

# *On the Trail of the Iberian Lynx*

*Sierra de Andujar Natural Park*

*Sierra Morena, Spain, 1<sup>st</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> November 2010*



*David Bowman and Doug Hume*

## Introduction

This is by far the hardest trip report to write, of the many I've produced over the past thirty years. My good friend Doug Hume and I shared many of those trips, often in company with Doug's brother Colin. The three of us have jaunted round more than twenty Scottish islands, made repeated trips to our beloved Spain and ventured into the wildest regions of Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Morocco. We had many more adventures planned when, shortly after returning from this trip, Doug tragically and unexpectedly passed away. He has left a massive hole in the lives of all who knew him and as I write this my thoughts are particularly with his widow, Ann his children, Jackie, Richard and Andrew and his brothers Colin and Alan.

Doug and I had long had a burning ambition to see the Iberian Lynx – endemic to Iberia and the world's rarest wild cat. This trip was designed to try and scratch that itch, as well as to enjoy all the birds and ancillary wildlife in such a beautiful area of Spain. For a long time, the Coto Donana, in Andalucia, was regarded as the only site offering any chance of a sighting of this charismatic feline. After twelve birding trips to Donana, without a sniff, I began to believe that, given the declining population in the 1990s, it was unrealistic to hope to accidentally cross its path before extinction finally claimed it. Over that decade, the population in Spain dropped, from more than a thousand individuals, to around one hundred, with only 38 known breeding females. Additionally, the adjacent Portugese population was believed to have reached vanishing point. Thankfully, prompted by campaigns by committed lynx conservationists, the Spanish government finally started to take action. The problems were primarily those which face all large predators in a modern society – human encroachment into wild areas, habitat fragmentation, illegal shooting and poisoning and increasing numbers killed on the roads. An additional key factor for the lynx was the decline in the Spanish population of European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, primarily due to the introduction of myxomatosis. Rabbits are the main prey of the lynx and the distribution and decline of the two were clearly linked.

Research subsequently showed that the only really healthy population of Iberian Lynx was not in Coto Donana, where numbers were dropping fast despite significant conservation effort, but in the Sierra de Andujar, a wild area of the Sierra Morena. Animals from this population were then used for the establishment of a captive breeding programme, allied to an intensive rabbit reintroduction programme. This is starting to pay dividends, with an officially estimated population, in 2008, of 150 individuals in the whole of the Sierra Morena and another 50 in Donana. Speaking to researchers in Andujar, who were radio-tracking collared lynx, they estimated that there were more than 300 now present in the Sierra Morena, with 100 in the valley of the Rio Andujar, alone. Andujar, then, presents the determined observer (and I use the word *determined*, purposefully – more of which later!) with a better than even chance of coming face to face with this beautiful and charismatic cat.



*Early morning in the Sierra de Andujar*

## **Getting There**

Doug and I flew from Manchester to Malaga with Easyjet. The flight cost £130 per person return, including all the inevitable add-ons and was punctual both ways, taking two hours on the outward leg and a little longer on the return. We also booked our car through Easyjet's provider (Europcar), which cost £120 for a basic car, paying seven euros per day on arrival to upgrade to a larger vehicle. We based ourselves, for all but the last night, at Los Pinos, a hotel 14km to the north-east of the town of Andujar and perfectly placed for the lynx-watching sites. We paid 45 euros per night for an apartment with two twin-bedded rooms, which was excellent. The hotel has a friendly, typically Spanish restaurant serving wonderful local specialities. The food was excellent and reasonably priced and the wine cheap. The only disadvantage was that it didn't open for breakfast till 8.30 am, by which time we were long-gone, so we made our own arrangements by stocking up at the Carrefour Supermarket in Andujar. We also bought a couple of folding chairs at the supermarket, which proved invaluable during the long hours spent scanning for Lynx.

