

Spain's Cantabrian Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 8 July 2011



Iberian Brown Bears



Valle del Lago



Iberian Green Lizard



Short-toed Treecreeper

Report and images compiled by Byron Palacios



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour leaders: Byron Palacios
Gloria Lana

Participants: Nigel Cottam
Deborah Cottam
Kay Adamson

Day 1

Friday 1st July

London to Pola de Somiedo

The group arrived at Asturias airport on time. We started our journey heading south towards Somiedo Natural Park going through Belmonte until we arrived at the lovely village of Pola de Somiedo. The scenery became increasingly impressive as we progressed, and it was greener than ever and sunnier than ever! We finally arrived at our comfortable hotel in Pola in the heart of the Somiedo National Park in good time to settle in and enjoy a good 'sidra' (local cider), followed by a delicious first dinner together.

Day 2

Saturday 2nd July

Puerto de Somiedo - Llamardal

The morning was gorgeous and we were up to check some of the hills in case Brown Bear were around. We checked an old site where I've seen them in the past, but although some Red Deer and Chamois were there, there was no sign of the elusive bears around this time. We then returned to the village to enjoy a relaxing breakfast, and then we started driving southwards towards the site known as El Puerto. Interesting birds such as Water Pipit, Yellowhammer, Hen Harrier, Linnets and Serin were seen here. We walked around a hill and amongst the broom vegetation, in search of birds, and found Ortolan Buntings, Common Whitethroat, Garden Warbler and more, very active around the brooms and Erica spp. bushes. We kept walking in search for a White-spotted Bluethroat with no success. A lovely pair of Montagu's Harrier was soaring very close the hills and we had great views of this beautiful bird. We had lunch by the creek while Common Buzzards, Griffon and Egyptian Vultures, and a hovering Short-toed Eagle, were taking advantage of the warm thermals going through.

After lunch, we drove back to Pola for a break and then we set off again in the late afternoon to one of the view points at La Peral to give the bear searching a go. We had lovely views of the surroundings, including the ancient Brañas and rolling evergreen hills, plus groups of Chamois and some of Red Deer. As the wind started blowing with a hint of chilly currents, we decided that it was time to go for a warm and tasty local supper at Casa Miño.

Day 3

Sunday 3rd July

Castro Trail & Aguino view point

It was another beautiful day, although a couple of big dark clouds coming from the north face of the Cantabrian Mountains were a threat to our planned long walk. We started it quite vigorously as the trail offers a great array of dramatic rock-cliff landscapes, combined with forest - beech being the most dominant, amongst non-deciduous oak.

Many birds such as Western Bonelli's Warbler, Chiffchaff, Blackcap, Long-tailed, Great and Blue Tits, and Firecrest were constantly on the way. Griffon Vultures and a single Egyptian were seen too, as well as the always elusive and unexpected Sparrowhawk, which distracted our attention in many times. We stopped in a few key spots along the trail in order to carefully scan for bears, but with no positive results, and instead came across some 'brañas' (shepherd's summer corrals) lying on the steep meadows. We finally arrived at the small village of Castro by noon, after enjoying a truly wonderful trek. I walked back on the main road in order to collect our vehicle and pick up the rest who stayed down in Castro, and then enjoyed a delicious picnic lunch back at the trail entrance.

After this, we drove back to Pola in order to have a break before our usual early evening bear watching time, which was slightly spoiled by low mist and poor visibility. In spite of the situation, we decided to give it a go anyway from a picturesque view point located in the area of Aguino, right on the opposite side of Pola de Somiedo. After a while here spotting numerous Red Deer and Chamois; besides, a few Griffon Vultures nesting in the crags feeding youngsters, there was – again – no signs of bear. We drove back to the village in time for a delicious supper.

Day 4

Monday 4th July

Valle del Lago & Braña de Sousas

It was a wonderful morning! Although covered by a dense layer of dense fog, the bright sun and deep blue sky were penetrating through it gradually as the temperature increased. After enjoying a nice breakfast dominated by rich 'café con leche', local cake and omelettes, we drove up towards el Valle del Lago, where our resident botanist Gloria was already there; ready to assist us by taking us around her local patch. Born and bred in el Valle de Lago, Gloria knows the area inside and out, due to her constant field work, especially searching the local flora... We walked by the village reservoir where Willow Warblers, and White and Grey Wagtails were seen while we crossed the bridge. We then took the path which makes an interesting loop of the village, where there were many Yellowhammers, Tree Pipits, and stunning views of a nesting Short-toed Treecreeper. Lovely butterflies were spotted on the way too, and the morning was certainly ideal for them as the sun was bright in the blue sky. As we were completing the loop, Gloria found us some bunch of blooming *Centaurea somedensis*, a beautiful little flower endemic to the area.

