

Spain: Birds, Bears, Wolves, & Total Solar Eclipse August 3-14, 2026 | Trip Report by Stephen Grace



With Naturalist Journeys Guide Stephen Grace, Naturalist Journeys Host Alex Cahill, and participants Nancy, Robert, Janice, George, Barbara, Steve B, Judy, Loretta and Lynn



Mon., Aug. 3 Arrivals in Madrid

Many of us had arrived in Madrid a day early, so after breakfast at the elegant Hotel Agumar we set out for bonus birding in nearby Parque del Retiro. Over breakfast we discovered that this group's interests ranged far beyond birds—from wildlife and geology to art, history, photography, and Spanish culture.

News reports before the trip had emphasized drought, extreme heat, and wildfires across southern Europe, sometimes painting an almost apocalyptic picture of smoke and flames. Madrid greeted us instead with clear air and a brilliant blue sky. It was hot, but low humidity and a welcome breeze kept the morning surprisingly comfortable, and conditions on the ground felt far calmer than the headlines had suggested.

El Retiro began as a 17th-century royal retreat for King Philip IV and his court and was opened fully to the public after 1868. Today its mature trees, gardens, fountains, ponds, and broad promenades create a remarkable green oasis in the heart of Madrid—and excellent habitat for urban birds.

Our principal target was Iberian Green Woodpecker, an Iberian near-endemic found predominantly in Spain and Portugal, with its range extending into southern France. I had located a few while scouting the previous day, but the birds made us work for them, giving us time to become acquainted with some of Madrid's common species. Noisy Monk Parakeet, native to South America but firmly established here, zipped overhead and gathered

around enormous communal stick nests. Eurasian Blackbird foraged on lawns and beneath shrubs; despite the familiar name, they are true thrushes, not relatives of New World blackbirds.



European Greenfinch moved through the trees, along with Great Tit, members of the same family as North American chickadees. Their black heads, white cheeks, yellow underparts, and strong central breast stripe became increasingly familiar. Flocks of Long-tailed Tit were especially entertaining, their tails nearly as long as their bodies. Despite the name, they are not true tits but members of Aegithalidae, the same family as North America's Bushtit.

Then a Black Kite appeared overhead. We watched it circle on broad wings before it settled into a treetop where we could study it through the scope. Black Kite are among the earlier southbound raptor migrants in Spain, with many beginning their journey toward Africa in late July and early August. Seeing one on our first morning nicely foreshadowed the migration we would witness during the trip.

Persistence finally paid off with Iberian Green Woodpecker. We enjoyed both male and female, noting green backs, brilliant red crowns, and the different moustachial stripes: red in the male and black in the female. Unlike many woodpeckers, this species spends considerable time on the ground searching for ants. Finding such a charismatic Iberian specialty in the heart of Madrid was a wonderful beginning.

Our walk eventually brought us to the Palacio de Cristal, the soaring glass-and-iron pavilion built in 1887 for Madrid's General Exposition of the Philippines. Around the pond we found an eclectic mix: exotic Black Swan and Egyptian Goose, native Common Wood-Pigeon, and Eurasian Moorhen picking their way along the edge on remarkably long toes.

By midday everyone was free to explore Madrid. Some toured by tuk-tuk, while others visited the Museo Reina Sofía and Picasso's monumental Guernica or the Prado's extraordinary collection of Velázquez, Goya, El Greco, Bosch, Titian, Rubens, and many others. It was exactly the kind of afternoon that suited this group: birds in the morning, then art, architecture, and history for anyone who wanted more.

By evening the final members of our group had arrived, and we gathered for our official welcome and introductions to our Spanish guides, Manuel Morales and Víctor Porras. We quickly learned how fortunate we were to have them. Both were exceptional field naturalists with sharp eyes and ears, deep knowledge of Spain's wildlife and landscapes, and a genuine commitment to conservation. Just as importantly, they brought warmth, humor, generosity, and infectious enthusiasm for their country.

Celebratory drinks led to lively conversation and our first shared dinner—the beginning of a series of Spanish meals that often felt more like feasts. The camaraderie came easily from the start, and we headed to bed eager for our first full field day.



Tues., Aug. 4 Madrid to Sierra de la Culebra

We began our first full field day with breakfast at the Hotel Agumar, where the buffet included tortilla de patatas, the classic Spanish omelet of eggs and potatoes, often with onion. Along with fruit, pastries, juice, and plenty of coffee, it fortified us for the journey northwest toward the Sierra de la Culebra in Zamora near the Portuguese border.

“Culebra” means snake in Spanish, a fitting name for the long, sinuous ridges of this rugged landscape and an amusing prelude to our first major bird of the day.

A quick stop became an astonishing raptor bonanza. As we approached a gas station, a Short-toed Snake-Eagle sat prominently on a power pole. I had just been talking about the “snake” in Sierra de la Culebra, so the timing seemed scripted. This large-headed eagle specializes heavily in reptiles, especially snakes, and often hovers while hunting.

