

Iberian Wildlife Tours/Jeff Clarke Ecology

Picos de Europa

10 – 20th May 2010

Review



May 2010 Picos De Europa Tour Group

Teresa Farino & Jeff Clarke

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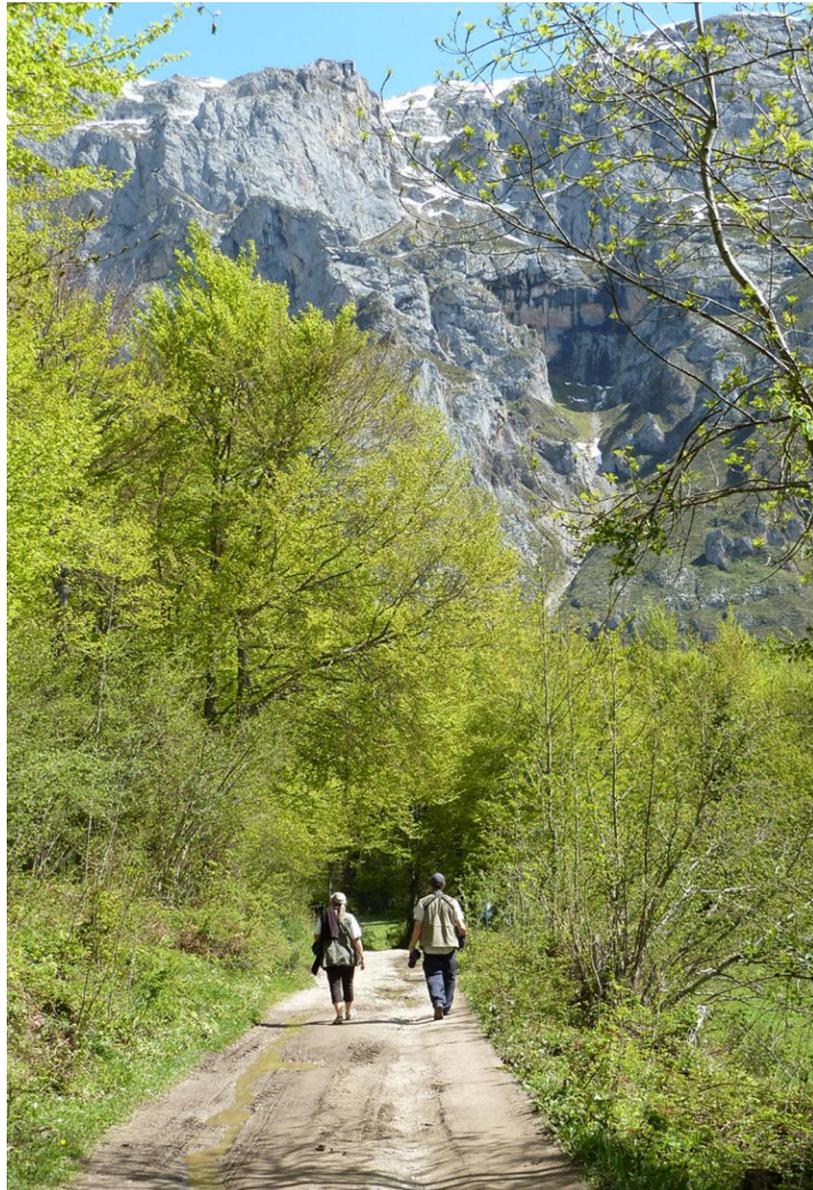
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Introduction

This review covers the highlights from a memorable tour of the Picos de Europa from May 10th to 20th in 2010. Despite challenging weather conditions in the first few days the wealth of flora and fauna more than made up for the drizzle, frost and even the snow experienced by the group in this exceptionally late spring. Teresa's local knowledge proved invaluable in helping to make the most of each day as we re-jigged the itinerary.

A friendly atmosphere among the group certainly created a positive experience for participants and leaders alike. A willingness to share knowledge and explore new facets of natural history was a real feature of the tour and added to the whole experience. Though it was only possible to sample a fraction of the biodiversity potential of the region, all those taking part will feel they have experienced and enjoyed one of the most beautiful and biologically rich parts of Europe.

Review

We began our journey on the 10th May when we boarded the Pride of Bilbao and departed Porstmouth harbour as the sun set over the Solent.

