

Holiday Highlights  
Cantabria and Asturias  
18 – 27 August 2024

**Guide:** Julian Sykes

**Guests:** Jennifer and Robert Hardy, Lynn Manifold and John Law, Roger Smith, Pam Litton, Adam Moan

**Day 1:** We are all at Gatwick Airport on time despite the early hour and after a streamlined check-in and security, we board our flight for Bilbao. The flight is on time and we land on a lovely, warm day, collecting our luggage and now meeting Roger in the arrivals hall as he flew directly from Bristol earlier. We make our way down to the rental company, but there is a queue and wait a short while to get the minibus. Eventually we leave the airport and take the coastal motorway towards Santander seeing a Lesser Black-backed Gull and what we presume are Little Egrets enroute.

After a while we turn south, with the weather deteriorating as we pass over the eastern end of the Cordillera Cantabrica Mountain range. Once through the numerous tunnels and on the south side the low cloud and rain slowly disappear as we reach our proposed lunch stop. Over the adjacent hillside we see our first Griffon Vultures of the week, with both House Martin's and Barn Swallows flying round too. Sadly, these motorway services are absolutely chock-a-block and it's now 'plan b', with our guide trying to find somewhere nearby. We succeed and head off south, stopping again 10 minutes later and Julian secures a table in this establishment, which is also very busy! We all get settled down and it's great, with the consensus being that we prefer these second services. We don't finish our lunch until 4.30pm and now need to crack-on to our hotel in Cremenos, as we are due out 'wolf-watching' later this evening.

The busy motorways slowly get quieter, passing the Embalse del Ebro, the source of Spain's third longest river (and biggest by volume). Continuing south we reach Aguilar del Campo and follow the southern side of the Cantabrian mountains until heading back north, where we soon reach the hotel around 6pm.

We quickly check-in, head to our respective rooms, before we are back out 45 minutes later, heading off with local guides in their all-terrain vehicles. It is still very warm and showing no signs of diminishing at the moment! We are all a little tired but also excited as we drive into the Sierra de Riano along a track no conventional motor would attempt! We see a Black Redstart as we travel slowly along, eventually parking on the edge of some Spanish Broom.

Once we are ready Pablo and Ilya escort us through the vegetation on a short walk up the hill to a watchpoint where we now settle down. It is cooler now in the strong breeze as we scan the area for any movement. An Iberian Wolf is briefly seen

by Pablo, Pam and John, who are lucky enough to be watching the right patch of open ground at just the right time. The sighting is only seconds but it's still a sighting and the lucky few are thrilled. We continue to watch for the rest of our time there but nothing else, which is a shame, but we have seen a few of the commoner species around and the rising moon is absolutely stunning. We now make our way back to the vehicles where we stand and listen to a couple of calling Tawny Owls as we eat our lovely 'bocadillos' with some fruit and a biscuit. Once ready we start back down the mountain and to our hotel, getting in around 10pm and a very long and tiring day, but incredibly worthwhile too.

**Day 2:** Our first morning and we are heading across the Picos de Europa N.P. to the cable car at Fuente De. A quick coffee (or tea) and a magdalena (cake) we leave the hotel at 6am, climbing aboard Ilya's big nine-seater vehicle. A fabulous dawn is breaking over the mountains as we drive up towards the famous San Glorio Pass, with a lucky few seeing a European Nightjar alight from the road ahead. We continue down this winding road to Potes, the main town in the Liebana valley, before heading up through some more quaint villages to the car park at Fuente De.

It is just 8am as we join the queue for the cable car, with Adam spotting a Marsh Tit in the nearby conifers and Roger seeing our first Jay. Ilya has our online tickets and we soon pass through the barrier and make our way to Europe's longest single span cable car, which transports us 600m higher in just 4 minutes. After a short wait we set off from the bottom station and head upwards, with the cable cars picture windows revealing our stunning surroundings on this absolutely glorious day. We reach the top station and now head straight for the café, where we now have another light breakfast overlooking the limestone escarpment we have just climbed, which is breathtaking. Ilya spots an Alpine Accentor on the causeway, so we finish up and head outside to the viewing platform. We are greeted by even more stunning views of the impressive limestone peaks of the 'Picos de Europa', it was worth the effort to get here for these views alone!

Julian is keen to set off as he knows the place will get very busy today, as the weather is so good. We set off slowly up the track, stopping for a few plants and butterflies along the way, with Common Brassy Ringlet and Provencal Chalkhill Blue on the wing. We are also seeing our first Linnets and a Northern Wheatear before a young Rebeco runs right across our path, giving us all a very good view. We keep going with regular stops, to admire the spectacular views from this mountain-top enclave and allow everyone to catch up. We eventually reached the junction in the track having seen our first Griffon Vultures overhead, along with a few red-billed Chough. John and Lynn decide this is enough for them and they head slowly back to the cable car station with Ilya, where we will meet them later.

The rest of us now walk towards a well-known Wallcreeper site, known to our guides and again this is punctuated with stops for birds and butterflies, which are much the same species apart from our first Black Redstarts, Crag Martins and Raven. We reach the area, where we now concentrate our efforts on for the 'crimson-winged gem' – Wallcreeper, arguably one of the most sought-after species

in Europe. We settle down on an available granite rock and sit in glorious sunshine, while Julian goes on further along the track. We wait for some time before Julian excitedly points towards a rockface nearby and we all walk quickly down to his position. It takes a couple of minutes as our target has disappeared into a crevice looking for insects but soon comes into view doing exactly what its name suggests creeping along a sheer granite wall – superb. We watch it for a while before it flies up and over the ridge towards another rock face out of view. We walk round but cannot relocate this beautiful mountain bird, but we have all had an excellent view. We stay a while longer, but Julian is conscious of the time and wants to be back along the track for lunch at a specific place.