At lunch time, we decided to set our picnic lunch up in the campsite owned by Gloria's parents, and enjoyed the peaceful surroundings while munching the fresh local meats, veggies and fruit, and the lush 'bonito omelette' prepared by Gloria's mum! After this feast, we hit the trail once again, this time, following the Braña de Sousas trail, where a juvenile Brown Bear had been seen by Gloria and her family in the last two weeks. We walked the nearly 3-mile trail, enchanted by the magical landscape around every corner as we moved up the route. Once at the Brañas, we choose the spot, and started to scan with our scopes and binoculars the hills around us. But after two hours of searching, we spotted just beautiful Chamois grazing amongst the meadows, but no bears. We trekked back to the village, enjoying the magical scenery of the nearly-dusk landscape, painted pink as the sun began to set. Once in the village, we drove back to Pola and went for a delicious dinner, with local cider and wine or the local drink 'la casera'.

Day 5

Tuesday 5th July

Valle de Saliencia (La Farrapona) & Llamardal

We had a relaxing start this morning due to the late evening the previous night. The morning was beautiful and soon – once again – we enjoyed the scenery of the mountains and crags which surround Pola before setting off towards the Saliencia Valley. Located at around 1,800 metres, this dramatic valley is part of the main drainage system which produces nearly the 60% of the water supply of the area. The valley, surrounded by iron-rich and limestone mountains, with lush meadows and lakes, provides stunning landscapes wherever you turn! We walked down the gravel track, amused by some of the many butterflies and plants we saw along here.

We stopped in front of a massive rocky cliff expecting to get some altitudinal specialties and had great views of Alpine Accentor, plus Linnets, Black Redstarts, Crag Martins, Serin and Meadow Pipits. Surprisingly, we spotted two beautiful male Wallcreeper in one of the rock faces, but unfortunately they were moving very fast amongst the crags and suddenly they flew away chasing each other. We continued down the track getting great views of a single male Alpine Accentor, stunning! Later on, a conspicuous Meadow Pipit caught our attention while suddenly another male Wallcreeper was spotted moving around a rocky area very near to us, on the right side of the track, an unexpected but nice surprise! We also saw Alpine and Red-billed Chough moving around the cliffs together, plus some Rock Bunting, Black Redstart and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrushes.

After spotting some Griffon and Egyptian Vultures and Short-toed Eagle on the walk back to the vehicle, we drove down towards the village of Saliencia where we set up our picnic lunch in a lush local area by the river, where White-throated Dipper, and Grey and White Wagtails were seen while we enjoyed our lunch!

Afterwards, we drove back to Pola de Somiedo for a while and then we drove out of Pola again towards El Puerto, from where we tried hard to spot big mammals from one of the view points by the main road. Several Chamois were seen, plus Egyptian Vulture, Sparrowhawk, and Common Buzzard, amongst others. In the early evening, we drove back to Pola in order to enjoy a delicious supper.

Day 6

Wednesday 6th July

Monte Cancedo – Valle de La Cueta – Perlunes – La Peral

After having our breakfast, we drove heading south from Pola de Somiedo and into the county of Leon (Castilla y Leon Kingdom). It was a gorgeous morning which showed off the lush landscape of the transitional habitat between the mountains and the foothills. After drifting down the bendy road for about thirty-five minutes, we arrived to the small village of Piedrafita de Babia. White Storks nesting on the buildings and pine trees dominated the scenery of the quiet village. We parked up our vehicle in the upper part in order to explore the Monte Cancedo, a lush pine wood located in the upper part of the village. A good look at the various White Stork nests and a few Serin, Northern Wheatears and Black Redstarts was the way to start our walk. Up in the pine-dominated forest, we spotted some interesting birds such as Crested Tit, Goldcrest, Eurasian Treecreeper, Coal Tit, and a pair of Booted Eagles, amongst others. A group of Red Crossbills flew across but we didn't manage to see them.

