

EUROPE'S BIG 5

Saturday, the 5th of March

12 AM group gathering at the AVIS rental car desk, terminal 1 Madrid Barajas airport. Snow covered surroundings around Spain's capital when we drive in the direction of the Culebra. As we do reach our destination, weather is getting brighter and temperatures a bit milder; around 13°C.

Almuerzo in between. 5 PM at San Pedro. Drop of las maletas in Veniata. Destination for the evening is the well known area near San Pedro railway mirador. Because the gravel road is too muddy to drive all the way with our VAN to the end, we are forced to walk the last 20' by our own. We arrive at 'La Pista' a bit after 6 PM. While overlooking the magical valley below from the mirador we do spot some Red and Roe Deer, a male Hen Harrier and Wild Boars. At 7.20 PM suddenly howling of one, two wolves followed by some others. Splendid start of the trip! Cena in Veniata & early to bed.

Sunday, the 6th of March



7.15 AM coffee in Veniata. 7.30 towards la pista. We are forced again to walk 20' caused by the bad shape of the gravel road. At the mirador again all eyes are focused on the valley below. Several Red Deers with a big herd of 9 individuals. Some Roe Deer, calling Grey Shrikes, skulky Dartford Warblers, Rock Buntings and flying over Crossbills and Ravens. No lobo sightings.



We do leave the area at 10.15 AM and have breakfast at Veniata at 10.40 AM. At 11.30 AM we do start our sightseeing loop tour with several stops in between: at the trash dump of Figguerela , near the summit, and at some 400 year old chestnut trees.



Down town Villardeciervos we do consume a soda/café solo/café con leche at the Remesal bar before heading for the hermita walk. Many, many tracks as soon as we emerge the car and start our



walk up the ridge. At the hermita we do overlook the gully below but only witness a noisy Raven near the remains of an old carcass. Nice weather allows us to order tapas at the Otra Cosa bar in the small town of Villanueva de Valrojo. We enjoy this way our almuerzo in the open air.



Short break at Veniata before another evening visit at the railway from 5.50 – till 7.50 PM. No auditory neither a visual sightings of the resident lobo pack.

Monday, the 7th of March

7.00 AM coffee in Veniata; 15' later towards Ferreras. Big herd of Red deer near the road just before arriving there. Ravens & Red Kite down at the carcass but no wolves yet. Breakfast at Veniata. Before the one hour ride to Duero, we have a short supermarket stopover in the village of Alcanices for some fresh fruit and water. At the Duero gorge we do enjoy the splendid weather.



While overlooking the idyllic and peaceful surrounding, we do spot a soaring over Egyptian Vulture, a pair of displaying Golden Eagles and a roosting pair of Black Storks on a rock in the river. Another flying over pair of them when walking back to the car. Also calling Rock Sparrows. Lunch in San Vitero (variety of tapas) and taking in fuel before driving back to the carcass spot near Ferreras. No sign of lobos after more then one hour looking around there. Left there again 'round 6.15 PM and switched to La Pista near San Pedro. Gravel road dry enough this time to drive all the way to the 1.6K far look out. Last hour of the day there with bathing Red Deer, foraging Wild Boars and a hunting Red Fox. As KEJ get's a bit nervous after we again fail to get a glimps of the lobos...

Tuesday, the 8th of March

7.00 coffee in Veniata. 7.15 towards Ferreras. After 10 minutes there, Steven spots a wolf in the fields behind the pine forest! Everyone is able to see it well before it get's out of sight to continue it's early morning territory border patrol! Great start and ultimate Culebra mission accomplished with this sighting. At 9 AM KEJ yells: 'there is a wolf near the carcass!'

In bright light of the rising morning sun, we all witness an eating individual for about fifteen minutes. After a while it stops eating, marks the area (scat) and disappears in the pine forest with a hump of meat. Splendid!

A bit later the individual reappears to eat again. After another fifteen minutes or so, the animal decides to take the whole part of meat into the forest. All very satisfied, we draw back to the VAN and drop Karl nearby the feeding spot so he can try his luck with his camera approaching the lobo himself all a lone. While having breakfast in a bar (Otra Cosa again) in Villanueva de Valrojo , Karl sends an sms to KEJ receives one of his best messages ever on his mobile: J – a – a – a – a!



This means the best souvenir is guaranteed for everyone! As it is carnival, KEJ agrees in disguise him as a real lobo guide. Laughters for sure!

At Villafafila we drive in the first agriculture track right hand side of the road before the village of San Agustin to get familiar with the famous bird species related with this area: several small groups of Great Bustards are immediately spotted. Also displaying Calandra Larks and singing Corn Buntings.

We take a 2nd dirt road ride before the town of Villafafila and drive into it for about 4 K's. We park the VAN near a small quarry. From there we walk to some pristine habitat but are unlucky to find the normally resident Little Bustards. Cooperative are Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Hoopoe and a vocal Great Spotted Cuckoo. We continue on the same road with the car and actually make a loop as we return near the main road. Many flocks of Great Bustards all the time. Then we look for the Little Bustards in the fields South of Tapioles, but literally no birds here.



