

# **Picos d'Europa & Asturias**

## **Mammal-watching**

### **A Greentours Itinerary**

This itinerary includes Day 1 and Day 9 for those taking the optional ferry journey from Plymouth. The tour description below starts with the flight option running from Days 2 – 8, with the description of Days 1 & 9 at the end.

### **Day 2**

#### **Arrive Santander. Transfer to Boca de Huergano**

Those arriving by flight or by ferry will be met and brought to the hotel in the pleasant hamlet of Boca de Huergano high in the wonderfully wild Picos d'Europa. The drive though not long takes us gradually up a narrow valley with cascading rivers, thick forests and latterly steep rocky slopes giving us an idea of just how untamed this area is.

### **Days 3 & 4**

#### **Iberian Wolf-watching in the Picos d'Europa. Wild Cat watching in the hay meadows near Boca de Huergano**

There are several Iberian Wolf families within a few kilometres of our base at Boca de Huergano and each morning we'll head out up quiet (and rough) tracks in the 4wds before parking up and walking a relatively short distance (usually less than a kilometre) to watchpoints where we can spend time observing the comings and goings of the Wolf families. The watchpoints are a distance from the Wolves so as to avoid disturbing them, and this works well as evidenced by the Wolves themselves who just seem to go about their business without taking any notice of us, that is until they seem to stare straight down the barrel of your telescope! A wonderful moment!

Afternoons will generally be spent in hay meadows watching Wild Cats. Found in generally low numbers through much of Europe, Wild Cats still manage to evade our eyes with ease and there are few areas where seeing them is deemed a reasonable prospect. However in this area and at this season seeing is very much on the cards. For Wild Cats are actually not particularly shy. Usually their stealth and camouflage and the habitats they frequent combine to make them more or less invisible. In August in the Picos though the freshly mown meadows not only provide a perfect dining table for the cats it also helps make them rather visible. They suddenly materialise out of the thick cover surrounding the meadows intent on prey they can hear in the short grass, oblivious to the optics trained on them, or even the occasional car or motorbike that drives past not many metres from them! We'll likely see these beautiful cats every afternoon we're in the area.

Boca de Huergano is close to one end of the large reservoir by the small town of Raino. The reservoir drowned some of the habitation in the valley and the church from the valley has been reconstructed with the original stone in the new location

of Riano. Black Redstarts nest in Riano and we can expect to see Rock Buntings and Rock Thrushes in the higher ground around. Red-billed Choughs winnow through the air above the slopes we'll be searching for the Wolves on, and as we search we'll very likely come across a number of Red Deer. Ring Ouzels will have well-grown young now in the ferny Gullies and we'll see Golden Eagles overhead. Other birds we might see whilst looking for the Wild Cats in the afternoon include Wryneck, Whinchat, Nuthatch and Serin.

## **Day 5**

**Looking for Wolves in the morning and then transfer to the Western Asturias.  
Looking for Brown Bears in the afternoon.**

In the morning we'll have another look at the Wolves before travelling west to the valleys and mountains of Somiedo. We'll soon be amongst magnificently dense green swathes of oak, beech and birch, giving way on the higher slopes to great grey crags set amongst purple heather and yellow gorse of almost unreal brightness. The mountains of south-western Asturias are a blank on the map even for most Spaniards. They are home to the largest population of Brown Bears in western Europe. What's more the population is not just surviving, it is growing. In the 1980s there were only 50 to 80 bears left in the whole Cantabrian range, and now most estimates agree that there are more than 250 in western Asturias. According to the Fundación Oso Pardo (the Brown Bear Foundation), the principal NGO involved in bear conservation, numbers have grown consistently since 2004, recently by as much as 10 per cent each year. This success followed the creation of the Somiedo Natural Park in 1988 – considered a model of its kind for its combination of local support, wildlife protection and human needs – here the locals don't feel threatened by the bears, rather they are actually proud of their bears.