We continued up the main road following a detour towards the valley of El Cueto. This pristine area provides lush valleys across riparian areas and 'abandoned' little picturesque villages which we enjoyed looking at. Some other birds were spotted on the way up to the valley such as Red-backed Shrike, Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush, Northern Wheatear, Common Whitethroat, Short-toed Eagle, Griffon Vulture, and others. We had a nice walk towards our picnic place located in a peaceful spot by the river.

After lunch, we drove back into Asturias and up to the village of Perlunes. Located about 2,000 metres above sea level, the very-bendy-access-road village is well hidden in the heart of the park. A short walk was made around it in order to see the lush surrounding of the place. Afterwards, we drove back to Pola for a break and a delicious early supper. We did this in order to take an evening trek looking again for Brown Bears. We drove up to La Peral, getting into the little village and parking our vehicle near the trail entrance which takes you to the view point of El Príncipe. As we started our trek, a kind villager greeted us, wishing us good luck in our search, adding that he saw two of them around the area thirty minutes ago. We appreciated his kind comments as we made a stop to scan the area he pointed at, and shortly after that, there they were!!! We spotted two beautiful Brown Bears taking a stroll near the top of the mountain, perhaps feeding on insects and invertebrates as they were scratching the ground and beneath rocks very actively! We were thrilled with the sighting, and enjoyed them for at least fifteen minutes through our scopes and binoculars!! Mission accomplished...and the efforts we made during the week so far were more than well paid off!! After this great sighting on this beautiful evening, we thought that this moment deserved to be celebrated; so we drove back to Pola to celebrate at the local pub!

Day 7

Thursday 7th July

Puerto de San Lorenzo - Veigas

It began as a glorious clear sunny morning. In the early morning we went up to El Puerto de San Lorenzo, located about 2,000 metres above the sea level, and the point where Somiedo Natural Park borders the buffer area of Peña Ubiña-La Mesa Natural Park. The weather started to change at our arrival up there to the point, where we started our walk in the middle of a very strong wind. The wildlife was quiet and flocks of birds were hard to find as the heavy wind hit the ridge, apart of a very obliging Yellowhammer. The trek was superb and very enjoyable, and we returned to our vehicle still satisfied as we had enjoyed the walk. We then drove back to Pola and we went to have lunch in the picnic spot by the Castro trail.

After lunch, we drove up to the village of Veigas in order to visit some homes which have been kept by Antonio and the county council, in order to show the visitors how the locals used to live in the area. As we arrived there out of the opening, Gloria kindly went to look for Antonio who was working on his field collecting some fresh grass for his cattle; and he kindly agreed to open the local museum-like cottages for us. While taking us on a short tour through the three different cottages kept pristine and genuinely left as they were by their original owners, Antonio explained to us every single detail and how cleverly they developed their lives here for centuries, being friendly with the environment by taking the right amount they needed to live. The three homes showed off the different transitions between the decades as new techniques were seemingly adapted to their day-by-day life-style. After this very interesting visit, we drove back to Pola in order to get ourselves ready for our very last supper together at Casa Miño restaurant!

Day 8

Friday 8th July

Pola de Somiedo – Asturias Airport to London

After a leisurely morning in Pola de Somiedo we enjoyed our last breakfast together and then we went for a short walk along some tracks within the village. The weather was getting grim and big dark clouds announced rain was coming. Some of us enjoyed doing some last souvenir shopping before we set off! Local products such as pates, cheese and honey were some of the most-wanted products we wanted to take home with us as a reminder of the beautiful area which had been our home for the last eight days!

We set off in the late morning towards Aviles, where our airport is located. We made a lunch stop at the small town of Pravia in order to enjoy some sandwiches, drinks, coffee and ice cream. We arrived at the airport right in time to catch our flight back to Stansted.