Casa de la reserva is closed so no postcards neither a look at the exhibition 'bout the RAMSAR site we are. Also the pit stop near Otero de Sariegos isn't really productive as the Lesser Kestrels aren't present yet near their breeding colony. Lunch in the Iberian Hare restaurant near the A52 highway where we all have a tasty almuerzo con pescado. We decide to skip the Mayorga visit (breeding colony of BsKites) because a 2hour car driving extension. Instead we try another site for this species near the Ferreras lobo place, but no birds present there. Look for some lobo tracks on the hill opposite San Pedro town and then towards la pista where we chill out from the first part of the trip.

Must be said that, overlooking the area from this well known mirador, is every time again a unique wild life experience with visible grazing Red and Roe Deers, hunting foxes and parties of Wild Boar. Nice risotto meal in Veniata. J & M from Britain witnessed another lobo (the 5 year old alfa female nicknamed lolli) at Ferreras and heard the pack howling just when dusk turned into the night. Marvelous! This means that three different individuals were seen here today. One less then the pack of four Jan saw earlier during the year near this stake out.

Wednesday, the 9th of March

Early coffee again at Veniata. 7.32 AM on the Mercedes Van's display; we are already heading towards Andujar for the 2nd main quest of the trip spotting: Lincé Iberico in Sierra Morena.

After 220K's, a first pit stop to fill up fuel and have breakfast. 270 K's further a 2nd pit stop near the lagunas of Alcazar de San Juan. Many waterfowl there. Big parties of wading Flamingo's, between 25 and 30 dobbering White headed Ducks, some Red-crested Pochards and a pair of feeding Purple Gallinules.



One more driving hour towards Andujar. Short visit at the supermarket there before heading towards the monastery road up into the Sierra. When taking the small gravel road towards the rural casa, KEJ informs the group about the fact that, even this close to the town of Andujar, all wooded properties with holiday houses are occupied by Lynxes. Less than one minute later it is (again) Steven gently pointing out a strolling Lynx less than 30 metres from the car. Unfortunately it walks into a party of trees with dens bushes underneath so not all of the group do witness this unexpected and to soon encounter with the target species for the next three days!

We do drop of our bags, change our shoes and drive up to the El Cinarejo look out. Lush green colors of the grass and trees gives the valley a very pristine impression. At the well known mirador, there isn't really much to see. The weather, being very cloudy, makes it rather dark already. Only some Red-rumped Swallows near the dam are the only interesting sighting. Back at the casa rura, Merché informs us about the exact figures from the latest population estimate (November): 192 individuals in Sierra Morena, 77 in Donana and two reintroduced families of 5 and the other of 7 already interacting with the main population of Sierra Morena. 281 in total.

Thursday, the 10th of March

7.30 breakfast at Mathilde. Afterwards towards the La Lancha look out. Group of 14 Mouflons (all males) impressive. Black Vultures and Griffon's also present. Calling Spotted Cuckoos are chased by Azure-winged Magpies. Moreover, several resident Sardinian Warblers, Rock Buntings and Grey Shrikes make us aware of their presence in the valley.



11.30 AM Karl finds a patrolling lynx working it's way down from the slope. We all manage to see the individual at he end. Massive beard and way of walking really impressive. Also we see it marking (urine spraying) some of the bushes it passes by. A calling Spanish Imperial Eagle, looking for it's rabbit lunch just after the lynx get's out of view, soars over our heads. A moment of pristine nature experience for sure!

Nice meal at Mathilde. Back to La Lancha. Around 6.30 PM Steven mentions Karl about a strange call. Both of them focus on some agitated Azure-winged Magpies nearby the bushes the 'waw' call comes from...some minutes later two lynxes suddenly pop on the main gravel road we do walk/drive ourselves on all the time. What follows is an hour of both animals, definitely being in love, following each other through the up and downhill bushes bordering the gravel road. Breathtaking, mind blowing close views for sure!



Just before we leave, an Eagle Owl start to call as the same with a Little Owl. After lunch at Mathilde only Ria joins Karl and KEJ towards El Cinarejo, but spot lighting doesn't reveals a Genetcat, Polecat or Badger.

Friday, the 11th of March

Back to La Lancha. A Black Vulture is the only remarkable observation during the early morning presence. A Spanish lincé freak – who's already present near K 6.3 - names the lynxes (on Karl's camera display) we saw yesterday. The massive bearded individual from the morning seems to be Elfa; one of both territorial females. She's about 8-9 year old and the most productive individual in the valley. The smashing couple from the evening is known as Datura and Dingo. Dingo is a 5-6 year old resident male and Datura an offspring of Elfa; most probably not fertile 'cause she hasn't been sighted yet with cubs.

Around 11.30 we do leave to visit the dam. Black Wheatear and Rock Trush, but no Spanish Ibex this time. Four species of bats in the small tunnel.



When we arrive back at the look out, both Datura and Dingo have been seen once again.