We are in very good spirits as we retrace our path, but we don't get far before Julian sees the Wallcreeper again up on the scree slope to our left. It is very active and doing well staying behind the large boulders it is alighting on, but we all again manage to get another look before it now completely disappears into a dip in the slope. We now continue the walk back until Julian decides to scan the only seasonal pool left with some glacial water in. He again has a specific target in mind and surprisingly finds it in the telescope – Alpine Newt. It is quite surreal being about 100m away and looking at this small amphibian as it floats in these glacial waters. As this is the only water around there are several birds here with our first Water Pipit of the day, plus Alpine Accentors, Black Redstarts, Linnets and Goldfinch. We now go on, but Pam is slightly ahead and stops suddenly looking down amongst the rocks and scree – it's a Snow Vole. Julian had mentioned there was potential for this species and they were difficult, but Pam points out where it was and we can't believe it when it reappears. In fact, this tiny grey rodent puts on a great show as it moves between the boulders looking for vegetation to eat, in fact at one point it crosses the track right by us, enabling for some photography, which is unprecedented! This is certainly the icing on the cake to what has been an incredibly successful morning as we now walk purposefully back to the junction, where we settle down for our picnic lunch.

Julian is hoping our sandwiches will draw the attention of one more of our day's targets – Alpine (Yellow-billed) Chough. It doesn't take long before two or three are in the vicinity but instead of our food they choose to accompany another family of picnickers nearby. These gregarious corvids are still close and we get some amazing views, whilst listening to their strange range of vocalisations. After a while and once we have finished our lunches, we now head back down the track towards the cable car station, where we hope to find Lynn and John. It doesn't take too long, but again we make stops for a single Booted Eagle and a pair of Egyptian Vultures flying over. We do get safely back to the station, where we quickly find the others on the sun terrace, enjoying a drink and the spectacular views surrounding them. We join them out there, which is lovely before it's time to get the cable car back down to Fuente De.

At the bottom, Ilya kindly walks down to the bottom car park to get the minibus and while we are waiting, we are seeing a few birds in the surrounding pines, with Jay, Coal Tit and Short-toed Treecreeper being seen. Ilya soon arrives and we climb

into the minibus and around 4pm we set off back down the winding road to Potes. The town is busy, as expected on this glorious day and once through we then wind our way back up the San Glorio Pass to the Collado de Llesba. This is a magical place with its fabulous statue of a Cantabrian Brown Bear (which are occasionally seen here) and more spectacular views back across to the upper cable car station. It is wonderful to see where we have been from this perspective. We only have about 30 minutes here wandering round, taking photos before we set off again back to Cremenés and our lovely rural hotel. We say “goodbye and thank you” to Ilya, who we will see again later in the tour, it has been a very memorable first full day in the mountains.

**Day 3:** Today we split into two groups with Julian, Pam, Adam and Roger going out looking for Iberian Wolf – Robert, Jennifer, John and Lynn going to a photo hide nearby. Julian’s group are ready to leave at 6.15am on a cool starlit morning, but the assigned local guide Rodri is slightly late and we eventually leave 15 minutes later. We drive north to Riano, getting further delayed by the Guardia Civil who are looking for drink drivers from the fiesta in the town! We continue north along to Boca de Huergano and then up into the mountains. We soon now reach our destination where we meet Inaki and again we split, with this guide taking Adam and Roger off to a walk to another watchpoint, while Julian and Pam stay with Rodri not too far from the vehicle.

It is a cold morning as we stand scanning the adjacent hillside with the toll of Riano’s church bell in the distance. Julian has his thermal imaging scope and locates some Red Deer, including a few ‘big antlered’ stags, who look resplendent as the early morning sun illuminates them. We are in communication with each other and sadly there is no wolf activity by 9am and the sun now is fully up, warming our bodies now too. Thankfully there is bird activity around both our locations, with lots of the commoner woodland species being seen along with Firecrests, Crested Tits, Tree Pipit, Bullfinch and a brief look at a Middle Spotted Woodpecker to Rodri, Julian and Pam. As it now gets warmer the butterflies start to appear with many of the same species as yesterday plus Oberthur’s Grizzled Skipper, which is new. Around 10.30am Inaki, Adam and Roger return, as it’s now unlikely any wolves will appear, so we collect our things and go back to the vehicles.

We drive back down the mountain, stopping quickly first for a family party of Common Buzzards, then a brief look at a Honey Buzzard. We call in at a local hotel to use the facilities and have a very welcome hot drink. During this time we hear from Pablo who has been with the other group and they are now back at our hotel having another late breakfast. We finish our refreshments and head out to the vehicles with a kettle of 30+ Griffon Vultures over the opposite ridge. We now drive back to Cremenés and get to the hotel where we meet up with Robert et al in the dining room. Lynn now relays their adventures at the photo hide, which was superb:

*We leave at 6.45am and drive north towards Riano, turning off for Valbuena, where we see a Field Mouse cross the road followed by a couple of European Nightjars*

*– great start. We soon now go off-road and eventually park in the middle of nowhere as it's starting to get light. We walk the short distance down to the two photographic hides, where we are spending the next few hours. Once Pablo has put out the bait and we are ready, the doors to the hide are shut with strict instructions not to come out until he returns. We sit and watch the rock where the food has been placed about 10m away, surrounded by limestone cliffs. It takes just 10 minutes before we see a movement and the head of a European Wildcat appears, which is totally incredible. The cat slowly reveals its whole, stripy self as it feeds on the bait for the next 20 minutes – the views are fantastic of this secretive cat. Once it has departed it is time for the Golden Eagles to arrive with the large female dominating the food as the smaller male waits patiently in an adjacent tree. While this is going on the local Jays and Magpies nipped in and steal some morsels that are being left. Over the next 3 hours we watch the eagles and the wildcat, which returns for seconds, making for a truly amazing experience and one I will never forget! (Thanks to Lynn Manifold)*

Once we are all refreshed, we reconvene at Julian's minibus where we drive the short distance south to the outskirts of Villayondra. We park and get ready for an easy circular walk near the village, in the now very warm sunshine. It is a very relaxed amble along these vegetated tracks seeing lots of new butterflies such as Red Admiral, Lang's Short-tailed and Long-tailed Blues, Great Banded Grayling, Weaver's Fritillary and Berger's Clouded Yellow along with some very smart Minstrel Bugs. It is quiet for birds, but we are treated to excellent views of a pair of Honey Buzzards circling with a Common Buzzard before the latter heads off. We don't have a long time to get back to the minibus for 2pm and drive back to the hotel for lunch, 30 minutes later. It is another excellent 3-course meal and once finished we have some 'downtime' until 6pm when we meet again in the car park.