## **Diary**

### **1<sup>st</sup> November 2010**

After a smooth flight to Malaga we had picked up our car and were ready for the road by 11.00 am. From the coast we saw Gannets and Yellow-legged Gulls before striking out for Andujar. Our journey took us northwards towards Cordoba before swinging east in the direction of Jaen. It is about 160 miles from the airport to the hotel and took us about three hours, including coffee and birding stops. En route we



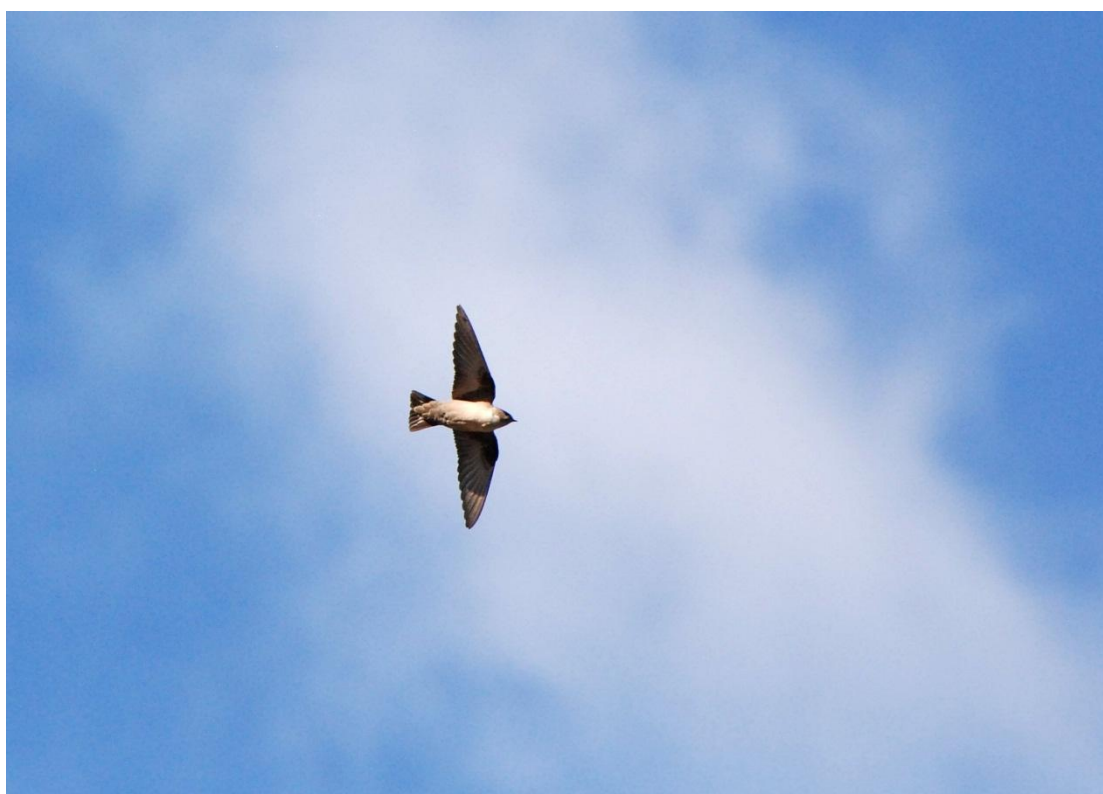
saw the usual range of Mediterranean species and a good variety of raptors, including Red Kite, Common Buzzard, Booted Eagle, Griffon Vulture, Merlin and Kestrel. By 2.00 pm we were checking into the Hotel Los Pinos, after a quick stop at El Carrefour Supermarket in Andujar for supplies. The hotel is pleasant, with spacious rooms in an “apartment-style” and the gardens good for birds, with Firecrest, Spotted Flycatcher and Serin immediately evident.



### *Hotel Los Pinos*

Having dumped our gear we set off to do some birding/lynx spotting before dinner. The road (the A-6177) to the hotel continues on into the Parque Natural de Sierra de Andujar and we followed this as it drops down past some impressive crags. As we did so, a pair of Golden Eagles drifted low overhead and we stopped for a while, watching them hunt the adjacent hillside until they were lost from view. A short drive then took us down to the bridge over the Rio Andujar, where we stopped for a quick scan, seeing Kingfisher, Blackcap, Chiffchaff, Crag Martin etc before heading off to our first Lynx-watching point. As you cross the river bridge there is a track leading off to the right, which is called the Encinarejo Trail (Sendero de Encinarejo). This follows the river for about four kilometres till you reach the Encinarejo Dam. This whole area is good for Lynx, which regularly come down from their hillside lairs to hunt along the river bank. The main lookout point is about half way along the trail, recognisable by some concrete blocks by a roadside layby, on the brow of a small rise. Doug and I eagerly piled out to set up our folding chairs (essential) and ‘scopes and installed ourselves for a long and hopefully productive session scanning the hillside opposite. With hot coffee from our flasks, which the hotel had been kind enough to fill and plenty of snacks, we were in our element. There was plenty of bird