I expected we would admire it, use the facilities, and move on. Instead, the sky erupted with raptors. Eurasian Griffon began soaring overhead, enormous vultures effortlessly riding the thermals, soon joined by even bulkier Cinereous Vulture. A Booted Eagle swept past the Moon, showing the bright white shoulder patches nicknamed its “landing lights.” With the total solar eclipse only a little more than a week away, the lunar backdrop seemed especially appropriate.

Manuel and Víctor’s expertise became immediately obvious. Both have extensive experience with Spain’s spectacular raptor migration toward the Strait of Gibraltar, where huge numbers of soaring birds funnel toward the short sea crossing to Africa. They picked out distant shapes by silhouette, flight style, wing structure, and tail shape, and we began learning those distinctions ourselves.

Red Kite showed a longer, more deeply forked tail than Black Kite, along with conspicuous white primary panels on the underwings. In good views, Red Kite also shows five long, obvious “fingers” at the wingtips, while Black Kite has a broader, blunter-looking hand and often shows a shorter sixth “finger.”

To our growing species list we also added Peregrine Falcon, Eurasian Kestrel, and Common Buzzard. The last name can confuse North American birders: Common Buzzard is a *Buteo* hawk, not a vulture. It is broadly

analogous to our Red-tailed Hawk, often seen soaring or perched over open country while hunting small mammals and other prey.

It was an extraordinary beginning—all at a gas station.

A few miles farther on, we spotted a large perched raptor with conspicuous white on the shoulders and upper wings. Manuel and Víctor found a safe pullout, and after setting up scopes, we confirmed one of the great prizes of Iberian birding: Spanish Imperial Eagle. eBird/Clements currently uses the shorter name Spanish Eagle, while BirdLife and other authorities retain Spanish Imperial Eagle—the name Manuel and Víctor used. Both refer to the same species, *Aquila adalberti*, and “imperial” seemed entirely appropriate for such a magnificent bird.

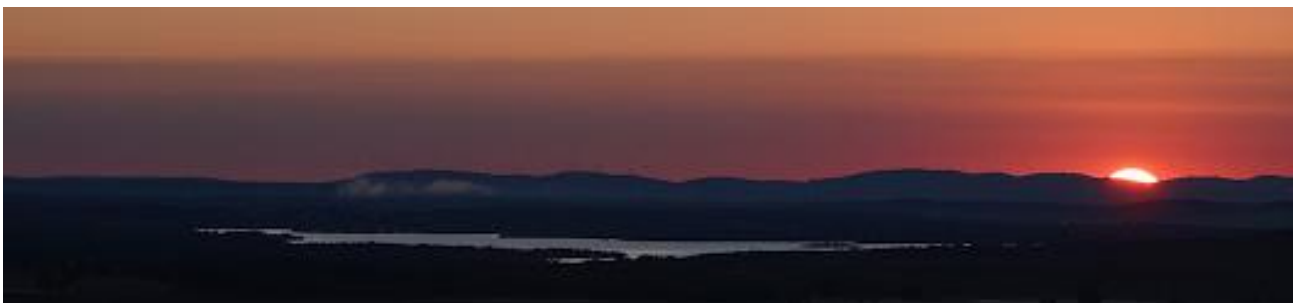
The species breeds almost entirely on the Iberian Peninsula and is one of Spain’s great conservation success stories. The first national census, in 1974, found only 39 breeding pairs. Decades of protecting nesting territories, combating poisoning, correcting dangerous power lines, and conserving habitat produced a remarkable recovery; by 2022, the Iberian population had reached 841 breeding pairs. Electrocution and poisoning remain threats, but the species has come a very long way from the brink.

We watched the eagle perched for some time before it launched and began soaring. Broad-winged and powerful, with brilliant white shoulders flashing against dark plumage, it looked every bit worthy of its name. Imperial indeed. Finding one so unexpectedly on our first travel day was an extraordinary gift.

Another roadside stop produced European Bee-eater lined along wires, brilliant turquoise, chestnut, and yellow birds making aerial sallies for insects. Among them sat a single European Turtle-Dove, a beautifully patterned long-distance migrant whose populations have declined sharply across much of Europe.

After lunch we continued into the Sierra de la Culebra, checked in, and settled into a rhythm that would serve us well throughout the tour. August afternoons could be hot and daylight lasted well into the evening—sunset here on August 4 was around 9:39 PM—so our days often became early outings, late lunches, siestas during the hottest hours, evening excursions, and late Spanish dinners. That schedule gave us cooler conditions for wildlife and long, beautiful evenings in the field.