Adam has been using his spare time outside looking for butterflies and dragonflies, finding a couple more for our growing list. As we wait for Rodri and Pablo in their 4x4's, Julian spots a falcon over the trees behind the hotel and calls "Hobby" and we all get a brief view of it being mobbed by the local Barn Swallows and House Martins. Our vehicles duly arrive and we are informed that we are heading to a local valley, which is a very special place, not visited by any people – even Julian has never been before!

We head up towards Riano turning off and now take the minor roads to a beautiful village, with its equally beautiful cathedral. A photo stop is rightly made before we reach the secret entrance to the valley, which runs alongside the reservoir. Our offroad vehicles are definitely required here along the bouncy dirt track and we stop when we see our first interesting mammals – Potaka Horses and Water Buffalo! This valley was a privately owned estate, owned by a couple who introduced these animals to the site, plus more recently the very rare European Bison, of which there are only a few. It is quite bizarre to be close to these feeding alongside domestic cows, all being watched over by a couple of very big Leonese Mastiffs. This is a very productive area as there are lots of Griffon Vultures around along with a big flock

of Red-billed Chough milling around. High up on the scree and rock faces we also find a few Red Deer and another 'hoped-for' target – Spanish Ibex, which is great.

We continue our drive now heading up a really winding track towards the old Kings Lodge, which is a lot smaller than we thought it would be, looking much like a small toilet block! However, the views here are simply stunning in all directions and a very good place to have our picnic dinners. We find a sheltered place and eat our 'bocadillos' as the sun is setting behind these limestone mountains. Once we are finished, it is time to start back for Cremenés and as we are leaving the valley a few of us see our first Red Fox of the tour, along with a Grey Heron on the water's edge.

It is almost 10pm when we get back to the hotel, it has been another rewarding day, but we are all ready for a good night's sleep.

**Day 4:** It is another day of splitting the group, with John, Lynn, Robert and Jennifer going with Pablo looking for wolf at 6.30am. Julian is up to see them safely off before he, Pam, Adam and Roger set off for the wildlife hides, 15 minutes later with Enrique.

Our journey is quieter than yesterday with just a Red Deer at the side of the road, before reaching the parking place. It is another glorious morning as we walk slowly down to the hides, where Pam and Julian share one, Roger and Adam the other. Enrique puts out the bait on the nearby limestone rock, making sure we are okay and departs. We now wait patiently with a couple of Jays visiting first, quickly followed by a Sparrowhawk, which flies through. Minutes later the adult male Golden Eagle, who starts to enjoy the bait. The larger, more mature female now arrives and takes over but today the male continues to feed alongside her, as she occasionally flies off with a large piece of bait – presumably for their youngster. This activity is fascinating to observe and goes on for the next 90 minutes with the Magpies and Jays, constantly in attendance.

The sun has now risen above the mountains and it's warming up nicely as we start to see a few passerines with a few Blackcaps, Nuthatch, Black Redstart, a family of Blackbirds and Robin. Adam and Roger are very lucky as they also see a female/immature Pied Flycatcher from their hide too. Later into the morning and it starts to quieten down, but we are still enjoying the passerines until Julian gets a message Pablo is on his way and starts to pack up. A young Ocellated Lizard is then seen on the rock and it's necessary to get the camera back out before Pablo arrives – it's a great way to end this wonderful experience. We are allowed out of the hide and make our way slowly back to the vehicle, seeing an immature Red-backed Shrike plus a few good butterflies. We now leave this fabulous place and head back to the hotel at Cremenés, where we hook up with the others. Now is an account of their morning by Jennifer:

*We left at 6.30am, under a gorgeous starry sky, driving up beyond Riano, past the embalse and out beyond Boca de Huergano to a site near Prioro. It's still dark when we arrive but it is starting to get lighter and now the terrain is getting much clearer.*

*We scan the area for wolves, with Pablo using his thermal imaging binoculars and telescope, but without success. We do though get the consolation of a couple of Red Deer, before we move on an hour later. As we drop down off the mountain, we are escorted by about a dozen large horses as they trot along in front of the vehicle, eventually turning off into a paddock allowing us now to pass and reach the main tarmac road! With a couple of hours to kill, Pablo takes us on a drive around the outer limits of the Picos de Europa N. P. giving us yet more wonderful views of this incredible corner of Iberia. It is also quite productive for wildlife as our local guide shows a small group of Spanish Ibex through the telescope, followed by a beautiful Red Fox. Around 11am we start to make our way back to the hotel, where we now wait for the others to return from their photographic experience. (thanks to Jennifer Hardy)*

We are all back at the hotel at half past midday and go for our main meal of the day in the restaurant about an hour later. Lunch is superb as you would expect in this area with delicious Asturian Bean Stew as an entree, followed by Revuelto, which is either with or without meat, just what you need after a morning's wildlife watching. We are reconvening at 6pm so most of us head to our respective rooms to 'siesta' for the afternoon. Adam again uses this time to explore the local area and is rewarded with an Iberian Chiffchaff, Serin, and Lesser Spotted Fritillary along the river's edge.

Today Pablo and Enrique are our local guides and they arrive on time in their respective off-road vehicles. This evening, we are looking for European Wildcat and once we are ready drive to Boca de Hurgano, where we first make a pass on the nearby fields. It is quiet but we do manage to spot a Red Fox, which everyone sees, along with a couple of Common Buzzards sat on telegraph poles. We now decide to return to the village where we stop at the bridge over the River Esla, looking for Dipper. We walk out on to the old bridge, which doesn't have traffic and look down to the river below where we initially find both Grey and White Wagtails, just before stunning views of a 'pale-phase' Booted Eagle circles overhead. Julian now spots a 'Black-bellied' Dipper at the bend in the river and we get some great views through the telescope but after a few minutes it flies towards us and lands quite close, which is brilliant. We stay here in the warm evening sunshine, enjoying the many hirundines (Barn Swallows, House and Crag Martins) hawking for insects, a couple of Great Cormorants fly through and in the water, we see lots of Brown Trout – it is a wonderful hour here.

We are now back in the vehicles and heading for Riano, turning off for the mirador, where again we are on high alert for wildcat. As we drive slowly along the road, scanning the hay meadows and find another Red Fox plus some Mistle Thrushes. Then Enrique stops suddenly in the first vehicle and there is our first European Wildcat, but sadly it's aware of us and makes its way out of sight by the river. We are all pleased with this sighting and want more but first we are ready for some food and our drivers take us the short distance to a parking area, which is overlooked by an Egyptian Vulture nest. It is great to have our picnics while watching

the adult vultures circling around, along with a Pied Flycatcher, Stonechat and Dunnock in the nearby scrub and bushes.