Tuesday 11th May

We made a pre-breakfast start as the ship rounded the Brest Peninsula. The wind was from the north at a steady force 6 which and 'white caps' decorated the crest of most waves. Conditions were difficult for cetacean watching but the birds did their best to compensate. The ships forward motion cancelled out the wind and we enjoyed calm conditions aboard the ship itself which made using a telescope and binoculars fairly easy.

As we steamed south into the Bay of Biscay north bound migrants trickled past the ship, including Turnstones and Ringed Plovers heading for the Arctic tundra. By the end of the day we had recorded 21 species of birds from the ship. The on-board highlight being a Turtle Dove which took refuge on the ship's bridge.

At sea the star bird was undoubtedly a single Sooty Shearwater. A bird out of time and place, it should just be completing its breeding season in the Southern Atlantic. The 53 Manx Shearwaters were more expected though surprisingly most were seen in the northern part of the bay than in the Western Approaches. The most



Sooty Shearwater © Jeff Clarke

abundant species was the Northern Gannet, with 111 birds counted, more than double the number of any other species.

Wednesday 12th May

We docked at Santurzi at 7.00am and as we cleared customs our mini-buses arrived courtesy of our other tour leader Teresa Farino and her friend Teresa. The lowering clouds on the Sarantes and the cold northerly wind prompted a switch of venue for our first stop and we headed for the Santona Marshes where we watched a small flock of Spoonbills feeding in the channel, while a statuesque Purple Heron stalked its prey and first of many Black Kites observed during the trip glided effortlessly by. Also seen here were Black tailed Godwits, Little Egret and a Sandwich Tern.

After a stop at the excellent Visitor Centre we then headed for Santander Airport ostensibly to allow Jeff to sign up for driving the mini- buses. However a small meadow adjacent to the car park area gave the botanists their first taste of what was to come as Heart-flowered Tongue Orchids decorated the damp ground and Robust Marsh Orchid was also present.



**Heart-flowered Tongue Orchids
at Santander Airport © Jeff Clarke**

The bird watchers were able to observe Fan-tailed Warbler (aka Zitting Cisticola) and Cetti's Warblers blasted out song from deep cover. A brief sunny interlude tempted out a few butterflies including our first Sooty Copper and Meadow Fritillaries of the week.

We stopped for lunch at the Marismas Blancos, and enjoyed the first of many

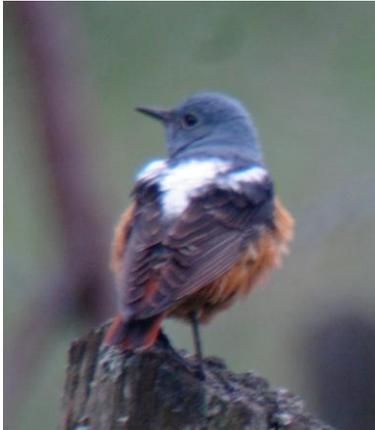
sumptuous picnics provided by Teresa. Despite the rapidly deteriorating weather we did enjoy close views of Marsh Harrier and Common Terns. The cooling conditions pulled in ever increasing numbers of hirundines to feed over the open water, including our only Sand Martins of the week. The temperature gauge on a nearby building dropped steadily and a low point of 9°C prompted our departure for the Picos de Europa. The journey through the tortuous Hermida Gorge providing a dramatic introduction for the first time visitors in the party.

We stopped briefly, en-route to our hotel, at the church of Santa Maria in Lebana and enjoyed a spectacular view of Egyptian Vultures as their huge cousins the Griffon Vultures sailed around the high peaks. We arrived at our hotel El Hoyal in Pesaguero in the early

evening. Overlooking wooded valleys and with meadows to the rear it promised to be an excellent home base.

Thursday 13th May

We awoke to fresh snow falls high in the mountains and cool, moisture-laden, northerly winds. An exploration of the wooded valley and the fields surrounding of the hotel immediately produced dividends and one of the outstanding avian highlights of the week. A stunningly beautiful male (Rufous-tailed) Rock Thrush had been driven out of the high



Rock Thrush at Pesaguero
© Jeff Clarke

mountains by the snow and sought refuge in the meadow by the hotel. Perching on nearby fence posts he provided outstanding views to everyone. Most views of Rock Thrushes tend to be fleeting and often distant so this was a moment to be treasured.

So much bird activity delayed our departure and we soon notched up other goodies in the form of Wryneck, Middle-spotted Woodpecker and Common Redstart. A pair of Black Redstarts were feeding well grown chicks in the hotel eaves.

