

## IBERIAN LYNX SIGHTINGS IN THE SIERRA de ANDUJAR. JANUARY 2020.

In January 2020 I (we) spent 3 full days and 2 half days (4 nights) in an Iberian Lynx 'hotspot' the Sierra de Andujar region of Southern Spain. We stayed at Villa Matilde, 15km north of Andujar just outside the Parque Nacional, a homely establishment with excellent food. The trip was organised by Wise Birding (UK), Chris Townend (company owner) was our guide and including us there were 6 participants. The main activity centred around Lynx spotting (main target species) and the chosen location was from and between a series of lookout posts on the JF-5004 road (unpaved) between Los Escoriales and La Lancha. La Lancha is now a derelict village but the road which is a dead-end, services a dam / hydroelectric facility built across the Rio Jandula valley. The JF-5004 which is very popular with mammal watchers has several observation platforms built along the main observation route, unfortunately toilets have not been included so mountain stream tunnels which pass under the road are used, not good. These have been partially blocked with netting presumably to encourage the Lynx to cross directly over the road rather than under it. At weekends the area attracts significant numbers of wildlife enthusiasts and it was encouraging to see so many young people enjoying the experience, it tends to be quieter during the week. A short night drive and brief visits to other locations were also included in the itinerary. I recorded 8 species of mammals and 70 bird species during the trip. (see separate trip species checklist). 4 Iberian Lynx sightings were recorded during the trip possibly including 5 different Cats. It was noted that Iberian Rabbit numbers in the region at the moment appear very high which is a good thing in order to safeguard this endangered species which suffers badly when Rabbit numbers drop as Iberian Lynx feed almost exclusively on Rabbit. Roadkill numbers remain a deep concern to all those involved in the conservation of the species and some unbelievably, appear still to be being illegally shot (pers. comm). Iberian Lynx numbers were at an all-time low in 2002 at around 94, in 2012 the IUCN SCG reported a number of 156 adults. A recent census 2019 indicates a total population throughout their now extended range as being 686. Speaking to seasoned observers during the visit they felt that the actual number is higher than that at around 800, there is little doubt that the significant effort and money that has gone into the conservation of this species has paid off, as the the Iberian Lynx is now classified as Endangered rather than Critically Endangered. For now, a wildlife good news story and the Iberian Lynx is possibly no longer the rarest cat on earth although there is still plenty of work to do and over confidence would be a mistake. This initiative to me represents good value for money although it may now be the case that EU funding has stopped or is under review. Recent reintroductions of the species into Portugal circa 2014 (natural range) appear to be going very well with breeding success being reported.

### SIGHTING 1. (S1) Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> January 2020. 18.30

As we returned to the villa about 1 km from Los Escoriales a sub adult Lynx ran across the road in front of our vehicle (5m), it passed under a wire fence across some grass and settled briefly on top of a low wall. The whole length of this road is wire fenced on both sides although openings have been integrated into the fence design, presumably to accommodate Lynx movements. It looked directly at the vehicle; the ear tufts were clearly visible and then it ran towards a tree before vanishing into the dark. I got a very good look at it as I was sat in the front seat of the vehicle. It was smaller than I expected, around 2 years old and possibly newly independent, it was about twice the size of a domestic cat, of robust build and had the characteristic stumpy tail. It was quite dark in colour with a noticeable white band on its raised tail. (3 days later at virtually this exact same spot several observers had an outstanding sighting of a Lynx lying on a rock outcrop close to the road during daylight hours).

At the time of our sighting the weather was poor with rain and mist, visibility was not too good and it was cold 3°C and dark. We had been out in the field since around 14.30 on arrival from Malaga (230km).

### SIGHTING 2. Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> January. 12.15

We had been out since 08.00 in cool and overcast conditions (better than Saturday) when CT spotted a Lynx crossing what appeared to be almost a sand bank in the valley below, possibly at a

distance of about 300metres. By the time we got a fix on the position it had vanished into a large clump of bushes. After a few minutes the Lynx reappeared to the delight of all before entering more dense vegetation. Anticipating the direction, the cat was heading we followed our instincts only to be disappointed. We got a very good view of the Lynx initially and it was certainly much larger than the one seen on the first evening, a very impressive cat indeed. A Red Deer feeding very close by was totally unconcerned by the presence of the Lynx.