It is starting to get dull as we make one more drive for wildcat and again find one near the road in full view and not concerned about our presence at all. It has heard a vole in the grass and it's wonderful to watch it attempting to catch something, with their distinctive 'up and down' leaps. We watch this animal for almost 30 minutes before we need to leave as it's now getting quite dark and difficult to see. We again arrive at the accommodation around 10pm, we are tired but very satisfied with another fantastic day.

**Day 5:** It is our final morning in the Riano area and we are again split up as a group, with our two couples – John, Lynn, Robert and Jennifer opting for a more relaxed 8.30am start with Enrique and a local walk to the hotel. Adam, Pam and Roger have opted for the wildlife hide again in the hope of a wildcat, leaving Julian to look again for Iberian Wolf.

Our SW guide is the first to leave at 6.15am with Enrique who drives him to the original site, where he is left to fend for himself. This glorious morning is spent looking out over the hillside, where a wolf was previously seen but sadly without success today. It is still eventful getting flight views of a Black Woodpecker, plus other common woodland species and good looks at both Red and Roe Deer. However, the icing on this cake is first hearing a Cantabrian Brown Bear walking through the forest behind where he's sat, before seeing it disappearing into the trees on the other side of the valley. As Julian walks back to the meeting point with Enrique he discovers some very fresh bear poo, this bear must have been within 100m of him!

Around 11am Enrique arrives in the 4x4 and they return to Cremenos, seeing a few Serin on the way back. At the hotel Julian meets up with our two couples who say they have had a lovely time around Villayandre, where their highlight was a Middle Spotted Woodpecker, along with Iberian Green Woodpecker, Common Buzzard and an impressive White Storks nest in this historic village. As we are chatting in the hotel bar, Adam, Pam and Roger arrive, with news of another great session in the photo hide but sadly no European Wildcat. The Golden Eagles put on another fantastic show, as did the Jays and Magpies coming to the food. Their highlight was actually walking back to meet Pablo at the vehicle, seeing Red-backed Shrike, Pied Flycatcher and an Iberian Wall Lizard. A very contrasting set of events for each group.

We are ready to leave the hotel by midday and after saying "thank you and goodbye" to Pablo and the hotel staff we set off west on this beautiful hot, sunny day. It is a great drive through more stunning scenery and slightly less scenic industrial towns and villages, as this area was heavily influenced by coal mining. After a couple of hours we reach the top of the pass, which leads down to our next hotel in Pola de Somiedo and as we wind down, Julian starts to point out potential bear watching places, which makes it quite exciting for the next couple of days.



Around 2pm we arrive at the hotel and quickly check-in, followed by a freshen-up in our rooms and lunch in the restaurant, which is superb and sets the tone for the rest of our stay here. After our extensive lunch, we are joined by Ilya (who we met earlier in the week) – he has been here already for a couple of days doing a recce and informs us he has been seeing bears, which is great. We are now given a couple of hours to ourselves to properly check in or have a wander round this beautiful village.

This evening we reconvene outside and climb into Ilya's minibus as he now takes us to a tiny hamlet, where we park and walk into the centre. Here there is a grass bank, given over to bear watching with purpose-built seats and signage boards – Cantabrian Brown Bear are a big deal here. We are surrounded by steep cliffs and ridges with scree slopes covered in Hazelnut trees and Alpine Buckthorn, which is what the bears like to feed on before their winter hibernation. We scan the area and ridges initially having success with raptors moving through, as we see a few Honey Buzzards, Short-toed Eagles, with Pam spotting a Peregrine Falcon and Adam finding a Booted Eagle.

We have been here a little over an hour when Ilya thinks a bear has been spotted by the reaction of some nearby watchers – and he's spot one. We get directions and after a few minutes, we are all watching a single male Cantabrian Brown Bear high up on the rocky slope – superb! It is a long way off but through the telescopes we have set up, it's a terrific view before disappearing into the forest. We are absolutely thrilled by this, success on our first attempt with everyone getting a good view. We continue to search and after another 45 minutes the bear reappears, this time remaining in view for much longer. It is dusk when this bear finally goes out of sight and we now decide it's time to head back to the accommodation as it's been another long day and we have another early start in the morning. It is a wonderful start to our time in the Somiedo valley.

**Day 6:** We are all outside the hotel by 6.30am in the dark, with a Tawny Owl calling in the distance as Ilya brings the vehicle to where we are waiting in anticipation of more bears. We set off and as we wind our way up the valley the front seat occupants see a feline dash across the road, which could have been a European Wildcat! We don't stop and continue past the village we watched from the previous evening pulling into a car parking area a mile or so further on.

It is still dark when we arrive, with just a hint of dawn over the mountain ridge to the east but it's a lovely calm morning and we can hear another Tawny Owl as we patiently wait for more light. The car park is filling up with 'bear-watchers' and it's a very friendly atmosphere, with lots of European nationalities being represented. Soon enough there is enough light to start seriously scanning the slopes and trees for signs of life, although initially we only find domestic animals with cattle and goats grazing in the alpine meadows. Roger now spots our first Red Deer of the day, followed by Julian finding a very distant Southern Chamois, which is a dot through the telescope! There is a murmur from behind us – a bear has been spotted but has disappeared again. We get an idea of where it's been seen, we watch and wait.

It is the edge of the dense forest and there's speculation that the animal might have gone further in but then a movement is seen by Ilya and there is a bear but it's tiny. This bear is then followed by a second cub and then the mother – what a thrill. For the next hour we are treated to this family feeding on the hazelnuts in this area, with lots of interaction between the two young cubs. This is definitely going to be one of the 'magic moments' of the tour. They eventually disappear, which is useful as it's now time for breakfast and it would have been difficult to leave if they had still been putting on a show.

We now set off back to the hotel and a little after 10am settle down to a very welcome breakfast with lots of choice.