Another weather enforced change in our plans saw us head out to the 'old road' in the Hermida Gorge. The crags and peaks were alive with Griffon Vultures, with over 120 counted in a matter of minutes. We had our first glimpse of Dipper in the Rio Deva and a Honey Buzzard passed through as did a Booted Eagle.

The plants then took centre stage with a succession of Orchid species, including the diminutive Man and Dense-flowered Orchids, followed by Violet Limodore. The pungent Bitumen Pea and Turpentine Tree lived up to their aromatic names. Tassel Hyacinths looked like two different plants flowering together, while the heathers were represented by Tree Heath and St Dabeoc's Heath. The latter's name was memorably misheard by Jeff and from then on was referred to as the Debauched Heath.

Lunch was taken in the delightful village of Tudes, with a brief stop en-route to enjoy the spectacular Pink Butterfly Orchid. Here we had close encounters with Middle Spotted Woodpecker and a nesting Common Redstart. From here we walked to Valmeo. We stopped to explore a water trough and found Marbled and



Marbled Newt at Tudes © Jeff Clarke

Palmate Newts as well as the giant sized tadpoles of the Midwife Toad. On way down the hill we had close views of Red-backed Shrike, Cirl Buntings. We spent a wonderful hour searching a meadow with a fabulous array of plants. Here we added Green-winged Orchid, *Dactylorhiza sulphurea*, *Serapia ligua*, Early-purple Orchid and Burnt-Tip Orchid to our trip list.

Friday 14th May

The day started promisingly with clear blue skies and we set off for Al Puerto de Piedrasluengas full of hope. On arrival the impact of the fresh snows were much in evidence. The spectacular views down the valley demonstrated the progression of altitude related leaf development on the beech woods that clung to the slopes. The trees at the top of the pass barely breaking bud, whilst those in the valley base had leaves that were fully expanded.

Birds were in short supply, but a male Rock Bunting sang from a bush at close quarters and afforded everyone a chance to catch up with this mountain dwelling species.



Angel's Tears © Jeff Clarke

All too soon the weather closed in and chased us in to the autonomous region of Leon. Almost immediately we came to meadows full of narcissi. We stopped and explored one of them. Here we found the trumpet curled subspecies of Wild Daffodil 'nobilis' and the delicate looking Angel's Tears. The field was full of 'mole-hills', which as Teresa pointed out are created by Southern Water Vole, which confusingly does not necessarily live in association water.

More good views of Rock Buntings were had at this site, together with the familiar Yellowhammer and we also found another pair of Red-backed Shrike.

We then headed for the village of Vanes on the shores of the Embalse de la Requejada. Here we immediately found Rock Sparrow, a new bird for most people. We were serenaded by Nightingales and a distant Woodlark and a little careful fieldcraft teased out a Bonelli's Warbler. The botanists in the group were delighted to find Yellow Lousewort. Maggie Williams found the startlingly coloured Shieldbug *Eurydema ornate*

We took lunch in a fishermans retreat close to the village of Salinas de Piseguero. Crossing the river we had seen a large



Eurydema ornate © Jeff Clarke



Ophrys lutea © Jeff Clarke

Orchid as well as Pyrenean Fritillary. We then entered an area commonly referred to as Stork City. It lived up to its name with White Storks and their nests dotting the area, many on purpose built poles.

A long day in the field was richly rewarded despite the difficult weather conditions and we returned to the hotel more than ready for our evening meal.

Saturday 15th May

More cold and damp conditions greeted us at dawn and so we headed for the Urdon Gorge. We stopped briefly in La Hermida and were rewarded with a Golden Eagle passing overhead and a nesting pair of Egyptian Vulture. Once in the gorge we finally had good views of the 'black-bellied form' of the Dipper. A session of stone turning revealed a bejewelled ground beetle called *Carabus auronitens* and a Glow Worm larva. Birds in the gorge included Crag Martins and the only record of Alpine Swift during the tour.

A brief sunny interlude tempted out a few butterflies including Sooty Copper and Orange Tip. A Common Wall Lizard also crept out of cover in an attempt to warm itself. As so often on this trip it was an impromptu 'comfort break' which led to the best find. Mathew discovered a fine specimen of *Gyas titanus* a huge cliff dwelling harvestman. The botanists

Barbel in the clear waters and Purple toothwort was growing at the base of some of the Poplar trees on the route down to hut. Iberian Chiffchaffs stuttered their song from riverside willows. The highlight during lunch was the low approach of a circling Short-toed Eagle which was variously accompanied by Common Buzzard and dark phase Booted Eagle.