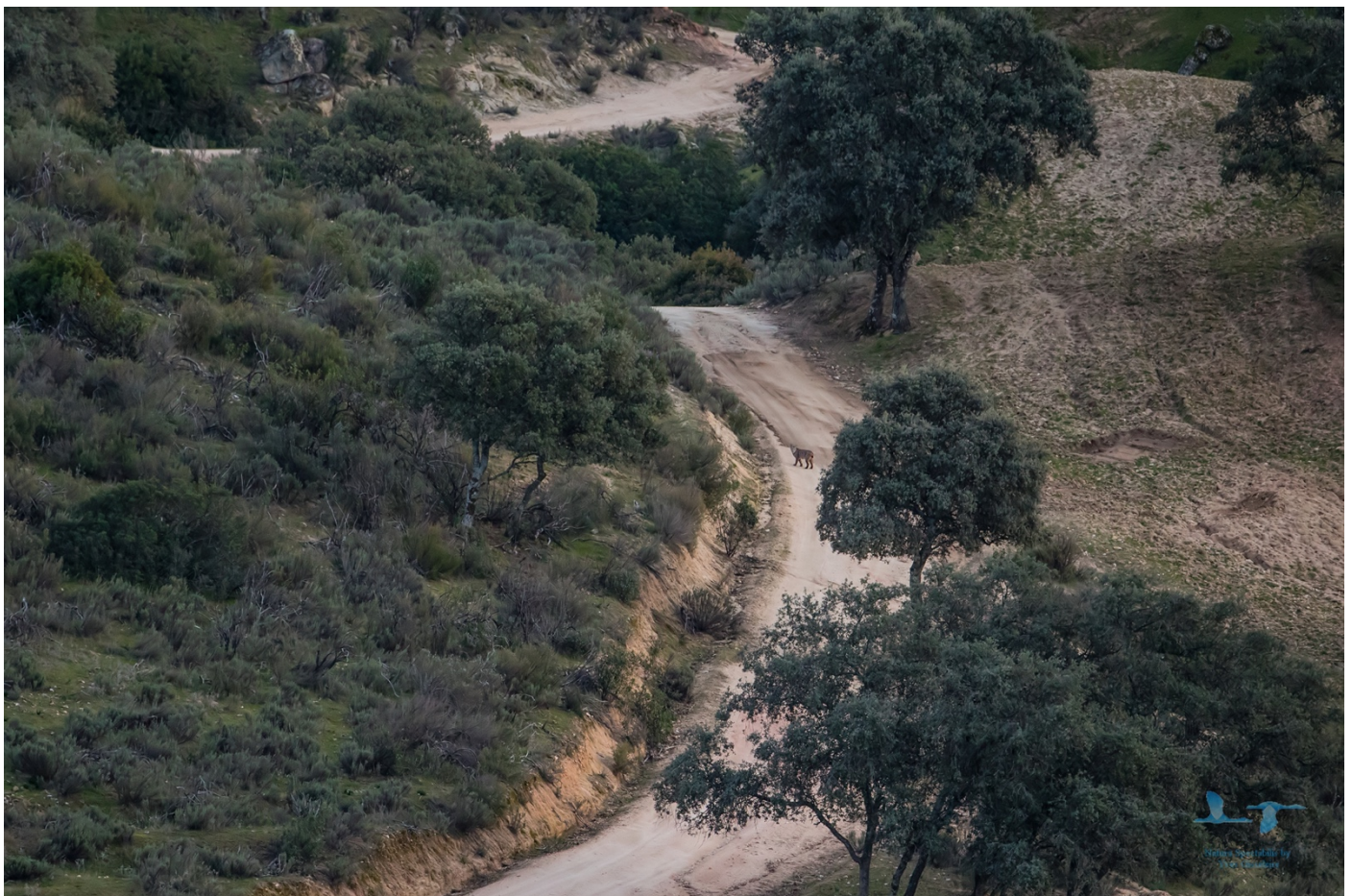
The most commonly seen mammals in the area are Red Deer which are seen in significant numbers everywhere and they are nowhere near as skittish as those found in Scotland and I am fairly sure hunting takes place in this area which is just outside the Parque Natural, we also recorded Fallow Deer (in much smaller numbers), Iberian Rabbit (lots), Southwestern Ibex\* (3), European Mouflon (6+), Wild Boar\*\* (6+) and Daubenton's Bat (2) during this short trip.

\* Observed high up on the cliffs behind the hydroelectric plant at La Lancha on the last full day.

\*\* Best observation during a short night drive at the southern end of Embalse del Encinarejo. (20<sup>th</sup> 20.45).

### SIGHTING 3. Monday 20<sup>TH</sup> January. 17.30

At 12.00 it was drawn to our attention that a local guide had seen a Lynx with a Rabbit kill enter a clump of bushes at the head of a valley close to the road. We spent most of the afternoon staking out the site until 18.30 without any luck. However, during this period, we enjoyed another brief Lynx sighting at 17.30 when an adult Lynx was spotted making its way up a track (to our left) towards the main track. Had the one in the bushes managed to get out unnoticed? After a short period of time it disappeared from view and did not reappear. So, we returned to the delights of the stake out. The weather was variable all day, cold and windy with short periods of sunshine, we were expecting it to be warmer. Sighting 3 was about 400metres east of 2, both seen from the JF-5004. The sighting once again was from a distance of about 300 metres but was very clear.



17.30 SIGHTING (S3) LYNX VISIBLE ON THE TRACK. CENTRE, RIGHT. (TAKEN FROM A CONSIDERABLE DISTANCE).

SIGHTING 4. Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> January. 16.30

As the final full day in the field drew to an end, several observers at the central observation platform were noticed to be behaving excitedly. On our arrival, 2 Lynx had been seen in the valley in front of the platform close to a wide fire break possibly mating. From a distance of about 250 metres I briefly saw both Lynx clearly, but just for a few seconds before they were obscured by some shrubs. Both were adults with one larger than the other, we saw one again fleetingly before the sighting went 'cold'. One reappeared 30 minutes later much higher up the valley and crossed the main track in front of several people and climbed up into the hills. This sighting apparently was a very good one, with the Cat appearing very close to the observers, unfortunately, I was just slightly out of position to take advantage. Once again, the weather had not been particularly good.



THE LARGER OF TWO ADULT LYNX OBSERVED AT 16.30 (S4).

On the way back to the villa we were just 3 minutes late for another exceptional close encounter as described under S1. The flat wooded area around S1, with large boulders just after Los Escoriales (E to W) before the main viewing section of the JF-5004 appears to be a good location to start looking for Iberian Lynx when visiting this area.

The following day we returned home.

In short, we enjoyed 4 Iberian Lynx sightings and possibly observed up to 5 different Iberian Lynx, 4 adults and 1 sub-adult. (certainly 4).

Thanks to Wise Birding and Chris in particular for his perseverance. It was a very successful and enjoyable trip.

Both images appear by kind permission of Yves Gisseleire. (Tour participant).

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