

During these tough Covid-19 days for us mammal watching travelers and since our trip to Baffin Island was canceled for summer 2020 ☹, my wife and I looked for other possible options with limited risk in Europe to take into account any possible pandemic evolution during these summer months. Being located in the South of France, one natural option that came to mind was to visit Spain since it is close to get there by car with only one border to cross. Although this was primarily a birding trip to be honest, we took the chance to also look for some mammals, especially in the Asturias mountains where many previous reports posted on Jon's website mentioned good places and rich fauna. We put in place a 3-week long itinerary from August 1<sup>st</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> that brought us in various places from Catalonia to Aragon, then South of Madrid in Sierra de Gredos mountains, Extremadura, Basque Country and finally the Asturias mountains. Although not being as rich as Africa or South America, Spain is for sure a good place to go for mammal watching in Europe and due to the Covid situation again, a safer place to travel compared to Northern Europe / Scandinavia since the need to travel by plane and/or drive across multiple countries to get there from France were increasing risks to be blocked or put in quarantine....

In this report, I won't cover all the places we did for birdwatching as they are all well-known and described on other platforms like Cloudbirders. I will focus on what we saw, and where, in terms of interesting mammals.

One word about August: such month is clearly not the best period for either bird or mammal watching but you can still be rewarded with some great sightings however if you are patient and know in advance where to go depending on which species you are targeting. Of course due to the extreme temperatures that can occur during summer months in Spain, favorable hours for observations were only early morning or late afternoon/evening. The rest of the day was spent resting in our hotel rooms. We had up to 42°C! during a week but on the other hand experienced cold (as low as 4°C!), foggy and rainy weather in the Asturias mountains. Spain, the land of weather extremes ☺

### Catalonia

We did an evening/night hide for **common genets** located in the forests near Barcelona with the company PhotoLogistics. Great location, hide and sightings of several genets during hours! A memorable moment with great photo opportunities. Besides genets, we could also potentially observe pine martens in this hide but we saw none. If you are not hardcore mammal watchers and are also interested in birds, PhotoLogistics owns a large array of hides throughout Spain targeting many iconic bird species. Highly recommended.

We observed on a few occasions **European rabbits** and **roe deers** in the fields while travelling in various places near the Pyrenean mountains.

### Aragon

We went there mostly for birdwatching but were surprised by the number of **European rabbits** we could observe in the dry lands near Zaragoza.

### Sierra de Gredos

A very nice and scenic place! I used information given in previous reports posted on Jon's website to organize our visit there. We booked a hotel (the very nice and comfortable Hotel Galayos) in the village of Hoyos del Espino. From there you drive on the AV-931 road that climbs in the mountains up to the parking lot where start most of the trails to the Plataforma Gredos area. You can't get lost as there is only one road and the parking lot is a dead end ☺ You then just need to walk along the trails and scan the mountain slopes to look for **Iberian Ibex**. There are very easy to find and observe, especially because many of them are tame. Indeed, we could approach some individuals very close without them running away. This clearly shows they are not hunted in the area and are used to people. Warning for summer months: this place is very crowded with tourists (even during these Covid days) and as a consequence you need to drive to the parking lot very early not only to find a place but also to be able to drive up there because they close the road when the parking lot is full and it is fairly quickly full. What we also noticed is that when hikers and noisy families are in numbers, the ibex tends to climb higher in the mountains to get away from the crowd. So best observations are guaranteed earlier in the day. Nice place for bird watching as well.

### Extremadura

We mainly visited three places again for birding primarily: The Monfragüe National Park, the Sierra de San Pedro mountains and the Zamora area (which is actually outside of Extremadura).

Monfragüe National Park is a very famous place for birders as large birds like griffon vultures, black vultures, Egyptian vultures, black storks and eagles can be easily observed at short distances in the various cliffs overhanging the Tiétar and Tajo rivers crossing the park. Besides birds, many mammals can also be seen in the park: **red deers** are plentiful and **red foxes** are commonly observed. We also had the chance to observe a **European otter** very well for a long time at the Portilla del Tiétar mirador. I guess many other mammals could be seen at night but we didn't try any spotlighting session while being there.

Sierra de San Pedro mountains have many rabbits and **red deers**. We can also observe Egyptian mongoose there but we saw none although we did a hide organized by the company PhotoRaptors that was dedicated to this species observation.

## Basque Country

We went there only to do a whale watching trip organized by the company Verballenas located in the Santurtzi harbor next to Bilbao. Whale watching in the Bay of Biscay is known to be quite rich and rewarding according to past reports I could read and sightings listed in the Verballenas website so we had high (too high?) expectations when we booked and went there. On the day we did the tour, the weather was chilly with some wind and as a consequence the ocean was quite choppy. Not a big problem by itself but what we found out once onboard is that we had to sail for 2 hours to get to the prime area for whales and dolphins and of course 2 hours more to get back to the harbor. Therefore and although the trip was advertised as a great 8-hour full day tour on their website, we actually only had about 4 hours for good cetacean observations. Well, during these 4 hours we only saw a few shy **short-beaked common dolphins** who stayed in the distance and did not come to play with the boat unfortunately. On the other hand, we had chance with 2 sightings of **Cuvier's beaked whales**, one of them showing a decent display knowing how hard beaked whales can be to observe most of the time. To conclude, I had mixed feelings about this whale watching tour and would have been a disappointment if we would have not seen the beaked whales. The Verballenas company is not to blame of course: their boat was fast and stable, and the crew was nice and knowledgeable. It's just that Mother Nature can be tough with us some days ☺.