Our evening walk introduced another suite of birds. White Wagtail trotted across open ground, constantly pumping their long tails. European Stonechat used shrubs and fence posts as hunting perches, dropping toward the ground and returning to exposed lookouts. Stonechats belong to the Old-World flycatcher family Muscicapidae, alongside robins, redstarts, and wheatears, and are unrelated to the tyrant flycatchers of the





Americas despite similar sit-and-sally behavior—a nice example of convergent evolution, in which unrelated species independently evolve similar traits or behaviors in response to similar ecological pressures.

Dartford Warbler and Greater Whitethroat played hide-and-seek in brambles and low scrub, briefly materializing before vanishing again. Both are sylviid warblers, evolutionarily distinct from the colorful New World warblers in Parulidae; the old catch-all category “Old World warblers” has been divided among several evolutionary families as relationships have become better understood.

Eurasian Skylark crossed the open fields, while Red-backed Shrike perched conspicuously on shrubs and fences. Shrikes are songbirds with the habits of miniature raptors, using strongly hooked bills to dispatch large insects, lizards, and even small vertebrates. Their habit of impaling prey on thorns or barbed wire creates temporary food caches and explains the old nickname “butcherbirds.”

As evening approached, we shifted to our first “wolf wait.” Wolf watching here is an exercise in patience. Rather than trying to approach animals, we positioned ourselves at a distant vantage and scanned forest edge, shrubland, tracks, and clearings.

The Iberian Wolf, traditionally classified as *Canis lupus signatus*, is a distinctive Gray Wolf population; *signatus* means “marked,” referring to dark markings on the forelegs, tail, and shoulders. Iberian Wolf are generally smaller and more lightly built than the large North American wolves familiar from Yellowstone and Denali. Females average around 65 pounds, while males are typically around 85–90 pounds and can exceed that.

Red Deer appeared while we waited. Along with Roe Deer and Wild Boar, they provide an important wild prey base for wolves here. We scanned until fading light told us to quit. No wolf.

But a “wolf wait” is called a wait for a reason. We returned for a late dinner with an extraordinary first field day behind us: snake-eagle, vultures, kites, falcons, a magnificent Spanish Imperial Eagle, our first exploration of the Sierra, and the knowledge that somewhere in the gathering darkness one of Europe’s most elusive large carnivores was moving through these mountains.

Tomorrow, we would try again.



Wed., Aug. 5 Sierra de la Culebra

Long before sunrise we set out to meet Carlos, a local wolf guide who had devoted years to studying wolves, educating visitors, and advocating for their conservation. His passion was immediately obvious.

We walked quietly in the dark to a lookout over a broad valley and set up scopes as first light revealed the landscape. Carlos explained that wolf packs are essentially families, usually centered on a breeding pair and their offspring from one or more years. Working together allows wolves to tackle prey much larger than themselves, although Iberian Wolf are opportunistic and diet varies from place to place.

He also described the more complicated relationship between wolves and people where livestock and traditional rural livelihoods overlap with predator country.

Carlos cautioned us that his success rate for actually seeing a wolf was only about 30 percent. These were wild animals moving through an enormous landscape on their own schedule. Nothing was guaranteed. Simply being there at dawn already felt like reward enough.

As first light spread across northern Spain, tendrils of mist curled through the low places in the valley like pale serpents, winding between dark ridges and forest. The first rays of sunlight turned the mist gold, and an orange sun broke over the horizon. Through the scopes we could see Red Deer feeding in the open country below.

Carlos told us to watch the deer. If they suddenly scattered, he said, start looking for a wolf.

For a while everything remained peaceful. Then Manuel noticed movement.

“The deer are running.”

Everyone became instantly alert.

And then the word we had been waiting for: “Wolf!”

A wolf was chasing the deer across the distant landscape. For a few exhilarating moments we watched one of Europe’s great predators doing what wolves have done in these mountains for thousands of years. Nothing was staged or predictable; we had simply been watching the right patch of country at exactly the right moment.

Eventually the deer settled and the wolf disappeared. We kept scanning and, remarkably, several minutes later picked up another wolf sighting. Carlos’s 30-percent morning had become a hundred-percent success for us.

Afterward we headed into town for coffee, where wolves seemed to be everywhere—not the animals themselves, but signs, artwork, souvenirs, and businesses catering to wildlife watchers. The wolf has become part of the Sierra de la Culebra's identity and economy, and wolf-watching tourism now brings visitors from across Europe and beyond to a rural region where new sources of income are especially valuable.

The story, however, is not a simple conservation success. We met Carlos again for a field workshop devoted to tracking and wolf ecology, finding tracks and scat and learning how these signs reveal travel routes, diet, and territorial behavior. Scat deposited conspicuously along tracks, junctions, and ridges is not simply waste but also a scent signal advertising the presence of a pack.

As we walked, Carlos spoke candidly about the human dimensions of wolf conservation. Wolves can kill livestock, and their presence has generated deep resentment among some ranchers, farmers, hunters, and rural residents. Their legal status in Spain has become intensely political, with competing demands for strict protection and greater population control.