From here we took a route that looped around the Embalse de Augilar de Campoo. We stopped at a fabulous orchid rich meadow which had everyone captivated. New species here included Dull and Yellow Ophrys, Early Spider and Barton's



White Stork © Jeff Clarke



Slow Worm © Jeff Clarke

resisted and a bit of judicious rock turning gave us a couple of Slow Worms, still lethargic in the cool air. The wooded path sides on the route up to the meadows produced Violet Limodore and Sword Flowered Helleborine. The meadows themselves were awash with flowering plants. White Asphodels abounded and orchids seemed to come along at every carefully placed step. Pink Butterfly, Robust Marsh, Sawfly, Green-winged and Burnt-tip orchid were present in large numbers. Here to we found Fragrant Solomon's Seal, Alpine Sandwort, Large-flowered Butterwort, though pride of place fell to the Wild Peony *Paeonia mascula*. For the birdwatchers the meadows provided another splendid view of Red Backed Shrike.

As we descended we checked another water trough and found more Midwife Toad tadpoles and a well grown nymph of a hawker dragonfly *Aeshna cyanea*, also known as Southern Hawker.

Sunday 16th May

At last the weather turned and we were blessed with a blissfully warm and sunny day. Sadly we had to leave one of our party behind as Val Marshall was poorly. We began by heading for the village of Dobres. A steeply banked meadow at a roadside stop produced a few butterfly species, Green Hairstreak, Wood White, Small Heath, Weaver's Fritillary, Wall and Small Blue while a Tree Pipit sang its lilting song close at hand.

in the group were as busy as ever but were particularly pleased to find Blue-leaved *Petrocoptis*

Lunch was taken with a superb overlook of La Hermida. Raptors observed included Short-toed Eagle, Common Buzzard and Sparrowhawk and a roadside stop produced more orchids in the shape of Woodcock Ophrys and more *Serapia lingua*.

The post lunch walk in the meadows of the Lebana Valley above the Church of Santa Maria provided one of the truly magical botanical highlights of the

week. We climbed steadily upward on the twisting path where one rock-filled bend couldn't be



Mathew with Wild Peony © Val Marshall



Iberian Wall Lizard © Jeff Clarke

We stopped close to the Dobres tunnels and from here enjoyed stunning views across the Karst limestone landscape. Red-billed and Alpine Chough were much in evidence. A Blue Rock Thrush proclaimed his territory from a nearby limestone outcrop and we had close views of a Griffon Vulture as it sat in its cave nest entrance. Crag Martins were prospecting potential nest sites and Common Kestrels played in the up-draughts on the cliff faces.

A lizard sunbathing on the rocks turned out to be an Iberian Wall Lizard; our only specimen of the tour.

From here we headed for the high point of the day at 5,568ft at the Mirador del Oso, before descending a little way to the Puerto de San Glorio for an eventful lunch stop. A low flying Honey Buzzard and a hovering Short-toed Eagle captured the birders eyes, while the botanists recorded *Genista obtusiramea*, Dog's tooth Violet and Moonwort. A Common Wall Lizard might have been the reptilian high point had it not been for another comfort break encounter.

Maria returned to the picnic ground and began excitedly and explaining about coming eye to eye with something. Unfortunately the key word was missing from the story and a comedy bout of 20 questions finally prised the word 'snake' from a clearly shaken Maria. We rapidly ascended to the spot and after a while sure enough the coiled form of a rather cold and slow moving Seoane's Viper could be seen at the base of the bush.

Nothing was going to beat that, but we did our best and bout of high volume 'pishing' finally revealed a few of the birds ensconced in the small conifer forest adjacent to the picnic area. The most surprising of which was the small party of Common Crossbill which popped up to see what all the fuss was about.

We looked in vain out over the high pastures and heathland for the sign of a Wildcat, though this was no hardship as we were serenaded by Skylarks. The keen eyes of Kath Morrell did pick out a Red Deer on the opposite hillside as we began our descent. A brief roadside stop part way down the valley provided Iberian Grizzled Skipper, Irish Spurge and Elder-flowered Orchid.



Marsh Fritillary © Jeff Clarke

A little further down the valley we stopped for a butterfly hunt on some steep sloped meadows. The highlights at this spot being glorious Marsh Fritillaries, Meadow Fritillary, Weavers Fritillary, Oburthürs Grizzled Skipper, Red-underwing Skipper and Short-tailed Blues. The botanists also had a field day with Common cow-wheat found among the many flowering plants.