During our usual return around noon to Villa Mathilde, we again enjoy a marvelous prepared meal by Roland there. This time, it's Lisette who stays at the hostel when the others once more return to La Lancha during the afternoon. Quite fast a lot of rain there. We are forced to leave the area. We drive up a bit towards los Ganaderias de reses bravas. Only vast and monotonous areas of bull grazing pastures there. A bit sooner than planned, we are back at Villa Mathilde. At EL Cinarejo only KEJ spots one individual of the resident Otter family. While driving back, a Garden Dormouse crosses the road. At Los Pinos we do order an appetizer and buy some souvenirs. A Scops Owl is calling near the hostel.

Friday 12th of March

Same morning ritual as usual: gathering at the desayuno table in Villa Mathilde. After enough toasted bread (with all kinds of home made marmalade) & cups of coffee, we do leave with our Mercedes Van towards what must be Lincés heaven in Spain: the La Lancha look-out. Ria and Lisette decide to walk the last 6K's of the ride to stretch their legs. They are dropped at the junction of the bumpy off road gravel track leading towards La Lancha. KEJ jumps out a bit before the look out and walks his way up. After previous experiences it's quite clear our targeted Felidae is often near the main road and not really shy at all in it's behaviour related with human encounters. Half way his walk, he suddenly hears a Lynx calling about four, five times. Rather difficult to locate where the call sounds from. Once arriving near the others, gathering near the look-out, he scans the ridge with

massive boulders. Soon it reveals the calling jewel from before. A lynx, being mobbed by a Little Owl, sits on a big mossy rock and overlooks the valley below. After some minutes, it seems totally relaxed, and closes its eyes. It seems ready for a long morning rest. Unfortunately fog comes in and disturbs the idyllic pristine scenery we just witness. In a couple of minutes the surrounding suddenly changes into a Neotropical elfin forest. Unfortunately no tapacullo's around to get busy with...



Ria and Lisette, both ladies in the company, and also a passing by car, do pass the lynx from below. Once the fog disappears, the lynx vanished into the mosaic of the hilly slope.

Some soaring around Black Vultures keep us busy as the same with some Imperial Eagles patrolling the ridge. Nice to meet and chat with the famous Phil Telfer in real time; a British cat/mammal twitcher Jan has been mailing with since a while.

As usual we do leave the area for our midday almuerzo period at Villa Mathilde. This time it is Per who decides to take some leisure time afterwards. It allows him to use KEJ's laptop to check some old mails. Steven has to practice his French for a forthcoming test. Everything is possible! The others return to La Lancha once again. They add Egyptian Vulture to the area list. One bird soars above our heads together with both the resident Black and Griffon Vultures. Karl and Ria also have a Golden Eagle twice above their heads. Karl spots the Lynx from the morning again, but it runs rather immediately into cover. Agitated Azure-winged Magpies make us aware of its refuge, but it refuses to come out. As severe rain comes in we decide to leave towards El Cinarejo. We pick up both Steven (a bit soaked on his walk back) and Per at our hostel. At El Cinarejo, Karl gets positioned at the Otter's den KEJ discovered by coincidence the day before. At the mirador there is an Osprey around. A calling Tawny Owl decides to start its vocal appearance rather early. An otter leaves the den between dusk and night. Three participants of the group see it running over the boulders covering the river bank. Strolling to the car, we do find some calling Tree Frogs. Amazing how loud this tiny creatures are calling. We do manage to catch one for a photo shoot. The same with another decibel creator: Mole Crickets. When turning the car, Karl jumps out to catch another night crawler: matterjack toad. Just before arriving at Mathilde, another object blocks our route. A common (Iberian) Toad crosses the road. Not the most beautiful creature we encountered this trip! At the hostel we do have a nice chat and have some laughers while consuming our cena. Merché, el jefe de la casa, joins the table. She really knows everything about the current situation del lincés.



Sunday 12th of March

Last morning into the field. A bit after 8 we are again near the La Lancha mirador. Both hardcore Spanish lincé watchers from yesterday are already on the look out. As the same with the Telfer crew and some others. About twenty people all together. Around 9 AM KEJ takes a seat near the main look out and follows a 4WD that is driving through the valley below. When the car reaches the curving gravel path in front of the look out, it disturbs a roosting lynx in the verge of the road. The animal only runs for a couple of meters to a sandy platform a bit higher up from where it looks for cover behind some scrubby bushes. Some minutes later, it starts its morning stroll and becomes visible for all of the lincé watchers gathered together now near the mirador. KEJ recognizes the individual, a young male 2-3 year old male, from his previous trip in May 2010. A great ending for us with this 7th lynx observation and 6 different individuals all together. At 10.45 PM we finally withdraw to Villa Mathilde where we pack our bags, consume an early latest lunch and head towards Madrid where we arrive a bit before 4PM after a ride of three hours and a half. A fast fare well in the terminal before the groups spilt up to get in time at the right gate. An abrupt and sudden end of a marvelous, breathtaking and very confinding trip for sure! All participant are more then just privileged regarding the smashing lobo and lincé quest!

Jan Kelchtermans

europesbig5@gmail.com