For Carlos, those tensions were personal. He told us that his outspoken advocacy had brought hostility and even threats, forcing him to consider his own safety. It was sobering. That morning we had watched wild wolves moving freely through these mountains and seen how wildlife tourism can support rural communities. The afternoon reminded us how difficult coexistence becomes when a large predator shares the landscape with people whose livelihoods may be affected.

In the evening we returned to the same overlook where we had watched the chase. The wolves stayed hidden, but European Stonechat perched on shrubs and fence posts, and a Common Hoopoe swept past on broad black-and-white wings.

We had begun before sunrise hoping only for the possibility of a distant wolf. Instead, we watched one pursue Red Deer through a mist-filled valley, found another shortly afterward, learned to read their tracks, and spent the day with someone whose life had become deeply intertwined with their future. The day gave us not only memorable wildlife sightings but a glimpse of the complicated human story surrounding one of Europe's most compelling and controversial predators.

Thurs., Aug. 6 Puebla de Sanabria | Sierra de la Culebra to Somiedo Natural Park

Before leaving the Sierra de la Culebra region, we spent the morning exploring Puebla de Sanabria, one of those Spanish towns that seems almost purpose-built for wandering. Perched above the Tera and Castro rivers, it was an important fortified settlement for centuries, and much of its medieval character survives.



We followed cobbled streets lined with stone houses and old coats of arms, passed remnants of the defensive walls, and admired the 15th-century Castle of the Counts of Benavente. With its Romanesque church, steep lanes, balconies, and tiled roofs, the town's designation as a Historic-Artistic Site was easy to understand.

Even amid all that history, we kept looking up. The skies above the old town were alive with swallows and martins. Western House-Martin flashed bright white rumps around the buildings, larger brownish Eurasian Crag-Martin cruised past stone walls and rooftops, and Barn Swallow sliced through the air on pointed wings and deeply forked tails.

A single Bank Swallow—called Sand Martin in much of Europe—perched conveniently on a wire, allowing us to compare it with the other swallows and martins. It was noticeably smaller, with a distinct brown breast band—a tidy identification lesson delivered by a bird that chose exactly the right perch.

We then turned north, leaving Castilla y León and climbing into Asturias and the Cantabrian Mountains. The landscape grew increasingly dramatic as the road wound through forested slopes, rocky ridges, deep valleys, and tiny villages folded into green mountains.

Somiedo Natural Park is one of northern Spain's great wild landscapes. Established in 1988 as Asturias's first Natural Park and designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2000, it protects a mosaic of beech and oak forest, high pasture, rocky peaks, lakes, and traditional grazing lands. Its rugged terrain supports an extraordinary wildlife community, including Iberian Wolf, European Wildcat, Golden Eagle, and Cantabrian Brown Bear.

Soon after reaching our small mountain lodge, we encountered a Cantabrian Chamois, known locally as rebeco. This endemic subspecies, *Rupicapra pyrenaica parva*, is beautifully adapted to steep terrain with a compact body, powerful legs, and short backward-hooked horns carried by both sexes. We had excellent views—an appropriately mountainous welcome to Somiedo.

But the animal that had brought us here was the Cantabrian Brown Bear. By the early 1990s, only about 70–85 bears were estimated to remain in the Cantabrian Mountains, divided between small western and eastern populations. Reduced human-caused mortality, anti-poaching work, habitat protection, and improved connectivity have allowed a remarkable recovery. The latest full population estimate is about 370 bears—roughly 250 in the western population and 120 in the eastern. Somiedo lies within the historically larger western population and remains one of the species' most important refuges.

That evening we set up scopes at a spectacular mountain vantage where a bear had been seen the previous day. Expectations were high. Evening light swept across steep green slopes and limestone ridges while forests descended into valleys below, a grandeur very different from the open country of the Sierra de la Culebra. We searched distant clearings, berry-covered slopes, woodland edges, and exposed rock, repeatedly examining anything vaguely bear-shaped as shadows crept across the valleys and the air cooled.

The bear did not appear.

There was no sense that the outing had been wasted. Wild animals are not performances scheduled for our arrival, and part of looking for them is accepting uncertainty. Somewhere in that vast landscape were bears living according to rhythms entirely their own. We had entered their country; all we could do was watch.

As darkness approached, we returned to our cozy lodge for an outstanding dinner and lively conversation. By now we were settling comfortably into the Spanish rhythm of early wildlife outings, late lunches, evening excursions, and dinners stretching well into the night. The day had begun among medieval walls and swirling swallows and ended scanning the wild mountains of Asturias for bears. Somiedo had already begun working its magic, and we would be back out looking again.



Fri., Aug. 7 Somiedo Natural Park

We spent the morning exploring deeper into Somiedo, following winding roads through some of the most beautiful country of the tour. Around La Peral and the surrounding valleys, the landscape seemed pastoral in the old sense of the word: steep green slopes, scattered livestock, stone walls, small villages, and traditional brañas.