An hour later, we are ready to leave again, this time opting to take both vehicles to give us greater comfort on the drive. We set off south out of the valley and up through the pass at El Puerto and beyond, turning off for a valley. We drive slowly up this valley, stopping when Adam spots something interesting on an overhead wire – possibly Whinchat? We find a parking place and get out of the vehicles, setting up the telescope and scanning the field and trees. A Mistle Thrush flies in and lands on the wire but the original bird has gone from there, so we check the trees at the back of this field. Julian then spots something, but this is a Spotted Flycatcher, followed quickly by a Pied Flycatcher nearby – brilliant. The Whinchat now does get relocated on the wall and we manage to get in the telescope for most people before it again disappears – a very good find for this area! We continue to search, with Roger finding a Red-rumped Swallow amongst the commoner Barn Swallows and House Martins, which are annoying the local Kestrel.

It has been another cracking 30 minutes here as we now climb back into the minibuses and continue up the valley. We haven't gone 500m and we are again pulling into the side of the road as there is a huge kettle of 50+ Griffon Vultures circling up just ahead of us. Again, we get out and enjoy this scene as the vultures climb higher on the thermals, being now joined by a couple of Short-toed Eagles. There are also Southern Chamois, which are thankfully much closer than the one Julian found earlier and good for photographing. The weather is beautiful and consequently there are lots of butterflies on the wing, with an abundance of 'whites, blues and skippers'.

Our guides are conscious of the time, wanting to head up to the village for some refreshment, so it's back in the vehicles. We continue to drive up slowly to the top of the valley, stopping on the way to look at Serins, Stonechat and Common Buzzard. We reach the parking place on the edge of the village and are greeted by a host of Crag and House Martins nesting in the overhead crevices. We walk into this historic village, where we see more Serins and Chaffinches feeding on the thistles before reaching the local bar. It is really warm now and a cold drink, sitting in the shade is most appreciated, especially in this quirky establishment, which is like a shrine to the by-gone age of the area. Once we have finished, we slowly make our way back to the minibuses, stopping to look at a Dark Green Fritillary, before setting off for Pola de Somiedo.

On the journey back, we stop briefly a few times for birds and scenery, getting to our hotel a little after 2pm, where after a quick freshen up in our rooms we head to the restaurant for another superb lunch. After lunch we have the usual 'siesta' time with most of us taking some sort of rest, but Adam is keen to go looking for butterflies on this lovely day and is rewarded with a Blue Spot Hairstreak.

We are all ready to leave at 6pm, this time with Ilya in his vehicle. This evening our plan is to visit one of Somiedo's most famous (and well-known) bear watchpoints. It is set just outside the hill-top hamlet, along a narrow ridge, with a purpose-built platform with stunning 360° views of the Somiedo valley. We cannot park in the village, but we can drop everyone off (much to our relief) and go back down the road to the lay-by. It is still a short slightly uphill walk to the platform, but we all manage it without too much difficulty.

Once there we set up the scopes and start to scan the whole area, initially finding the usual Red Deer and Southern Chamois. There has clearly been a hatching of flying ants as they are everywhere and we are getting bothered by them, with poor Jennifer getting a few bites! It is quiet and our time is spent chatting and watching the surrounding Griffon Vultures, Common Buzzards and Kestrel. A bear is spotted, it's another lone male and we quickly locate it feeding on the berries and nuts but a long way off. It's still a good view through our telescopes as we can clearly see this large animal on the hillside and we watch it for about an hour before it moves deeper into the dense vegetation. There is a slight resignation that we won't see it again or anything else and decide to leave.

We pack our things and set off slowly back to the village, where there's a Common Pipistrelle flying around. We go down to the minibus and after collecting a few of us from the village we head back to the hotel for 9pm, where we enjoy a drink on the terrace before heading to our rooms.

**Day 7:** Just a few of us this morning meet outside the hotel at 6.30am and head off, this time going north from Pola de Somiedo. We soon turn off this mountain road, on to another and wind our way up the valley. On the way we flush a European Nightjar from the road, which is a great start to the day as we all get a decent view. We eventually stop at a lay-by near the head of the valley, get out and grab our scopes and bags.

Ilya now guides us off the roadside through some bushes to a clearing with breathtaking views of the Salencia valley. The short grass is still damp and Jennifer slips gracefully onto her rear as she makes her way down the slope, much to the amusement of her husband Robert. Thankfully we are only going a very short distance and we quickly join Ilya, who is already scanning the opposite mountainside with his new thermal-imaging binoculars. They obviously do the trick as he points out Southern Chamois and Red Deer as it starts to get light.

It is another lovely morning and as it starts to warm up, Griffon Vultures appear above the ridgeline, being joined by a big flock of Red-billed Chough. There are also

good numbers of Barn Swallows moving through the valley, along with House Martins and some resident Crag Martins. Ilya can see another couple of bear watchers up on the roadside looking intently across the valley and goes off to speak to them. He returns saying they have just seen a Brown Bear but it's not in view at the moment. He points out the general area where it was seen and after about 10 minutes it reappears, in an open area in the forest. It is a tremendous view and arguably our closest yet, as this male stands proud on an exposed rock. He is moving slowly, in this small open area but still disappears back into the forest after about 15 minutes. By the way it looked to be going, Ilya thinks we should drive further up the valley and try to refind it from there.

We quickly get back to the minibus and set off, stopping after just 5 minutes at another lay-by. Ilya now leads us out to another clearing, which has a much better view over the area where the bear was seen. It is a great idea but sadly the bear hasn't read the script and doesn't reappear, but we do get good views of more Southern Chamois and an Egyptian Vulture flies over. Around 10am we decide to leave as we need to meet the others for breakfast at the hotel, getting there 30 minutes later. Pam, John and Lynn are there waiting, having had a lovely relaxing start to their day and we all enjoy our morning meal.

Just over an hour later we are ready and waiting outside for a walk around the general area of the hotel, although first Julian thinks we should visit the 'Centro de Oso Cantabrica' (Cantabrian Brown Bear Interpretation Centre), which is just a 100m away. Adam would rather not, preferring to head off along the proposed route in search of butterflies and dragonflies, which is great. The centre is only small but very informative with an excellent video showing how these bears have increased in number and their habits within the Cantabrian Mountains. Julian has seen this several times already and opts to just sit outside with the bags and telescope and whilst doing this gets rewards with Pied Flycatcher in their garden.