activity to keep us alert, with a pair of Spanish Imperial Eagles being the star performers. They harassed a Buzzard, were buzzed in turn by both Peregrine Falcons and Golden Eagles before settling on tree-top perches directly opposite us. Iberian Green Woodpecker, Black Vulture, Red Kite, Cetti's Warbler, Azure-winged Magpie, Iberian Grey Shrike and both Red and Fallow Deer were other nice sightings. As the sun started to drop nearer the horizon and the evening began to cool we became focussed on the search for Lynx – each taking a sector of hillside and constantly scanning for movement. Deer, Rabbit and Red-legged Partridge were common, 150 Cormorants flew down-river to roost and a Tawny Owl slid across the valley but by the time it was fully dark we were still without a sniff of our quarry. After the short drive back to the hotel and a quick brush-up, we settled into the hotel's pleasant bar-restaurant for a meal of pork steak with fried egg, chips, salad, bread and red wine. Truly wonderful! Then an early night with the prospect of a full day in the field to come.



*Crag Martin*

## **2<sup>nd</sup> November 2010**

The plan today was to head out into some of the wilder areas of the Park, where the highest densities of Lynx occur. We were up an hour before dawn and dashed down to the restaurant, expecting it be humming with life at an early hour, based on many previous experiences of Spanish country restaurants. We were anticipating tortillas, sweet cakes and hot coffee but were met with a sign to the effect that it didn't open till 8.30 am. Hungry but determined not to waste time, we grabbed some chewy bars from the room and set off. Leaving the hotel, we turned right on the main road into the Park and then took an immediate right onto the JH-5002 towards Los Escoriales, a



drive of about fifteen kilometres. Initially, the road is paved but soon deteriorates into a wonderfully wild, pot-holed track through woodland and meadows. As it was still pitch-dark, we were hopeful that we might see Lynx out on the track and so drove slowly, with my spot-light at the ready. As we pushed deeper into the Park, we were amazed by the numbers of Red and Fallow Deer. As it was the rutting season, it seemed that every bend in the road revealed another roaring stag with his harem of females. As we reached Los Escoriales, which is just an isolated collection of ancient farm buildings, the sun was coming up through the morning mist and we stopped to stretch our legs. Hawfinch, Hoopoe, Little Owl and Sardinian Warbler were among the commoner birds and deer were everywhere.



### *Fallow Deer*

From Los Escoriales the track winds down, for another twelve kilometres, towards La Lancha and a large reservoir, the Embalse de Jandula. It is a wonderfully scenic and peaceful drive, with little valleys dropping down to the left of the track and it is here that the Lynx has one of its strongholds. Towards the end of the track, before you reach the viewpoint at the Mirador del Embalse de Jandula, there are a couple of lay-bys, overlooking a peaceful valley with a ruined finca in its centre. This is a very active and potentially productive Lynx territory and is where Doug and I planted ourselves for the rest of the morning. High on the right-hand side of the valley are some rocky outcrops which look ideal for Lynx to hole-up in, while the lower valley held numerous rabbits and Red-legged Partridges, its two main prey species. I'd like to report that we soon had good sightings of Lynx but it's not that easy! There is a lot of territory to scan and a lot of avian distractions, too. We spent six hours scanning without luck, though we did see more Spanish Imperial Eagles, plenty of Dartford and Sardinian Warblers plus plenty of raptors and more deer than you could shake a stick at. It was truly a great place to be spending time but eventually, eye-sore and hungry, we decided to head back and go in to Andujar to stock up on breakfast supplies for the



rest of the week. While we were at the Carrefour Supermarket we stopped for lunch at the attached bar/restaurant. The meal of hake, croquet potatoes, salad, chips and a beer was massive, delicious and cheap, at 4.90 euros per head.

By 4.00pm we were back in the park for another Lynx-watch, from the viewpoint on the Encinarejo Trail. After a solid three hours of scanning, without luck, we'd added Scops Owl to our list but still no Lynx. We met some lovely Spanish people at the watch-point, who came every year to try and see Lynx, with varying degrees of success. They showed us photographs they had taken in previous years, including one of a male on the carcase of a freshly killed Fallow Deer. They told us that a female had a territory opposite the view-point and regularly came down to hunt at dusk. I think they were impressed at mine and Doug's dedication, as we never took our eyes off that hillside for a moment. They also reckoned that one Lynx sighting for every forty hours of scanning was about par for the course, which gave us a degree of hope. If we failed it wouldn't be for lack of effort.