A braña is both a high mountain pasture and the seasonal pastoral settlement associated with it. For centuries herders moved livestock into these uplands during the warmer months and lived in simple stone huts called teitos. Their steep roofs were traditionally thatched with broom. The meadows and huts are a reminder that people and wildlife have shared these mountains for generations.

Walking a quiet rural road at birding pace, we watched Egyptian Vulture, smaller and lighter than the enormous griffons we had been seeing. Adults are unmistakable: mostly white with black flight feathers, a wedge-shaped

tail, and a bare yellow face. They are also among the relatively few birds known to use tools; in parts of Africa, they pick up stones and use them to break open ostrich eggs.

Then came Red-billed Chough. At first there were a few, and suddenly the sky seemed full of them—a swirling, calling cloud of glossy black corvids. They twisted and banked over the slopes with remarkable agility, one of the great visual highlights of the morning.

The bird that caused the greatest excitement, however, was a Bearded Vulture.

Also called Lammergeier—and in Spanish, *quebrantahuesos*, “bone breaker”—this remarkable raptor lives largely on bones. A bird may carry a large bone high into the air and drop it onto a favored rocky surface, smashing it into pieces small enough to swallow. Few bird names are more perfectly descriptive.

Víctor and Manuel were thrilled. It was one of their favorite birds, and they had not expected us to find one here. Their excitement made the sighting even better.

The species also carries a powerful conservation story. Bearded Vulture disappeared from large parts of Europe after centuries of persecution, poisoning, and other pressures. Captive breeding, releases, supplementary feeding, anti-poisoning efforts, and reduction of threats such as lead ammunition have helped return them to parts of their former range, including northern Spain. Watching one sail through these mountains felt like much more than adding another impressive bird to the list.

By lunchtime our appetites had caught up with us. A local restaurant introduced us to cachopo, an Asturian specialty of two thin veal fillets enclosing ham and cheese, breaded and fried, usually with potatoes and peppers. It is unapologetically rich and often enormous—the sort of meal that makes a post-lunch siesta seem entirely sensible.

In the evening we returned for another bear watch. Again, we set up scopes over a vast sweep of habitat where a bear had recently been reported. Every distant dark shape raised hopes for a moment. We watched forest edges, scrub, rocky openings, and sunlit meadows. Suspicious rocks and shadows repeatedly seemed capable of becoming bears.

No bear appeared.

At the time, it was hard not to feel some disappointment. These animals were one of the great wildlife targets of our journey, and we had now spent hours in promising habitat without seeing one. Yet this unsuccessful search became, unexpectedly, one of the most meaningful experiences of the tour.

At our final dinner later in the trip, when I asked everyone to name a favorite moment, Alex chose our bear waits.

Not because we had seen a bear—we hadn't. She chose it because we had stood in the bears' wild home, surrounded by magnificent mountains, knowing the animals were somewhere out there living lives entirely independent of us. They were not performing animals. This was not a zoo. We had no claim on a sighting simply because we had traveled a long way and wanted one.

I thought it was one of the wisest answers I had heard to that question—and all the more striking coming from Alex, by far the youngest member of our group.

Her response transformed the evening from a missed target into something richer: an encounter with wildness itself. Wildlife travel can tempt us to measure success in sightings, photographs, or checked boxes. But nature owes us nothing. A wild animal's freedom to remain unseen is part of what makes finally seeing one so powerful.

We did not see a bear that evening. But years from now, I suspect many of us will remember standing together in the Cantabrian Mountains as the light faded, scopes trained on immense green slopes walled by limestone cliffs, waiting for an animal that never appeared—and understanding a little more clearly what it means for something to be truly wild.



Sat., Aug. 8 Somiedo Natural Park to Oviedo

We began with one final morning birding session in Somiedo, where European Robin proved a group favorite. Despite the familiar name, it is not closely related to the American Robin: ours is a thrush, while the European Robin belongs to the Old-World flycatcher family Muscicapidae. The shared name is simply a historical coincidence inspired by the orange-red breast.

European Robins are smaller, rounder, and often more secretive than the robins we know at home. They frequently stay low in dense vegetation, making a prolonged look—or a good photograph—surprisingly difficult. That only made our clear views in morning light more satisfying.

Then we left bear country for Oviedo, the historic capital of Asturias. The journey was short geographically but carried us deep into another chapter of Spain's history. Oviedo rose to prominence in the early Middle Ages as capital of the Kingdom of Asturias, a northern Christian realm that emerged after the Muslim conquest of most of the Iberian Peninsula beginning in 711. Under kings such as Alfonso II, the city became an important political and religious center. Oviedo served as the kingdom's capital from 791 until the royal court shifted to León in the early 10th century.