An hour later we are ready to continue our walk in the hope of meeting up with Adam along the way. There are dark clouds rolling in, but thankfully it's not raining – yet! It is a lovely, vegetated walk, but fairly quiet for birds, with the expected common woodland species but Pam and Roger keep things interesting by pointing out some of the special flowers and ferns along the way. We stop to look at a kettling of Griffon Vultures above the ridgeline, with Julian pointing out a migrating Honey Buzzard amongst them, which is great. It is here that we meet back up with Adam, who has been 'off-piste' finding some more butterflies to add to our already extensive list. As we chat the rain now does start and we set off back towards the hotel as it steadily gets heavier. We reach our accommodation around 1.30pm, giving us some time to dry off before our lunch 30 minutes later.

After lunch we have the usual 'siesta' time before meeting again at 6pm, with Ilya collecting us in his minibus. Our Spanish guide suggests a new 'less known' area this evening having already had such good bear sightings and we are all happy with this. At least we are until Ilya drives on to our steepest mountain road yet, but thankfully it's quiet as he negotiates the tight, hairpin bends. Still once we arrive at the 'mirador'

the drive is soon forgotten about as the view is again stunning, arguably our best yet! This is very much a 'photo opportunity' but we still manage to see Booted Eagle, Common Buzzard and Griffon Vultures during our 30 minutes there.

We continue our drive now down into another steep-sided valley, stopping by the river to look at some more Griffons sitting on the crags. We stay here a while watching the vultures but also get rewarded with an Iberian Green Woodpecker in the telescope. We are again back in the bus and keep driving this winding road to a tiny, quiet village, where we have to turn round as the road has ended! The journey back is just as hair-raising, but eventually we get back to the main road to Pola and into the village.

As the weather isn't great, we now go to a parking area on the edge of Pola, where we spend the time searching the hillside for bears. It is quiet here and after a while of seeing much the same species, we decide to return to the hotel to get ready to leave the next morning.

**Day 8:** It's another 6.30 start as all meet up with Ilya and again head off for Saliencia, on this very cold morning – in fact it's freezing! We arrive at the same place as the previous day and carefully make our way to the viewing place, looking out over this stunning valley. It is a much quieter morning, but we do again find a few Southern Chamois dotted around the mountainside and also a couple of Red Deer. As it starts to slowly warm up the birds start to appear with our first Griffon Vultures and another big flock of Red-billed Chough wheeling around the opposite ridgeline. In the trees around where we are sitting, we can hear Chiffchaffs calling along with a single Willow Warbler, which are likely to be migrant heading south for the winter.

We decide to stay here until 9.30am in the hope of our final Cantabrian Brown Bear but sadly not and we make our way back to our hotel for breakfast. We arrive around 10am and after our last meal here, get ourselves ready for the journey north to the Costa Verde.

Around midday we are set to leave and off we go, initially, through the Cordillera Cantabria to Oviedo and then to the coast, reaching the Faro de Penas two hours later. We are not quite ready for our picnic lunch, so we walk slowly down to the cliff edge where we look north out over the Bay of Biscay. It doesn't take long for Julian to find our main target here – European Shag, with a few loafing on a rocky island in the water below. There are also lots of Western Yellow-legged Gulls with Pam spotting our first Gannet flying west past the headland. We stay here looking out to sea, with Julian now finding a Great Skua also flying west low over the water. Adam has continued round the headland looking for butterflies but quickly returns to say he has found a Sedge Warbler, which is superb. We all now walk a short distance to where it was seen but sadly it's moved on, which is normal for migrants making landfall on this headland.

Adam and Roger decide they want to do the circular walk around the headland, while the rest of us walk slowly back to the minibus, collect the lunches and head

to the nearest picnic table for lunch. Roger and Adam arrive back and have done very well on their longer walk, finding Marsh Fritillary, Swallowtail, Painted Lady and Essex Skipper butterflies and Roger identifying some delightful Marsh Gentian and Autumn Squill. We finish our lunches on this lovely afternoon, make use of the facilities in their interpretation centre, before setting off for Gijón.

It doesn't take too long to get to the city and we make good progress through to the port, as our guide wants to make sure of the drive the next morning. We now head back out of the city, still heading east along the coast towards our final accommodation in Villaviciosa. We have a bit of time, so Julian decides to call in at a watchpoint over the tidal mudflats, which is near the town. The tide is out and there's lots of exposed mud, but it is quiet, although we do find an adult Mediterranean Gull amongst the commoner Black-headed Gulls, which is decent.

It is now late afternoon and we make the final short journey to our hotel, which is situated on the edge of a small wetland Reserve. We have a couple of hours before dinner and after checking in Adam decides to investigate, finding a small flock of Spoonbills, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper and Cattle Egret, which is superb. Around 8pm, we met again for dinner at this quirky hotel.

**Day 9:** We meet for breakfast at 6.30am, which is a decent buffet and allows us to 'line the stomach' ahead of our pelagic boat tour. Julian walks round for the minibus which is parked at the sister hotel, as we get ourselves ready for a full day at sea in the Bay of Biscay. Around 7.15am, we set off for Gijón, getting to the port an hour later parking the bus safely for the day.

We make our way to the mooring place and meet our skipper, Freddie and Jaime 'the chum guy' who is loading the cartons of chum on to the boat. We are very impressed with the vessel – being a large catamaran with all the necessary facilities. Once everyone and everything has been helped on board, we set off slowly away from the port towards the huge harbour wall, which shelters this bay.

We start to see a few expected birds with a couple of Shag, Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls. Once we reach the open water Jaime opens the first carton of chum, pouring it over the side. This now attracts gulls from every direction, which are mostly Yellow-legs but also now some Lesser Black-backs and a first winter Mediterranean Gull. It is a glorious day, with very little swell, which is great as we continue north away from land and encounter our first true pelagic birds. There are both Manx and Cory's Shearwaters, along with a few Gannets plus the unexpected sighting of a migrant Pied Flycatcher trying to land on the boat! It is fabulous to see these seabirds so close and in good numbers, with the Gannets looking huge alongside the gulls following the boat. Jaime now shouts "paino", which Julian immediately recognises as 'petrel' and at the back of the feeding throng is a tiny black bird with a white rump – European Storm-petrel. Pam is absolutely thrilled with this as she was very keen to see one, having never done so before – brilliant.