## Asturias

This was the last region visited during our trip in Spain and we spent a full week there in 3 different locations. This is also where we focused more on mammal watching than bird watching. We use many useful information in the various reports posted on Jon's website to organize our itinerary there...

### - Riaño area:

What a lovely place! Even if you don't see any animals, the mountains, lake and valleys around Riaño are simply gorgeous with very scenic roads. We stayed 5 nights at the Tierra de la Reina hotel in Boca de Huergano as mentioned in many reports. A great hotel with nice rooms, a friendly staff and the best food at low cost we had in Spain. Yummy!

Roaming along the streets of the village is good for birding and the old stone bridge over the Esla river proved to be a good place to spend time between wolves and wildcat sessions for birding as well but also for mammals since we saw there a **stoat** and 3 **American visons**! I guess we were lucky.

So as I said above, we obviously went to Riaño for wolves and wild cats, the latter being our prime target.

Seeing **wild cats** is easy and we had up to 13 cat sightings in 4 early morning / late evening sessions we did over 2 days. Easy to see but damned difficult to take good pictures because: 1) most of the cats are skittish and as soon as you stop the car they run away back to the forest, 2) there is virtually no place to park/stop alongside the roads and I found the traffic to be quite dense in all the roads where the cats use to show up and 3) best sightings are when cats are less nervous with low traffic, which means very early mornings or late evenings when the light is poor and high ISOs are needed for photos. However we managed to take a couple of good shots ☺. Several reports mentioned the road south of Boca down to Besande among the best areas to see wildcats. In August 2020, this road wasn't actually very productive with only one sighting and another one close the Besande village. For us, the best place where we saw most of "our" cats was the road North of Vegacerneja (N-625) up to junction with road LE-2711. We also had one sighting near Crémenes and the area between Prioro and Tejerina looked to be also a good place for wildcats with many fields and a quiet road but it is a bit more complicated to get there from Boca compared to the other places mentioned before.

If wildcats are easy to see and as mentioned in many reports, seeing **wolves** on your own in the Riaño area is on the contrary just impossible unless you are very, very lucky. To increase our chances to see wolves, we then booked 2 days with Wild Watching Spain who knows exactly where to look for wolves since they are tracking and following the wolf packs throughout the year. The places we went for wolf observations are also quite remote and only accessible with a good 4x4 car. We did 4 wolf sessions with them. Two were aborted due to poor weather conditions and fog preventing us from scanning the areas where wolves were supposed to be. For the two remaining sessions we actually went on the same spot where a family with cubs had been observed since several days. On the day before us, another group saw for example 9 wolves there for about an hour: 3 adults and 6 cubs !! On our side unfortunately, we only saw one day 1 lone adult and the other day 2 adults. Both sightings were very brief and very distant. Bottom line, we indeed saw wolves but sightings were quite disappointing and not good for photos. The agency is clearly not to blame, our guide was very friendly and tried hard to show us wolves in good conditions but luck was against us. Having said that and based on my own experience, I think you can have much better wolf observations generally speaking in Scandinavia or North America compared to the Asturias. The good thing we had thanks to our wolf sessions was a nice **Broom hare** observation one night when coming back to our hotel.

Beside cats and wolves, there are also bears in the area. We saw none but we did not specifically look for them since we were planning to go to Somiedo. We also saw many **red deers** and **red foxes**, and a few **roe deer**.

### - Fuente Dé:

Another wonderful and scenic place! First the beautiful mountain cirque in the heart of Picos de Europa where you take the cable car, then the cable car ride itself that covers a 753-metre vertical drop from 1090m to 1850m in only 3 minutes without any intermediate stops, impressive! and finally, the mountainous landscape when you arrive up there. On top of that, we were lucky with the weather with clear and sunny sky but a very strong wind. All the ingredients to enjoy a wonderful day.

Our visit there was primarily for birding with several alpine bird targets but we saw a couple of **Pyrenean chamois** very well and in fairly short distance.

- *Somiedo valley:*

Many reports were describing this valley as THE place to go to see **brown bears** in Asturias and indeed it was. Many reports are describing in details the area and various spots where to watch for bears so I won't do it again as nothing has changed much since then. During the 3 days we spent there, La Peral was the best place where we had most of our sightings from the viewpoint above the village: 4 bears in total. From there, the advantage is you can scan a larger array of mountains compared to the other popular spots located down in the valley. On the other hand, although this place is very good for scope observations, it is not for photos as the bears are seen from the distance. You can have much closer sightings at places like Llamardal, Gua or between Aguino and Perlunes if the bears are around. During our stay, we were very fortunate to observe closely in the afternoon a mother with 2 cubs in Gua for more than 2 hours, a great moment !!