### *Lynx valley on the track down to La Lancha*

Having had a wonderful day, with the scent of Lynx (!) in our nostrils and the sun having set, Doug and I were just not ready to call it quits. We decided to drive back towards the hotel and cut off towards Los Escoriales and La Lancha. A night-time drive along the track might just bring us some luck. Spot-light at the ready we set off at a slow crawl. I have never been anywhere in Europe with such a high density of large mammals. Red and Fallow Deer were everywhere and the sound of rutting stags, with the clash of antlers echoing, was a constant sound-track during the whole of the drive. At Los Escoriales, we had a rush of adrenalin when the car headlights picked up some eye-shine prowling along the track towards us. It was definitely a cat. As it got closer it showed itself to be a huge domestic-type cat and with tiger-striped sides and heavy, black-tipped tail, probably a true Wildcat, which occur in good

numbers in the Park. A short distance further on we came across a fox, which dashed across the road and disappeared into the trees. Deer were regularly wandering out onto the track and several Little Owls were spotted feeding at the road-side. As we came round a bend, not far past Los Escoriales, we again saw eye-shine on the track, about fifty yards ahead. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up – it was a cat – it was massive – it had ear tufts – it was a Lynx!! I slowly drew the car to a halt and we watched this magnificent animal walk long-leggedly towards us, halt, tilt its head a couple of times and then effortlessly bound up a six foot embankment and away into the woods. We were both buzzing with adrenalin and babbling about what we'd just seen. We were struck by how large it seemed, by the beauty of its markings, by the length of its whiskers and ear-tufts and by how regally unconcerned by us it was.

I've been lucky enough to have some wonderful bird and wildlife encounters all over the world but this was something very special indeed, the fulfilment of a thirty-five year ambition to see this rarest and most charismatic big cat, in the company of my good friend Doug and in my very favourite country. Doug too was ecstatic. We drove further along the track, disturbing a herd of Mouflon and still chattering about what we'd just seen. When we reached our day-time Lynx-watching spot we got out of the car, set up our chairs under a bowl of stars, cracked a bottle of red wine, poured a cupful and drank a toast to "El Lince". Then we toasted our loved ones and chatted about future trips. All while the Milky Way glowed overhead and the odd meteor burned its way across the sky. Eventually we had to tear ourselves away, to make it back before the restaurant shut, where we had a wonderful meal of roast chicken with salad, bread and white wine. We toasted "El Lince" a few more times before finally falling into bed at midnight!



*Little Owl at night on the track to La Lancha*



**3<sup>rd</sup> November 2010**

Once again we were up and out before dawn, heading back down the track to Los Escoriales and La Lancha, hoping for another Lynx encounter. At Los Escoriales, still in the pitch dark, we decided to get out and do some spot-lighting to see what we could find. We found many more deer, rabbits, a fox and a few more Little Owls before wandering back down the track to the car. Just as we reached the car we heard a thundering of hooves, getting closer by the second. Turning round in the dark we saw two large Red Deer stags hurtling towards us, with the larger pursuing the smaller. It's not an exaggeration to say that we thought our end had come – jammed against the side of the car with nowhere to go, I actually felt the wind on my face as their antlers whizzed by. Recovering our composure, we drove slowly down the track towards La Lancha, getting excellent views of a small herd of Mouflon as the light improved.



*Male Mouflon by the track to La Lancha*

Reaching our usual vantage point and setting up, we were soon joined by a young Spanish couple, on their annual pilgrimage to see the Lynx. They were as keen as we were and after last night's sighting I was beginning to understand why people are so keen to gain repeat sightings of this magnificent animal. They were full of tales of past sightings, including having seen a mother with kittens on a rocky outcrop just behind where we were sitting. From their past experience, the valley we were overlooking offered the best possible chance of another sighting. I think this is because you can see the whole of the small valley, including the rocky outcrop where they hole-up and the rabbit warrens where they hunt. No entry is allowed in the valley, other than for researchers, so the Lynx are confident enough to hunt during the day. We then spent five hours, with the four of us constantly scanning, without any luck. We did see White Stork, Spanish Imperial Eagle, Black Vulture, Sparrowhawk,