That history survives vividly in the city's pre-Romanesque architecture. Developed largely in the ninth century, the Asturian style predates the great Romanesque churches and cathedrals that later spread across Europe. Several monuments in and around Oviedo are now part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

After lunch featuring *fabada asturiana*—a rich white-bean stew traditionally prepared with chorizo, morcilla, and pork—we joined an expert local guide for a walking tour through the city's layers of architecture, religion, politics, and art.



An unexpected highlight came through our ears: a performance of traditional Asturian music, including the unmistakable sound of bagpipes. The *gaita asturiana* is emblematic of the region and part of an Atlantic folk tradition with cultural parallels in Galicia, Brittany, , and Scotland. Asturias enthusiastically celebrates this heritage through pipe bands, folk festivals, and traditional music.

Naturally, we also attempted a little urban birding. Eurasian Magpie strutted across lawns and flashed between trees, but it was a busy Saturday and the birds were sparse.

Which led to one of the funniest moments of the trip.

Víctor, unfailingly thoughtful, polite, articulate, and precise in his speech, surveyed the slow birding and calmly suggested, “Perhaps our time would be better used focusing our attention on the giant butt.”

There was a brief pause while everyone processed this.

Across the street stood exactly that: *Culis Monumentalibus*, a roughly thirteen-foot bronze sculpture by Eduardo Úrculo installed in 2001. The bronze figure stands on a granite pedestal and weighs roughly a metric ton. The title essentially translates as “monumental buttocks,” leaving little ambiguity about the subject. The sculpture is part of Oviedo’s remarkable collection of public art, though this contribution has understandably generated more amusement than most.

The sculpture was funny enough. Hearing Víctor—the very model of refinement throughout the tour—solemnly propose abandoning the birds for a giant bronze posterior made it exponentially better. Out came the cameras. Birding temporarily gave way to butt appreciation, and a cultural tour of one of Spain’s most historically significant cities had somehow arrived at the giant-derrière portion of the program. At the end of the tour, his recommendation remained firmly lodged in group memory. Some wildlife sightings fade with time. Monumental buttocks do not.

Our cultural immersion continued in more dignified fashion at a traditional *sidrería*, where tables filled with regional cheeses, meats, sausages, and other specialties as we sampled Asturias’s natural cider.

Here, even pouring a drink is a performance. The cider is *escanciado*, poured in a long stream from a bottle held overhead into a glass held low, often with the server barely looking directly at either. The falling stream strikes the inside of the glass, briefly aerating the cider and releasing aroma and a fleeting effervescence. The technique

has become an art form in its own right. Only a small amount—a *culín*—is poured at a time and drunk promptly before another follows.

It was a fitting end to a day that had carried us from Somiedo's wild mountains into the heart of Asturian culture: medieval history, UNESCO architecture, bagpipes, magpies, monumental buttocks, local food, and cider cascading dramatically from overhead. Spain continued to surprise us, and by now our group had become very good at enjoying whatever came next.



Sun., Aug. 9 Picos de Europa National Park | Covadonga Sanctuary | Cosgaya

We continued east into the Picos de Europa, one of Spain's most spectacular mountain landscapes. The national park spans Asturias, Cantabria, and Castilla y León and protects limestone peaks, deep gorges, high pastures, forests, and glacial lakes. Its original protected core around Covadonga, established in 1918, was Spain's first national park; it was greatly enlarged and renamed Picos de Europa National Park in 1995.

Our first destination was the Sanctuary of Covadonga, where history, religion, and landscape meet. Covadonga is traditionally associated with an early eighth-century victory by forces led by Pelayo, an event that became symbolic of the emergence of the Kingdom of Asturias and, in later historical tradition, the beginning of the centuries-long Christian expansion southward. Today the sanctuary includes the Basilica of Santa María la Real and the Santa Cueva, home to the image of the Virgin of Covadonga, La Santina.

Private vehicles are restricted on the narrow road to the Lakes of Covadonga during the busy summer season, so we joined other visitors waiting for a bus—and naturally turned the wait into birding.

Common Chaffinch fed nearby, giving us time to appreciate just how beautiful this common European bird is. The males combined pinkish-rust underparts with blue-gray crowns, chestnut backs, greenish rumps, and crisp white wing bars. A bird does not have to be rare to be spectacular. Great Tit were now familiar enough that their bold black-and-yellow pattern was instantly recognizable.

The bus wound steadily upward on a narrow road clinging to the mountainside, eventually delivering us into a signature Picos landscape of green pastures and towering limestone around Lakes Enol and Ercina. The lakes occupy basins shaped by Ice Age glaciers, but the mountains tell a much older story. The limestone began as



calcium carbonate accumulating on the floor of ancient tropical seas, much of it produced by marine organisms that built shells and skeletons. Later uplifted, folded, and fractured during mountain-building, the rock was gradually dissolved by slightly acidic water into caves, sinkholes, fissures, and gorges. Glaciation added cirques, moraines, polished rock, and the lake basins themselves. The scenery made geologic processes that usually sound abstract feel immediate and visible.