Freddie keeps the catamaran heading due north for almost 20kms and we are adding species all the time, with both Common and Sandwich Terns along with several Sooty Shearwaters, but it's still the mass of gulls which is dominating the food. Freddie now turns west to get the strengthening wind behind us and for a while Jaime stops chumming, which gives us a rest from the constant raucous calls of the gulls. During this time most of us have some lunch and a drink, which is great as we float gently along in the sunshine. After a while we start to chum again and the gulls quickly return, but we can also see a group of large shearwaters in the distance. Freddie heads for them and we start to get good views of this flock of Cory's but we also disturb a Balearic Shearwater off the sea and a gorgeous pale-phase Arctic Skua flies past. Adam now shouts "dolphin" and points to a beautiful Common Dolphin going under the boat. This animal appears on the other side and we are aware that there's more. These Short-beaked Common Dolphins are now all round the catamaran, which is amazing as they play and occasionally jump right out of the water. Jaime has left his chumming seat and is now laid at the bow, attracting the dolphins by tapping the hull. Julian now makes his way carefully to the front of the boat and lays on his front watching the dolphins just a meter below – it is such a memorable experience as he can almost touch them! This goes on for nearly 30 minutes before these fabulous marine mammals peel off to hunt for fish.

It is now time to head back to Gijon and some of us are quite pleased, as it's a long time on board. Jaime throws the last of the chum out for the gulls and Gannets, then as we near the harbour wall we play chicken with a huge oil tanker, which are heading for Santander or Bilbao. It has been an absolutely cracking day in the Bay of Biscay, one we will remember for a very long time. We reach our mooring and we thank our captain and 'chum man' for all their hard work, as we get ourselves back on terra firma.

We now walk slowly back to the city, where Julian suggests a drink at one of the many bars and there's no argument. We sit outside with a very welcome cold drink, talking about our day at sea and how good it has been. Once ready we head to the minibus and set off back to Villaviciosa, getting to the hotel around 5.30pm.

We have a couple of hours before dinner so Julian and Adam decide to go for a walk on the adjacent Reserve. We cross the road and as we pass a field with horses in we see a family of Yellow Wagtails, which is a great start. We now continue to the wetland Reserve, where we find the expected Grey Heron, Little Egret and Common Sandpipers. Although we also add Green Sandpiper, Dunlin, Cattle Egret, Black Redstart and Zitting Cisticola, which is brilliant. After an hour we return to the hotel and we all meet up at 8pm for our final evening meal of the holiday.

**Day 10:** Roger, Pam, Adam and Julian meet at 8am for a pre-breakfast walk on the local Nature Reserve, arranging to meet the others at breakfast an hour later. It's a lovely morning as we head along the road to the track, which dissects this small area of marsh. Sadly, there is no sign of the previous evening's family of Yellow Wagtails

with the cattle, but we do see our first White Wagtails, Spotless Starlings and Goldfinches. We reach the small pool and do find the Green Sandpiper along with a few Common Sandpipers, plus a fabulous male Yellow Wagtail which Pam is really pleased to see.

After a good look at these birds, we continue along the track finding the expected Grey Herons, Little Egrets, Mallard and Moorhen. We have a bit more time this morning and go along the boardwalk trail, where Julian first hears and then briefly sees a Zitting Cisticola. We stay in this area for a short while, eventually getting a good look at this tiny bird, sitting on top of some marsh grass. Adam, Pam and Roger go further on, leaving Julian behind but soon call him over when Adam thinks he's found a Sedge Warbler. Our guide arrives and the bird appears very briefly on the edge of the reeds and alarm bells ring with Julian, who says "this could be an Aquatic!" All of us are now concentrating on seeing it well, as it's a new bird for the majority of us and new in Spain for Julian. We don't have much time before we need to go for breakfast, but we are blessed with good fortune as the bird flies across the scrape to a small island much closer. It now pops out on the edge of the reeds and stays long enough for us to see the salient points required for confirming its identification, which is incredible, especially as Adam gets some decent photos, which also clinches it. We are all absolutely elated, with smiles all round, as this is a rare bird in Spain and globally for that matter.

It is now time to leave and as we head back towards the hotel a Water Rail squeals from the reedbed, adding another new species to the list! We soon get back and meet up with John, Lynn, Robert and Jennifer in the restaurant, who are also really pleased with our cracking find. We are ready for breakfast after all this excitement!

After breakfast and once we are ready, we load the minibus and leave Villaviciosa, heading towards a recommended new estuary site. We eventually find the parking place after a couple of hiccups by satellite navigation and we are immediately impressed. It is a big area and lots of birds, which is brilliant. We quickly find a couple of Spoonbill on a small island, followed by a Great Egret amongst the Little Egrets. There are Greylag Geese, Eurasian Teal, a single Mute Swan and plenty of waders, which include a Ruff, a few Black-tailed Godwit, a pair of Black-winged Stilt, lots of Greenshank, Common Redshank and Common Sandpiper – what a place. A Cetti's Warbler makes its explosive call from nearby, we cannot believe how many new species we are seeing on our last day in Northern Spain. We spend at least an hour here and could stay longer but Julian is conscious of the time and where he would like to be for lunch, so we grudgingly get back into the minibus and continue our journey east towards Bilbao.

After another couple of hours, we reach an estuary, making our way to the large hide which overlooks this huge area. It is a great place to sit and have our lunch whilst looking out for birds, but it's fairly quiet. There are a few warblers flitting around in the nearby Tamarisks, which are mostly Common Chiffchaffs, but we also find a Willow Warbler amongst them. As we are watching this, a European Kingfisher flies past and lands in view on a low branch, which is fabulous as it stays



around for several minutes attempting to catch a fish. The tide is going out and we can see a few mid-size waders flying towards an offshore island and from their distinctive call we know they're Whimbrel. They land on the island and we can see them clearly through the telescope, despite there being heat-haze from the warm afternoon sun.

We still have another drive to Bilbao Airport and mid-afternoon we make our final leg of the journey, which goes seamlessly and we arrive in perfect time to hand the vehicle back and check-in for the flight.

Once we are through security we sit with a hot drink and go through our highlights of the tour, which are many and varied – always a good indication of a successful holiday. It has been great fun in NW Spain. We get our flight on time, arriving in the UK just under two hours later and after some very fond farewells we head off on our separate ways.