Linnets, Iberian Woodpecker, Dartford Warblers, Corn Buntings, Jays, Iberian Grey Shrikes, Thekla Larks, Little Owl, Sardinian Warblers, Cormorants etc but no Lynx. Eventually, our Spanish friends set off back to the hotel while Doug and I decided to explore further afield. Back at Los Escoriales we had noted a track leading off to the right, which our map showed led to a place called Mirador de los Alarcones. Heading up this track we drove for miles through more open farmland and grassland, climbing steadily all the time. As the habitat changed, so did the birds, with large flocks of Mistle Thrushes e.g. 30 in one flock, Linnets, Goldfinches, Thekla Larks and particularly Corn Buntings, with 110 counted on the drive. Eventually we reached the Mirador, a viewpoint which looked out over endless grassland to the mountains beyond. There was a picnic site at the Mirador, though I doubt whether anyone ever gets up there to use it! Doug and I did though, making Manchego cheese and tomato sandwiches to go with our flasks of coffee, followed by sweet sponge cakes. Truly excellent.



*View from the Mirador de los Alarcones*

After lunch we drove to the dramatic village of Virgen de La Cabeza. This is a place of pilgrimage, perched high on a rocky pinnacle, overlooking the valley of the Rio Andujar. En route we stopped at the woodland at Hotel El Pinos, where we saw Crested Tit, Firecrest and Goldcrest before heading up the steep road to La Cabeza. It is a really spectacular place, where you can get a drink at a table over-looking the gorge and still pick up some good birds. We managed to see Blue Rock Thrush, Black Vulture, Black Redstart, Cirl Bunting, Raven, Griffon Vulture and Peregrine during our half hour stop.

With maybe three hours of daylight left we decided to find ourselves a watch-point, somewhere along the Rio Andujar but away from the usual viewpoint. We parked at the bridge and made our way down river, on the south bank walking west till we came to a huge flat-topped boulder on the river's edge. Easily climbable, we were delighted to find, as we started to clamber up, that many of the surrounding stones were covered in Otter spraint. Settled on top we had wonderful views of the river in both directions



and were content to sit it out till after dusk. I had brought my spot-light in the hope of another close encounter with “El Lince”. In the warm, still late afternoon the river was heavy with large fish. Terrapins slid in and out of the water from nearby rocks. Various warblers moved through the dense vegetation and Nuthatches called from the wood opposite our position. As the light started to fade, birds started moving to roost, with seventy Azure-winged Magpies counted and a distant Eagle Owl calling repeatedly in the background. Using the spot-light, I picked a family of Otters splashing by the bend in the river. Eventually, hunger started to call and we made our way back to the car, picking our way through in the pitch dark and having more close encounters with drinking Red Deer. Back at base we had the most tender Fallow Deer steaks, with salad, chips bread and red wine before doing some star watching and eventually falling into bed.



### *The Rio Andujar*

**4<sup>th</sup> November 2011**

Up early again, we decided to be at the La Lancha viewpoint half an hour before dawn and so drove the track more speedily and without any stops. Hundreds of deer and a few Mouflon provided good views en route and we were soon ensconced in our chairs, watching the sun rising and starting to burn off the mist. From our vantage point we could see numerous Red and Fallow Deer stags with their harems and they provided a fascinating background for our search. Doug poured us both a coffee and broke out the cakes, while I scanned the valley. After a couple of hours of watching, I had formulated a plan. I decided that the Lynx would hole-up in the crags up to the right, emerge as the day warmed up and then amble down to the main Rabbit warren beyond the ruined finca. The hillside between the two was mainly open, grassland with scattered bushes and linked by a complex network of animal trails. I decided to use my ‘scope to repeatedly scan back and forth along these trails, looking for any movement. I had been doing this for a couple of hours without reward when I saw a large flock of Woodpigeons drop in and start to feed under a stunted Cork Oak tree. I knew that Lynx would take ground feeding birds, so stayed focussed on them, slowly

panning to either side. Ten minutes later I was stunned when I picked up movement at the base of a stand of Broom. Out stepped a Lynx, which started to stalk slowly towards the Woodpigeons before suddenly accelerating toward them at astonishing speed. I had called Doug as soon as the Lynx had stepped into view but by the time he'd put his cake and coffee down, struggled out of his chair and come over, the moment was unfortunately gone. The Lynx had gone back into stealth mode and loped off into the nearest cover. I was elated at my luck but gutted that I hadn't been able to share the moment with Doug. He was, as ever, a bigger man than me and was magnanimous, through gritted teeth! We spent the next half hour scanning the area where it had disappeared, without luck. I then theorised that, not having killed, it would continue to work its way, anti-clockwise around the valley, passing below us before returning to its lair.