Yellow gorse and purple, crocus-like *Colchicum montanum*, with their delicate goblet-shaped flowers, softened the stony landscape. Asturiana de la Montaña cattle, also called Casina, a hardy native breed of these mountains, grazed the high pastures, many wearing bells whose gentle clanging drifted across the hillsides. Wind, cowbells, calling birds, and walkers' voices created a wonderfully European mountain soundscape.

The lakes held Eurasian Coot and Little Grebe, some still in breeding plumage with dark heads, rich rufous cheeks and necks, and pale-yellow gape patches. These tiny diving birds repeatedly vanished beneath the surface and reappeared elsewhere, seemingly propelled by invisible underwater machinery. Their compact size and constant diving made them delightful to watch against the broad scale of the mountain landscape.

A Gray Heron offered a useful comparison with its close North American relative, the Great Blue Heron. It fills a similar ecological role but is generally smaller and grayer overall. Meadow Pipit and Water Pipit worked the surrounding grasslands, another useful exercise in identifying subtle, streaked ground-dwelling birds by habitat, structure, plumage, and calls.

It was an idyllic walk: birds on the lakes and meadows, bells sounding across the pastures, flowers against green grass, and immense pale cliffs rising around us. The Picos had the improbable beauty of a landscape assembled from all the best elements of alpine scenery.

After descending, we continued east toward Cantabria and Cosgaya. Our route carried us through the Desfiladero de la Hermida, where the Río Deva has cut a long, narrow gorge through towering limestone. For kilometer after kilometer the road twisted beside the river with immense rock walls rising overhead—another vivid demonstration of water working over immense spans of time.

Beyond Potes we followed the Deva upstream into the Liébana Valley and reached the tiny village of Cosgaya near Fuente Dé. Almost immediately, the river beside our hotel produced another highlight.

White-throated Dipper!

Few birds seem more perfectly matched to habitat. This compact dark-brown bird with a brilliant white bib lives along cold, fast-flowing mountain streams, bobbing or “dipping” on rocks before plunging directly into rushing water. Using its wings almost like underwater flippers and gripping the streambed with strong feet, it can swim

and walk beneath the surface while searching for aquatic insects and other small prey. Watching one along the clear mountain river outside our hotel was a wonderful introduction to our new home.

Before dinner we caught up on the species checklist and then settled into another memorable Spanish meal. We had begun the day amid the deep history of Covadonga, climbed into an evocative landscape shaped by ancient seas and glaciers, birded alpine lakes among flower-strewn meadows and ringing cowbells, driven through immense limestone gorges, and ended beside a mountain stream watching a dipper disappear beneath rushing water.

It was the Picos de Europa from summit to stream—another extraordinary day in northern Spain.



Mon., Aug. 10 Picos de Europa National Park: Fuente Dé

Fuente Dé offered one of the most dramatic gateways into the Picos high country. Its cable car, operating since 1966, rises 2,470 feet from the valley floor to an upper station at nearly 6,000 feet. In minutes we traded forested lower slopes for an austere high-mountain world of pale limestone, open turf, cliffs, and immense views.

We had planned a fairly challenging hike for those who wanted it, but there was no need to rush. We would travel at birding pace, stopping frequently for birds, scenery, and the occasional excuse to catch our breath. Anyone preferring not to hike could enjoy the upper station, restaurant, viewing areas, and birding right outside the door.

One of our main high-elevation targets appeared before we had even started hiking, allowing everyone to enjoy excellent views.

Alpine Accentor!

This handsome mountain bird belongs to the small Old World family Prunellidae. We had already encountered its more subdued cousin, the Dunnock, lower down. Alpine Accentor is larger and sturdier, with a gray head,

streaked back, and warm chestnut spotting along the flanks. It is very much a bird of rocky high mountains, so seeing one almost immediately after stepping into the alpine zone felt wonderfully appropriate.

Once we started hiking, the birds kept coming. A handsome male Northern Wheatear appeared among the rocks, its black facial mask, gray back, dark wings, pale underparts, and diagnostic white rump and black-and-white tail perfectly suited to the open terrain.

Then came our first Black Redstart of the day.

And another.

And another.



Before long the unofficial game became: find a bird that is not a Black Redstart. They seemed to be everywhere—perched on boulders, hopping across the ground, flicking rusty tails, and launching short sallies after insects. Almost every promising little bird shape on a rock resolved into yet another Black Redstart.

Above us, Eurasian Griffon cruised along the ridges. Some remained high, while others dropped low enough for us to appreciate just how enormous they were. Adults were strikingly tricolored: pale heads and long necks, tawny-brown bodies and wing coverts, and dark flight feathers. At close range, their huge wings seemed built like gliders, and the birds rode mountain updrafts with astonishing efficiency, making flight look effortless.