We managed to see great wildlife, including some bears, and were blessed by great weather whilst we explored some of the best corners and hotspots of Somiedo. We had great camaraderie throughout, and were all very satisfied after our week enjoying the beautiful landscapes and wildlife of Somiedo National Park.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓ = recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	July							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Chamois	<i>Rupicapra rupicapra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
2	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓	✓			✓		
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓						
4	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>						✓		

Birds

1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓							✓
2	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>				✓	✓			
4	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		✓			✓	✓		
5	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>						✓		
6	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>								✓
7	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>		✓				✓		✓
8	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		✓			✓	✓		
9	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>		✓						
10	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
11	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓	✓		✓	
12	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>				✓		✓		✓
13	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>		h			h			
14	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>								✓
16	European Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓						
18	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			h			h		
19	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		h						
20	Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		✓						
24	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓			✓	✓		
25	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
27	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	h	✓	
28	Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓		
29	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
30	Alpine Accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>					✓			
31	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓				✓	✓	
34	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		✓						
35	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
36	Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>					✓	✓		
37	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓					✓	
38	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓				✓		
39	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>		✓						
41	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	July								
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
42	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		✓					✓		
43	Western Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>			✓						
44	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		h	h					h	
45	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>					h	✓		h	
46	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>		✓	h						
47	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>						✓			
49	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>						✓			
51	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>						✓			
52	Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>								h	
53	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>						✓			
54	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>				✓					
55	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia</i>						✓			
56	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>			✓			✓			
57	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
59	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>		✓							
60	Chough	<i>Pyrrhonorax Pyrrhonorax</i>				✓	✓				
61	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhonorax graculus</i>					✓				
62	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
63	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
64	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>									✓
65	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
67	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
69	Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓							
71	Ortolan Bunting	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>		✓				✓			
72	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓		✓	✓			✓	
73	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				✓					
74	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>		✓							
75	Rock Bunting	<i>Emberiza cia</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓			

Reptiles & Amphibians

1	European Tree Frog	<i>Hyla arborea</i>		✓							
2	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>		✓							
3	Iberian Rock Lizard	<i>Iberolacerta monticola</i>				✓		✓			
4	Viviparous Lizard	<i>Lacerta vivipara</i>					✓				

Butterflies

1	Apollo	<i>Parnassius apollo</i>						✓			
2	Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>					✓		✓		
3	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓			
4	Black-veined White	<i>Aporia crataegi</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓			
5	Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>		✓							
6	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓			
7	Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>				✓	✓	✓			
8	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phleas</i>		✓		✓					

	Common name	Scientific name	July							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	Holly Blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>					✓			
10	Long-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes boeticus</i>					✓			
11	Little Blue	<i>Cupido minimus</i>		✓		✓	✓			
12	Mountain Argus	<i>Aricia artaxerxes</i>						✓		
13	Adonis Blue	<i>Lysandra bellargus</i>					✓			
14	White Admiral	<i>Limenitis arthemis</i>						✓		
15	Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglias urticae</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	Large Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais polychloros</i>					✓			
17	Peacock Butterfly	<i>Inachis io</i>				✓				
18	Comma Butterfly	<i>Polygonum c-album</i>				✓		✓		
19	Silver-washed Fritillary	<i>Argynnis paphia</i>				✓				
20	Marbled Fritillary	<i>Brenthis daphne</i>						✓		
21	Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
22	Knapweed Fritillary	<i>Melitaea phoebe</i>				✓				
23	Spotted Fritillary	<i>Melitaea didyma</i>						✓		
24	Heath Fritillary	<i>Mellicta athalia</i>						✓		
25	Marbled White	<i>Melanargia galathea</i>			✓			✓		
26	Mountain Ringlet	<i>Erebia epiphron</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
27	Chapman's Ringlet	<i>Erebia palarica</i>					✓		✓	
28	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
29	Small Heath	<i>Ceononympha pamphilus</i>		✓						
30	Pearly Heath	<i>Ceononympha arcania</i>		✓				✓		
31	Spanish Heath	<i>Coenonymphia iphioides</i>						✓		
32	Chestnut Heath	<i>Ceononymphia glycerion</i>			✓			✓		
33	Speckled Wood	<i>Parare aegeria aegeria</i>		✓	✓					
34	Large Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata maera</i>				✓	✓	✓		
35	Wall Brown	<i>Lasiommata megera</i>		✓						
36	Grizzled Skipper	<i>Pyrgus malvae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
37	Rock Grayling	<i>Hipparchia alcyone</i>						✓		

Others

1	Hummingbird Hawk-moth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>						✓		
2	Garden Tiger	<i>Arctia caja</i>			✓					
3	Great Green Bush Cricket	<i>Tettigonia viridissima</i>			✓					