**Days 6 & 7 Brown Bear watching in Alto Sil, Somiedo National Park, Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña and Ibias.**

The second half of the trip will see us exploring the glorious landscapes of the Asturias and in particular two important National Parks, Somiedo and the rather clumsily named Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña and Ibias. The meadows and rocky peaks of the subalpine zone are dotted with tiny lakes and the whole region is dissected by deep thickly wooded valleys. A significant population of the Cantabrian population of Brown Bears resides in these forests where they are of course very difficult to see however as luck would have it, in late summer the Bears emerge from the depths of the forests into edges of the subalpine meadows where they feed avidly on the abundant cranberries, blackberries and hazelnuts. This gives us a great chance of viewing one of the most elusive mammals in Spain, particularly during the first and last hours of the day.

We'll search for the bears in the afternoon of Day 5 and mornings of both Days 6 & 7 after early breakfasts. The afternoons on those two days will be dedicated to further searching the area for other mammal species notably European Otter which frequents the rivers. The great crags that rise from the forest are the

favoured haunt of the Cantabrian form of Chamois. Wild Boar are tolerably common though elusive in day time so we'll try a night time excursion which will likely be our best chance of coming across Pine Martens which though probably as common here as anywhere are of course notoriously difficult to spot in daylight. Red Fox and Badger are also more likely seen at night.

We'll also have the chance to get to know some of Somiedo's birds. There is of course one European woodpecker that needs the kind of old very mature trees found here, the Black Woodpecker, and we've a good chance of seeing them during our visit. Pied Flycatchers and Western Bonelli's Warblers will have well-grown young buzzing around the trees and we're also likely to see Ortolan Bunting, Golden Oriole, Iberian Chiffchaff, and Dartford Warbler.

## **Day 8 depart from Santander**

### **The Ferry Option**

**Day 1  
Optionally depart Plymouth/Portsmouth (Britanny Ferries schedule depending)**

**Day 2  
Across Bay of Biscay (Cetacean-watching en route) to Santander. Then transfer to Boca de Hurgano**

There are two ways of getting to this tour. By air to Santander. Or by ferry from Plymouth or Portsmouth to Santander. This route has the added attraction of allowing one to add considerably to the mammal list. For many years now Britanny Ferries who operate this routing have sponsored a cetacean watching team aboard their vessel. Their work over the years has helped to shed light on the distribution of what is a very diverse range of cetaceans in the Bay of Biscay. Crossing the Continental Shelf in the north of the bay and over the deep Torrelavega Canyon north of Santander we are in fine whale-watching areas. Seen on most voyages are Fin Whales, sometimes in some numbers, and dolphins, mostly Bottlenose and Striped Dolphins. Long-finned Pilot Whales are frequently encountered too. Common Dolphins and Harbour Porpoises are very common in the northern parts of the Bay. Though not seen on every crossing the bay is recognised as being one of the best areas to see Cuvier's Beaked Whales. Sei Whales, Sperm Whale and even Blue Whale are quite possible at this time of year. Being on a huge ferry might not seem like the best way to whale watch but the boat gives you tremendous height and the amount of sea one can watch from the 'whale-watching' deck is phenomenal. And – if you check the logs of what the cetacean watching teams have recorded during their crossings you should be aware that they are only recording from one side of the boat! The other side of the observation deck level is reserved for dog-walkers. There is of course nothing to stop us from observing from that side too effectively doubling the likely cetacean-sightings. They should bring a dog!

**Day 8**

**Option to depart by ferry from Santander (Cetacean-watching en route).**

**Day 9**

**If by ferry then arrival in Plymouth/Portsmouth.**

Call 01298 83563 or visit [www.greentours.co.uk](http://www.greentours.co.uk) for the trip report from our previous tours to the Picos d'Europa and Asturias. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at [enquiries@greentours.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@greentours.co.uk).

To Book a on this Holiday please fill in the booking form which you can download from [www.greentours.co.uk](http://www.greentours.co.uk) (also found in the Greentours brochure) and post/fax to Greentours, PO Box 148, Buxton SK17 1BE, UK. Tel/Fax +44 (0)1298 83563. After booking your place you'll receive a confirmation letter and a detailed information pack will be dispatched twelve weeks prior to departure. Mammal and bird checklists are available.