We finished the day with a bat and moth session at Teresa's place where we identified Common Pipistrelle and also picked up one of the Horseshoe bat sp.

Monday 17th May

We started with a pre-breakfast opening of the moth trap. The early morning had sunshine tempted out a pair of Great-spotted Woodpeckers to perform noisily in a Poplar tree below Teresa's terrace. Many of the moths were familiar to British moth trappers, including Chinese Character, Early Grey, Peppered moth etc. less common were Silver Cloud and Chesias isabella, a species related to our Broom Moth.

It was market day in Potes so we stopped briefly to give people the chance to get some genuine local produce. A Green Woodpecker called loudly from the car park area and a Sparrowhawk flapped lazily across the nearby hillside, Common Swifts screamed in masses over the town and Jack found a Cream-spot Tiger moth whilst wandering out towards nearby meadow areas.

We then headed for our real target for the day; the vertiginous Fuente De cable car. Before long we were ascending at a rate of knots. As we approached the upper cable car station Maggie, Pat and Harold caught sight of a Snow Finch. It proved to be the only one of the day.

Crowned Moths were skittering about the snow clad landscape as we made our way across this majestic natural amphitheatre to find a good watch-point and lunch-stop. Northern Wheatears were prominent among the birds, most of which were difficult to get to grips with, though a Blue Rock Thrush gave itself up to a few people as did a distant pair of Alpine Accentors. The one bird that did not make its self scarce was the Alpine Chough which gathered around us in numbers waiting for a free handout.



Alpine Chough © Jeff Clarke



Egyptian Vulture © Jeff Clarke

The up-lighting from the snow created beautiful detail on the overflying Griffon and Egyptian Vultures.

The late snows had suppressed some of the botanical interest but the diminutive daffodil *Narcissus asturiensis* was evident, along with *Draba cantabrigiae* and spring Gentians.

Despite the falls of fresh snow the clear air and brilliant sunshine

created a real sun-trap and several of the party acquired a real 'mountain suntan'. All around could be heard the sounds of avalanches being triggered by the hot weather. On an adjacent rocky point a group of Isard (Southern Chamois) rested in the heat.

After lunch the party split into two groups, one descended to explore the meadows and screes at the base of the mountain and the rest stayed up to walk a little way along the safe areas of the high mountain trails. The top group enjoyed the company of Black Rstarts and Water Pipits while the group at the bottom of the hill enjoyed watching a party of Linnets, 30+ Red-billed Chough, Red Squirrel and the botanists found *Iberis carnosa* also known as Pruit's Candytuft.

After our evening meal we set the moth trap and then ventured out in search of mammals, but other than the Common Pipistelles, the two mammals crossing the road remained unidentified so we contented ourselves with a spot of star gazing. It's amazing how many stars are visible when the air isn't filled with man-made light pollution.

Tuesday 18th May



Cream-spot Tiger © Jeff Clarke

Our last full day in the Picos de Europa was a gloriously sunny one. We began with a rummage through the previous nights moths, which included Ringed Carpet, Cream-spot Tiger, Great Prominent, Cyperus Pug and Light Brocade and a small 'lappet type' moth called *Phyllodesma kermesifolium* which does a passable impression of a dried up leaf.

After breakfast we set off for the woods at the foot of the Fuente De. Tao Emperor moths jetted about in the dappled shade but never allowed a close approach, and Marsh Tits called. Herb Paris, Pyrenean Squill and Dog's-tooth Violet were flowering on the woodland floor and a walk into a meadow previously used for raptor displays was full of Globeflowers. The same meadow was also home to numerous Burnet Companion moths.

We then headed for a primary venue of the day; the meadows above Espinama. This walk really showed the potential of the area both entomologically and botanically. Plants included Hoary Rock Rose, Adders Tongue Fern and a host of orchids including the



Scarce Swallowtail © Jeff Clarke

On the ascent we bisected the territory of a Scarce Swallowtail. We also had many other butterfly species including Common Swallowtail, Large Tortoiseshell, Berger's Clouded Yellow, Small, Common, Holly and Black-eyed Blues. The day flying moths included the Speckled Yellow, Common and Latticed Heath. The drier slopes also held many other invertebrates including the Ground-bug *Lygaeus saxatilis* and Field Crickets.