We drove one day to another famous spot for bear watching: Fondos De Vega along the AS-15 road but we saw nothing. However, I must admit we weren't there during the best period of the day. On the other hand, the mirador is very well located just in front of steep mountain slopes and observations must be great and close if one bear passes around.

Besides bears, we saw many **Pyrenean chamois**, **red deers** and a couple of **red foxes** in the Somiedo valley.

Below is the detailed list of what we could observe during this trip:

Mammals with photos or well seen (lifers in green)				
Species	Espèces	Latin Name	Where seen	Pic
Common genet	Genette commune	Genetta genetta	3 individuals observed superbly well in a hide in a forest near Barcelona	X
Roe deer	Chevreuril	Capreolus capreolus	Few skittish individuals observed near Barcelona, in Monfragüe Park and Riaño area	
European rabbit	Lapin de garenne	Oryctolagus cuniculus	Many observed in various places throughout Spain	X
Red deer	Cerf élaphe	Cervus elaphus	Quite common and many observed in Monfragüe and Somiedo valley	X
Eurasian otter	Loutre d'Europe	Lutra lutra	One observed well in La Portilla del Tietar in Monfragüe park	X
Red fox	Renard roux	Vulpes vulpes	Observed in several places throughout Spain with the highest concentration seen around Riaño	X
Iberian ibex	Bouquetin ibérique	Capra pyrenaica	Several observed very well in Sierra de Gredos mountains	X
Wolf	Loup gris	Canis lupus	3 individuals seen very far and very briefly in the Riaño area	X
Stoat	Hermine	Mustela erminea	One seen well but briefly while looking for birds on the bridge over Rio Esla in Boca de Huérgano	X
American mink	Vison d'Amérique	Neovison vison	3 guys seen well but briefly while looking for birds on the bridge over Rio Esla in Boca de Huérgano	X
European wildcat	Chat forestier	Felis silvestris	Up to 13 observations of cats around Riaño	X
Broom hare	Lièvre de Castroviejo	Lepus castroviejoi	One seen well at night after coming back from a spotting session for wolves	X
Eurasian red squirrel	Ecureuil roux	Sciurus vulgaris	One suicidal individual crossing the road in front of our car while driving early morning to Fuente Dé	
Pyrenean chamois	Isard	Rupicapra pyrenaica	One seen well in Fuente Dé and many others seen in the distance in Somiedo valley	X
Brown bear	Ours brun	Ursus arctos	4 seen in the distance from La Peral in Somiedo valley and a superb observation of a female with 2 cubs during several hours in Gua in Somiedo	X
Short-beaked common dolphin	Dauphin commun	Delphinus delphis	A few seen briefly during the whale watching tour done from Santurtzi	
Cuvier's beaked whale	Baleine à bec de Cuvier	Ziphius cavirostris	2 individuals seen quite well during the whale watching tour done from Santurtzi	X
		Total Species Recorded = 17		

I'm adding to this report a few pictures of some of the species we observed during that trip:



Red deer



Pyrenean chamois



European rabbit



Broom hare



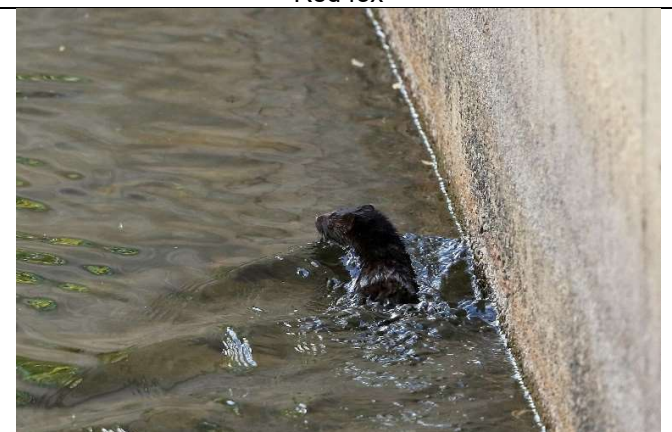
Iberian ibex



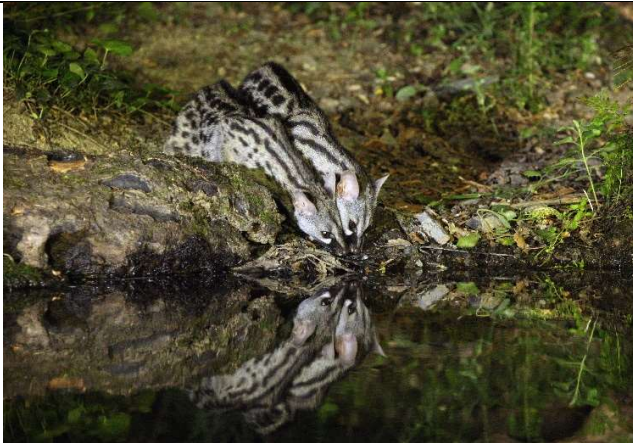
Red fox



Stoat



American mink



Common genet



Eurasian Otter



Wolf (can you see it ☺ ?)



Brown Bear



European wildcat



European wildcat