We were concentrating on scanning this hypothetical route when our young Spanish friends pulled up. They had been following us down the track, they said, before dawn, when a lynx, with a radio collar, had walked out onto the track in front of them. They had enjoyed stunning views for fifteen minutes and had spent the past few hours trying to relocate it, without luck. I shared our similar good fortune with them and then we all set about the job of scanning.



### *Doug on the hunt for Lynx*

By mid-day, under a glorious blue sky I felt in need of a leg-stretch. Half a mile down the track from our position was the entry to a gated track. This private track wound its way down to the ruined finca. I decided to wander down to it and do some birding. Just before I got there I realised that there was an excellent view down into a sheltered gulley and I could see good numbers of Rabbit and Red-legged Partridge feeding in it. I dashed back and fetched my chair, telling the others that I would stake it out for a while. I was soon joined by our Spanish friends, Doug opting to cover the rest of the valley. After half an hour I started to feel peckish and ambled back to join Doug for some lunch. I'd just bitten into a hunk of cheese when our friends started gesticulating wildly. Dropping everything I broke into what, these days, passes for a



sprint. I could tell Doug was close behind because, aptly, it sounded like I was being followed by the Flying Scotsman. Pulling up, panting we could tell by their faces that we'd missed something good. It turned out that they had just watched a Lynx stalk up the gulley to within fifteen metres of their position. Now it was my turn to feel gutted! We tried so hard to relocate it for the next hour but without any luck. That's Lynx watching for you. Long hours of concentrated watching and a bit of luck are all you need. As some consolation Doug did pick up our first Iberian Hare of the trip and the birding was also productive, with more close views of a hunting Spanish Imperial Eagle, sending the Rabbits and Partridges into a panic.

Feeling that we needed a break from the demands of constant scanning, we decided to finish our lunch down at the Embalse del Jandula. The banks of this large reservoir are said to be good for Lynx, early and late in the day as well as providing some good birding. After eating, we went birding, seeing White Wagtail, Stonechat, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear, Black Redstart, Meadow Pipit and Kingfisher. We also used a torch to view a known roost of Greater Mouse-eared and Schrieber's Bats in the tunnel by the dam.



*White Wagtail*

We ended the day at our La Lancha view-point. Sitting out, till well after dark, sharing a cup of red wine, enjoying the spectacle of the stars under a pitch black sky and listening to the rutting stags. Eventually, we set off back and en route had a close encounter with another feline, which had us going for a moment but turned out to be a giant domestic cat, as well as spooking a small herd of Wild Boar, which stampeded across the track, just missing the car. Back at base we enjoyed a superb meal of roast Red-legged Partridge, with the usual bread, salad and red wine, got chatting to some locals about Lynx and other things and ended up not getting to bed till the early hours. Altogether, a good end to another great day.

**5<sup>th</sup> November 2010**

Up early as ever, despite mild protests from Doug, we were back at our La Lancha watch-point not long after sunrise. Despite a determined six hour watch, we didn't locate our quarry and decided to again have our lunch down by the reservoir. The birding was again good and we managed to add Rock Sparrow and Rock Bunting to our list, as well as seeing plenty of other stuff. One site we hadn't yet visited was the "lower dam" on the Rio Andujar. This is reached by going back past Los Escoriales to the main road near the hotel, then driving down into the Parque and then following the Senderos de Encinarejo along the Rio Andujar for maybe five kilometres to the dam. There is a large car parking area and what people usually do is to climb the hillside near the car park to scan the hillside opposite, where there are a few old farm buildings. Lynx have been seen regularly coming down from near those buildings, sauntering across the bridge by the dam and then hunting close to the observers' position. Realising that my chances of persuading Doug to climb the steep hillside were less than slim, we found a nice concealed place, close to the car park and with good views over both bridge and hillside. We watched as a number of deer crossed the bridge and so felt confident that we wouldn't spook any Lynx which came the same way.