Our lunch stop was memorable for many reasons, the magnificent backdrop of the mountains, the flower rich meadows, the serenading of a Tree Pipit, the stunningly beautiful weather and Teresa's orange incident.

complicated trio of Barton's, Elder flower and *Dactylohoriza sulphurea*. We added Heath Spotted Orchid to our trip list and had yet more Sawfly and Dull Ophrys and Burnt-tip Orchids. One of the most fascinating plants was the Whorled Lousewort which Teresa informed us acts as a mimic of the marsh orchids and persuades insects to pollinate it by deception.



Whorled Lousewort © Jeff Clarke



Espinama Meadows: From left: Jack Swan, Ros George, David George, Claire Boyes, Val Fielding, Harold Fielding, Pat Stanbridge, Mathew Hyde, Kath Morrell, Maggie Williams, Jacqui Furner, Kath Edwards, Maria Hyde, Val Marshall

Bonelli's Warblers sang regularly from cover as did both common Chiffchaff and Iberian Chiffchaff. A Black Woodpecker called but didn't show itself, though Black Kites did.

Mammal sightings were at a premium in the heat of the day but we did manage Red Squirrel and David found a Wood Mouse. On the reptile front we added one more to the trip list in the form of Viviparous Lizard.

On the return home a roadside bathing female Pied Flycatcher caused a temporary diversion before our final proper stop of the day. A small roadside meadow close to Frama produced some stunning plants and more new insects. Top botanical prize probably went to the newly flowering Lizard Orchids, though the showiest plant was surely the biggest Pink-butterfly Orchid of the week. A Giant Orchid was in fruit and few could forget the Sillybum Thistle, *Silybum marianum*, more commonly known as the Milk Thistle.

We also found some wonderful invertebrates including an Ascalaphid, or



Lizard Orchid ©Jeff Clarke



Slender-scotch Burnets © Jeff Clarke

Owlfly called *Libelloides coccajus* a relative of the Ant Lions, Val had previously photographed one on the day she was sick. We also found a mating pair of Slender Scotch Burnet, startlingly coloured day flying moths, as well as Spotted Fritillary butterfly.

We had a special evening meal to celebrate our week and toast a fabulous finale to a wonderful spell in the outstanding Picos de Europa.

Wednesday 19th May

An early start was required as we headed for a rendezvous with the Pride of Bilbao. All too soon we were saying goodbye to Teresa.

Less than an hour out from the port of Santurzi we began to encounter cetaceans. First to break the surface were a couple of small pods of Bottlenose Dolphin and within minutes of this we began to see small groups of a rare beaked whale, Cuvier's Beaked Whale. In all we saw 10 different animals including, for most people, 3 very close to the ship.

After a lull we found some small groups of Common Dolphin including a few that came in to bow-ride. As we hit the edge of the abyssal plain we encountered 3 Fin Whale, including one animal fairly close to the ship estimated at 70+ feet in length. Shortly before dusk we had one more spectacular encounter when a 100+ cavorting Striped Dolphins passed close by the boat on the port side.

The following morning we awoke to thick fog which persisted virtually all the way up the English Channel so we contented ourselves with mapping our tour and reviewing what we had seen and where.



Common Dolphin © Jeff Clarke



Pink Butterfly Orchid © Jeff Clarke

And Finally...

After such a wildlife-filled tour it's impossible to pick out all the highlights and there will be many things not mentioned in this review. Hopefully it will remind you all just what fantastic places the Picos de Europa and the Bay of Biscay are for wildlife and help you to re-envisage some of those outstanding moments.

I'd like to give special thanks to my co-tour leader Teresa Farino, a fantastic naturalist, whose knowledge of the Picos de Europa and surrounding areas made for such a varied wildlife experience despite trying conditions in the first few days of the tour. Not only that but Teresa put together terrific picnic lunches and worked tirelessly to ensure our tour ran smoothly.

As a group I believe people got on exceptionally well and that added to the quality of the experience so a big thank you to all of you for helping to make the whole tour so relaxed and entertaining. Special thanks to Val Marshall for providing some of the images for this review. All of the images used in the report were taken during the tour with the exception of the Sooty Shearwater.

Of course the real stars of the show were the natural wonders of the Picos de Europa and the Bay of Biscay. We hope this encounter will tempt you to revisit this beautiful part of Europe on other occasions.

We trust and hope that you enjoyed your time with Iberian Wildlife Tours and Jeff Clarke Ecology. We hope to see you all again sometime, hopefully soon, and please let others know what you thought about your experience.

Kind Regards

Jeff Clarke & Teresa Farino