### Species of the Trip

Pam – European Wildcat/European Storm-petrel  
Adam – Golden Eagle/Aquatic Warbler  
Roger – European Wildcat/Aquatic Warbler  
Robert – European Wildcat/Golden Eagle  
Jennifer – European Wildcat/Golden Eagle  
John – European Wildcat/Golden Eagle  
Lynn – European Wildcat/Golden Eagle  
Julian – Aquatic Warbler/Snow Vole

### Place of the Trip

Pam – Anciles Valley  
Adam – Fuente De  
Roger – Somiedo (1<sup>st</sup> day)  
Robert – Catamaran Pelagic  
Jennifer – Catamaran Pelagic  
John – Cantabria/Asturias in general  
Lynn – Wildlife Hide  
Julian – Luances

### Magic Moment

Pam – Female Brown Bear with cubs  
Adam – Wildcat yawning, making it cross-eyed!  
Roger – Female Brown Bear with cubs  
Robert – The first glimpse of the wildcat from the hide  
Jennifer – Seeing the wildcat so close at the hide  
John – Seeing the wildcat so close at the hide  
Lynn – The appearance of the Golden Eagle at the hide  
Julian – Watching the Common Dolphins from the boat

## BIRDS

Mute Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Mallard  
Eurasian Teal  
Manx Shearwater  
Balearic Shearwater  
Sooty Shearwater  
Cory's Shearwater  
Great Shearwater  
European Storm-petrel  
Northern Gannet  
Great Cormorant  
Shag  
Cattle Egret  
Little Egret  
Great Egret  
Grey Heron  
Spoonbill  
Griffon Vulture  
Egyptian Vulture  
Golden Eagle  
Booted Eagle  
Short-toed Eagle  
Black Kite  
European Honey-buzzard  
Sparrowhawk  
Kestrel  
Hobby  
Peregrine  
Moorhen  
Water Rail (heard only)  
Black-winged Stilt  
Ringed Plover  
Dunlin  
Green Sandpiper  
Common Sandpiper  
Common Redshank  
Greenshank  
Black-tailed Godwit  
Curlew (heard only)  
Whimbrel  
Ruff  
Great Skua  
Arctic Skua  
Black-headed Gull  
Mediterranean Gull  
Yellow-legged Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Sandwich Tern  
Common Tern  
Feral Pigeon  
Rock Dove  
Woodpigeon  
Collared Dove  
Tawny Owl (heard only)  
European Nightjar  
Common Swift  
Common Kingfisher

Black Woodpecker  
Iberian Green Woodpecker  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Middle Spotted Woodpecker  
Crag Martin  
Barn Swallow  
Red-rumped Swallow  
House Martin  
Water Pipit  
Meadow Pipit  
Tree Pipit  
White Wagtail  
Yellow Wagtail  
Grey Wagtail  
Dipper  
Wren  
Dunnock  
Alpine Accentor  
Robin  
Black Redstart  
Northern Wheatear  
Stonechat  
Whinchat  
Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Blackbird  
Blue Rock Thrush  
Sedge Warbler  
Aquatic Warbler  
Blackcap  
Willow Warbler  
Chiffchaff  
Iberian Chiffchaff  
Goldcrest  
Firecrest  
Spotted Flycatcher  
Pied Flycatcher  
Great Tit  
Coal Tit  
Blue Tit  
Crested Tit  
Marsh Tit  
Long-tailed Tit  
Nuthatch  
Wallcreeper  
Short-toed Treecreeper  
Red-backed Shrike  
Magpie  
Jay  
Red-billed Chough  
Yellow-billed Chough  
Carrion Crow  
Raven  
Spotless Starling  
House Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Linnet  
Goldfinch

Serin  
Bullfinch

## MAMMALS

Iberian Wolf  
Cantabrian Brown Bear  
European Wildcat  
Southern Chamois  
Spanish Ibex  
Red Fox  
Red Deer  
Roe Deer  
Field Mouse  
Snow Vole  
Common Pipistrelle  
Short-beaked Common Dolphin

## REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Ocellated Lizard  
Common Wall Lizard  
Iberian Wall Lizard  
Alpine Newt

## BUTTERFLIES

Small White  
Large White  
Green-veined White  
Western Dappled White  
Esper's Marbled White  
Marbled White  
Clouded Yellow  
Berger's Clouded Yellow  
Swallowtail  
Southern Scarce Swallowtail  
Small Tortoiseshell  
Blue Spot Hairstreak  
False Ilex Hairstreak  
Small Copper  
Scarce Copper  
Sooty Copper  
Purple Shot Copper  
Common Blue  
Adonis Blue  
Osiris Blue  
Small Blue  
Mother of Pearl Blue  
Provence Chalkhill Blue  
Chalkhill Blue  
Turquoise Blue  
Holly Blue  
Long-tailed Blue  
Lang's Short-tailed Blue  
Brown Argus  
Northern Brown Argus  
Queen of Spain Fritillary

Silver Washed Fritillary  
Dark Green Fritillary  
High Brown Fritillary  
Weaver's Fritillary  
Knapweed Fritillary  
Lesser Spotted Fritillary  
Shepherd's Fritillary  
Common Brassy Ringlet  
Meadow Brown  
Southern Speckled Wood  
Gatekeeper  
Spanish Gatekeeper  
Wall Brown  
Large Wall Brown  
Comma  
Small Heath  
Great Banded Grayling  
Grayling  
Rock Grayling  
Tree Grayling  
False Grayling  
Brimstone  
Cleopatra  
Red Admiral  
Painted Lady  
Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper  
Silver-spotted Skipper  
Essex Skipper

## OTHER INSECTS

Shieldbug  
Ground Beetle  
Nomad Bee  
Minstral Bug  
Blue-winged Grasshopper  
Red-winged Grasshopper  
5-spot Burnet Moth  
Fox Moth caterpillar  
Southern Hawker  
Common Goldenring

## NOTABLE PLANTS

Trumpet Gentian  
Marsh Gentian  
Autumn Squill  
Birds-foot Trefoil  
Field Eryngo  
Scarlet Pimpernel  
Merendera montana  
Woolly Thistle  
Hawksbit sp.  
Narrow- leaved Lungwort  
Bellflower  
Common Rockrose  
Knapweed  
Mountain Cranesbill  
Pink  
Superb Pink  
Scabious  
Bloody Cranesbill  
Common Centuary  
Valerian sp.  
Stonecrop  
Hazel  
Ramnus alpinus  
Walnut  
English Oak  
Beech  
Scot's Pine