*Red Deer hind approaching the bridge at the Lower Dam*

Sitting comfortably, we watched as Rock Sparrows and Blue Rock Thrushes fed close by and a stunning Ocellated Lizard gave brief views. We were keenly anticipating the next hour or so before dusk, when a car pulled up onto the car park. A young woman got out, walked onto the bridge and set up a camera on a tripod. She took a couple of shots of the hillside and farm and then sat on the side of the bridge and to our consternation, unpacked a picnic. She was blissfully unaware of us and of the fact



that she was unintentionally ruining this, our last chance for another Lynx sighting. When it became clear that she was settling in to stay, I got up and went to have a word. It turned out that she was a student involved in Lynx research and knew all the Lynx territories in the area. She was taking background shots of this territory for her thesis. She told me that the local farmer had recently shot the female which had occupied this territory, claiming that it had been damaging his hunting by killing Mouflon. He had subsequently been prosecuted and served a short prison sentence. The upshot was that she felt our chances of seeing Lynx at this spot were very slender. I then did my best to persuade her to tell us where our best chances lay. “Impossible” she said. Her tutor had made her swear not to divulge such details, even to her own family.

Ten minutes of chatting (wheedling!) later she was jumping in her car to take us to a “secret place”, where it was possible, on most visits, to see a female Lynx with two cubs. Doug and I had to swear that we would never tell anyone, or print any details of this location, hence the lack of details which follow. Eventually, she pulled up at a secluded spot along the Rio Andujar and led us through woodland till we emerged on the river bank. There was a large, flat rock which was well-camouflaged by surrounding trees but protruded enough to give good views of the river below and the hillside with scattered trees beyond. Below the rock the river shallowed to create a natural ford, which, she said, the Lynx family crossed nearly every evening at dusk. She wished us good luck, we thanked her and off she went. With the sun setting fast, our level of anticipation was high. On the far bank of the river a Red Deer stag was seeing off his rivals and a family of Otters splashed just down stream.



*Rutting stags by the Rio Andujar*

I'd like to report that a female Lynx with cubs passed beneath us in the fading light but if they did, we missed 'em! Nevertheless, it was a magical evening made more

memorable when a Genet jumped down from a nearby tree and bounded away. Pleasantly tired, we headed back for our last meal at the hotel, celebrating with a massive fillet steak with the usual trimmings, washed down with a couple of bottles of excellent local red wine. Tomorrow would be another early start as we planned to have a day birding nearer to Malaga, so that we would be close to the airport for our early flight the following day.

## **6<sup>th</sup> November 2010**

Up and away an hour before dawn, we had a slight hiccup, when Doug mislaid his camera, though all was resolved in the end. The plan was to drive to Fuente de Piedra, which is probably the best all round birding site within easy striking distance of Malaga. I had visited it several times back in the 1980s but still wasn't prepared for how superbly it has been developed, as a reserve, since then. It took us a leisurely couple of hours to reach the village of Fuente de Piedra, and find a hostel for the night. We bought some bread, cheese and tomatoes for lunch, along with some soft drinks and the headed for the lagoon. Fuente de Piedra (meaning fountain from the stone) is a large, shallow, reed-fringed freshwater lagoon fed from the spring which gives it its name. When I first visited, access was difficult and the viewing not easy. It also had a tendency to dry up in mid-summer. What we now found was a reserve to equal the best that the RSPB has to offer. Lovely stone-built visitors' centre, boardwalk trails all round the extensive perimeter of the lagoon, hides and best of all, good water levels and healthy reed beds which were all jumping with birds.



***Laguna de Fuente de Piedra***

Sitting under the shade of a couple of trees we ate our lunch, all the while stopping to view the avian spectacle. We then drove round the lagoon, making many stops before finding the best vantage point to watch birds coming in to roost at dusk. Probably the best way of getting across how productive this site now is, is to just reel off the counts from my notebook, garnered from five hours of diligent watching:.



Lesser Black-backed Gull c.1,000, Zitting Cisticola 2, Wigeon 400, Dunlin 50, Cirl Bunting 2, Shoveler 10, Teal 600, Greater Flamingo c.5,000, Black-winged Stilt 200, Lapwing 110, Cetti's Warbler 10, Moorhen 170, Coot 400, Lesser Black-backed Gull, c.1,000, Snipe 1, Peregrine 1, Stonechat 20, House Sparrow c.220, Chiffchaff 4, White Wagtail 6, Yellow-legged Gull c.2,000, Spotless Starling 160, Mallard 40, Iberian Grey Shrike 2, Meadow Pipit 10, Black-headed Gull c.2,000, Sardinian Warbler 7, Goldfinch 30, Serin 60, Marsh Harrier 15, Little Owl 1, Common Crane c.2,000, Little Grebe 14, Purple Gallinule 5, Reed Bunting 1, Greenfinch 15, Corn Bunting 10, Greenshank 1, Grey Heron 1, Blue Tit 1, Crested Lark 4, Stock Dove 2, Cormorant 2, Common Buzzard 2, Mistle Thrush 1, Red-legged Partridge 4, Black-necked Grebe 11, Jackdaw 14, Golden Plover 1, Great Tit 1, Song Thrush 4, Sparrowhawk 1, Chaffinch 2, Little Egret 2, Cattle Egret 60, Griffon Vulture 40, Merlin 2.

