the excitement gave way to anxiety. What if the lynx doesn't show? Or worse yet, what if it appears and I'm looking in the wrong place or taking silly pictures of rabbits and I miss it altogether or fail to capture a photograph? Those thoughts all crossed my mind and I suspect for the others too, but none of it mattered as there were no cats that morning, just rain and overcast skies.

I was antsy for activity and movement so chose not to stay during the lunch break. My wife opted for a nap and I drove alone into the park, retracing the roads that were familiar from 2.5 years before. My previous trip in the summer had revealed a dry landscape but now the verdant landscape was green in all directions. As I drove through the private estancias I kept an eye out for movement but saw nothing, not even a rabbit. The road was just as bad as before, the short asphalt section perhaps worse than the dirt stretch. The heavy rains had washed rocks across the road in a number of places and the small stream had become

swift moving river. As I crested the last hill before the open valley where the laybys begin the sun peaked through the clouds and my hopes rose. There were only a few other cars out and about in the inclement weather so I had the first layby all to myself. I didn't have a lot of time if I wanted to catch the afternoon session at the hide so I made a quick scan and kept moving. At the second pull out I joined a couple scoping the terrain. I found a single deer and then moved on. At the next stop I spotted a pair of boar far in the distance. I was hoping for a moufflon if not a lynx but found neither.

I reached the dam overlook before turning around. As I approached the second viewing canopy I pulled over to get out but noticed a car ahead of me around the bend had stopped and there were a few people standing further up in the middle of the road. I excitedly parked and hurried up to them. The land on the left uphill side was all marked no entrance and the man parked ahead of me was explaining excitedly to the small group that chasing a lynx off the road was not permitted! A lynx? That was all I needed to hear. Two minutes before they had seen a lynx and it was now somewhere above us in the thick vegetation. We continued up the road another 30 yards to get a better angle to see into the trees and the 6 or 7 of us all put our glasses on the hillside. After a couple of minutes one of the men found it through his spotting scope lying beneath a tree. Later when I zoomed in I could see its head and forepaws in one of the pictures I had taken of the mountainside. After a couple of anxious seconds I asked if I could steal a look through his scope and there it was! Moments later I was able to find the feline through my telephoto lens and got my official photographic proof. It is amazing how relatively easy it is today to find this gorgeous cat that was so near the brink of extinction in my childhood.

We all watched in awe for a few minutes before the lynx resumed its climb up the hill away from us and disappeared again. I hurried jogged down to my car took one last scan from that vantage point for the lynx and headed back towards Gato Clavo. I saw a trio of red deer and then a lone doe on my way back out. I felt a little bad showing the picture of the lynx to the other guests as we gathered at 15:00 to reenter the hide, but most of them had seen a lynx before.

The weather seemed to be breaking in our favor and we had only intermittent light rain during the afternoon session. I again got the last seat but this time was the furthest right chair of the leftmost viewing slot. That meant a column blocked my view to the right and I could really only see a small sector to the right. But if there was no lynx it wouldn't really matter. Collectively we surely took a thousand pictures of rabbits, house finches, doves, and a couple of hoopoes as we hoped for the star to make an appearance. We all were a bit bored and took turns without coordinating to check our phones: email, reading, weather app, old mammal photos, anything to keep us awake. Lisa and I spent a few minutes at the standup hides before the cold chased us back to the enclosed hide. From that vantage point you could see the ground to the left and below the stage and imagine where a lynx may approach from.

Around 18:00 I glanced at my neighbor to the left and saw him lean down to peer through his lens. I looked up and there she was. Like a phantom a young female lynx had appeared and was witting on her haunches just 30 meters in front of us on a large rock. Within seconds everything camera was trained on her and a constant what sounded like thunder of shutters clicking began that would last nearly an hour. She seemed unperturbed by our presence or the camera noises though surely could hear them distinctly. She was on the hunt, patiently watching, then moving to different vantage points. Several times she made



quick movements or lunges but we never saw the rabbits that she heard and smelled tucked beneath the rocks or in the holes in the damp earth. At one point the crane in the pen behind us shrieked loudly and we all jumped but the lynx's attention was focused elsewhere a clearly what should have been a foreign sound had become familiar to her.



Just before 19:00 she retreated into the gathering darkness and we all exhaled. As she had moved across the stage we all shuffled to get better views and shared the limited space politely so all could take pictures. We stayed until 19:15 but at that point the pictures wouldn't be near as good and she was out of sight. Eduardo, one of the resident guides said that the lynx we had seen was named "Tanthanita" and was 2 years old, a daughter of the resident female. Back at the lodge the live stream of the stage was up on the tv and while we prepared our dinner we saw that she had returned to continue hunting.





In the kitchen we struck up a conversation with a Brit who was familiar with mammal [watching.com](http://watching.com). Jon will be happy to know that he's helped convert another birder to the light side. The world seems very small when a stranger from Britain says, "Oh I know who you are from your trip reports," when you introduce yourself! He was heading to another hide later that week to look for genets so hopefully he'll be making his first trip report soon as I don't think anyone has posted about a hide to see genets in Andalucía.

We were scheduled to spend the morning and afternoon the next day in the hide but the weather turned worse with wind and unrelenting rain. I joined the group at 7:30 but by 9:00 all was still and I left. My wife and I drove out to the Encinajero Trail along the river to the bridge in search of otters. The swollen river had over run the banks in places and some of the picnic tables would have left your feet soaked. I wasn't optimistic about finding the otters with the river conditions but I got out a few times and scanned the river to no avail. We retraced our path and then took the other road out to the Jandujar Dam. We saw a few more red deer but nothing else. As we crested the ridge leading from the broad valley to dam viewpoint there were a couple of cars pulled over. And people scoping the hillside off to the right. We got out and learned that they had seen a lynx a few minutes before but it was out of sight. They were using a thermal scope in the daylight and said they occasionally caught some movement. We joined them for 10 minutes then continued on down to the dam. The tunnel had just a single small bat so far recessed in a rock hole that I couldn't get a decent picture. The rain continued and though we stopped again where others were waiting out the lynx we had no further sightings. It was early afternoon and we had a long drive to Toledo so we skipped the afternoon hide session due to the poor weather. I spent about 15 hours in the hide and 14 of them were without incident, but that single hour made the trip!



Mammal List:

7+ species (5 lifers)

Iberian Lynx

Red Deer

Fallow Deer

Iberian Ibex

European Rabbit

Daubenton's Bat

Lesser Horseshoe Bat

Some other bats and unidentified rodents