Reluctantly tearing ourselves away as the light faded, we headed back to our hostel. After a quick shower we walked into the village for a pleasant debrief, a chat with the locals, some tapas and a few glasses of fino. All in all, a very pleasant end to a very special trip and the flight home, the next day, went very smoothly. Doug had been in his element for whole time, leaving me with more great final memories of a very special and badly-missed friend.



*View from the tunnel at the Embalse de Jandula*





*View showing the local practice of making troughs for cattle from large boulders*



## BIRD LIST

<b>Species</b>
1. Shelduck
2. Mallard
3. Shoveler
4. Wigeon
5. Teal
6. Red-legged Partridge
7. Black-necked Grebe
8. Little Grebe
9. Great Crested Grebe
10. Gannet
11. Cormorant
12. Cattle Egret
13. Little Egret
14. Grey Heron
15. White Stork
16. Flamingo
17. Griffon Vulture
18. Black Vulture
19. Golden eagle
20. Spanish Imperial Eagle
21. Booted Eagle
22. Bonelli's Eagle
23. Red Kite
24. Marsh Harrier
25. Common Buzzard
26. Sparrowhawk
27. Kestrel
28. Peregrine Falcon
29. Merlin
30. Moorhen
31. Coot
32. Purple Swamphen
33. Crane
34. Black-winged Stilt
35. Golden Plover
36. Lapwing
37. Dunlin
38. Greenshank
39. Snipe
40. Black-headed Gull
41. Yellow-legged Gull
42. Lesser Black-backed Gull
43. Rock Dove

44.	Stock Dove
45.	Wood Pigeon
46.	Collared Dove
47.	Eagle Owl
48.	Tawny Owl
49.	Little Owl
50.	Scops Owl
51.	Hoopoe
52.	Kingfisher
53.	Iberian Green Woodpecker
54.	Great Spotted Woodpecker
55.	Crested lark
56.	Thekla Lark
57.	Skylark
58.	Crag Martin
59.	Water Pipit
60.	Meadow Pipit
61.	White Wagtail
62.	Grey Wagtail
63.	Robin
64.	Black Redstart
65.	Black Wheatear
66.	Stonechat
67.	Song Thrush
68.	Mistle Thrush
69.	Blackbird
70.	Blue Rock Thrush
71.	Blackcap
72.	Sardinian Warbler
73.	Dartford Warbler
74.	Zitting Cisticola
75.	Cetti's Warbler
76.	Chiffchaff
77.	Goldcrest
78.	Firecrest
79.	Wren
80.	Great Tit
81.	Blue Tit
82.	Crested Tit
83.	Long-tailed Tit
84.	Nuthatch
85.	Iberian Grey Shrike
86.	Azure-winged Magpie
87.	Magpie
88.	Jay
89.	Jackdaw
90.	Raven
91.	Spotless Starling



92. House Sparrow
93. Tree Sparrow
94. Rock Sparrow
95. Chaffinch
96. Linnet
97. Goldfinch
98. Greenfinch
99. Serin
100. Hawfinch
101. Reed Bunting
102. Cirl Bunting
103. Corn Bunting
104. Rock Bunting

## MAMMAL LIST

Species
1. Iberian Lynx
2. Wildcat
3. Genet
4. Iberian Hare
5. Red Fox
6. Red Deer
7. Fallow Deer
8. Eurasian Otter
9. House Mouse
10. Rabbit
11. Greater Mouse-eared Bat
12. Daubenton's Bat
13. Schrieber's Bat
14. Wild Boar

## REPTILE/AMPHIBIAN LIST

Species
1. Spanish Terrapin
2. Montpellier Snake
3. Viperine Snake
4. Southern Tree Frog
5. Natterjack Toad
6. Large Psammmodromus
7. Ocellated Lizard



*Early morning mist rising in the Valley of the Rio Andujar, Virgen de la Cabeza in the distance.*