Our slow pace paid dividends. Every stop offered another chance to scan the slopes, check the sky, and absorb the setting. This was limestone country at its grandest—jagged ridges and cliffs rising around us, with deep valleys falling away below and almost no hint of the developed world we had left minutes earlier. Even when the birding paused, the landscape itself rewarded stopping.

Eventually we reached a high saddle with an expansive view and settled in for a picnic lunch. The sky remained active. Eurasian Kestrel worked the slopes and Booted Eagle appeared overhead while we ate sandwiches beneath the cliffs—one of those lunch spots difficult to improve upon.

On the return hike we found another hoped-for alpine specialty: Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush. This was exactly its habitat, rocky mountain slopes and alpine meadows. The male's blue-gray head, chestnut-orange underparts and tail, and contrasting pale back patch made it seem almost too colorful for the gray limestone around it.

Then came the grand finale. Egyptian Vulture appeared against the brilliant blue sky, their white bodies and black flight feathers dazzling in the strong mountain light.



By the time we reached the cable car station, coffee sounded good. We settled into the restaurant for caffeinated beverages and a final chance to savor the enormous views under clear skies. There was something deeply satisfying about sitting with a cup of coffee after a mountain hike while griffons still circled outside the windows. Eventually we boarded the cable car and descended from the alpine world into the forest below.

We were not finished birding. A woodland outing before we boarded our vans produced excellent looks at Eurasian Nuthatch, along with fleeting views of frenetic Goldcrest and Common Firecrest, members of Regulidae, the same family as North American kinglets. Goldcrest is Europe's smallest bird, a tiny gray-green bird with a relatively plain face and an "innocent" expression noted by Merlin, set off by a bright crown stripe. Firecrest is similarly diminutive but much more dramatically patterned, with a bold black-and-white face and a fiery crown in the male.

A Eurasian Jay added considerably more size and color, including a brilliant electric-blue barred wing patch.

We had traveled through an extraordinary vertical slice of the Picos—from forest to skyscraping limestone and back again. Alpine specialists and forest gems made the physically demanding day richly rewarding. Few things make a climb easier than a good bird appearing just when you need an excuse to stop.

Tues., Aug. 11 Montaña de Riaño Regional Park

We packed up to leave the Picos, but before going far we stopped at a quiet monastery for one last woodland birding session. There were no crowds, only birds in the surrounding woods and music drifting from somewhere inside the sanctuary. It was a peaceful and unexpectedly beautiful start to the day.

Near the parking area we found both Eurasian Treecreeper and Short-toed Treecreeper working methodically along trunks and branches. These tiny, bark-colored birds spiral up trunks, probing for insects with curved bills, and can be notoriously difficult to separate. Short-toed Treecreeper generally has a slightly longer bill, shorter hind claw, and warmer-toned plumage, but the differences are subtle and overlapping; voice is often the most reliable distinction. Seeing both in the same morning gave us an excellent comparison, and it was especially instructive to hear how Víctor and Manuel separated them by their calls and songs. After considerable patience and persistence from both guides, we also managed brief views of a Eurasian Wryneck and a Great Spotted Woodpecker.

We then continued south and east into Montaña de Riaño y Mampodre Regional Park in León, a vast protected landscape of mountains, river valleys, beech and oak forests, limestone massifs, high pastures, and traditional agricultural country. After several days among the dramatic Picos, we were entering a softer mosaic of meadows, hedgerows, forest edges, and villages—habitat for another of our most anticipated mammals.

European Wildcat.

At first glance a European Wildcat can resemble a large gray tabby, but a good view reveals a more robust animal: broad-headed and thick-furred, with a dark dorsal stripe and a heavy blunt-ended tail marked by dark

rings and a black tip. Wildcats are elusive and largely solitary, but this landscape provides both cover and open hunting areas.

Recently mowed fields were especially promising because they supported Montane Water Vole, one of the small mammals hunted by predators here. Despite their name, these voles are primarily subterranean rather than aquatic, living in tunnel systems beneath mountain meadows and pastures and feeding on grasses, roots, and other vegetation. Where abundant, they provide concentrated prey for foxes, raptors, and wildcats. Our strategy was simple: find the right fields near dawn or dusk, settle in, and watch.

We reached our hotel in Cistierna in time for lunch and a little downtime. Just before our evening outing, we worked through the bird checklist and noticed a conspicuous omission: after more than a week in Spain, we had recorded no buntings. Members of the Old-World bunting family *Emberizidae*, buntings are predominantly seed-eating songbirds that in some ways evoke North American sparrows.

Apparently, the birds had been listening.

After arriving at our evening wildcat stakeout, first came Rock Bunting, a handsome bird of rocky slopes and open country with a boldly patterned head and warm chestnut tones. Then the larger, more subdued Corn Bunting appeared, its heavily streaked brown plumage almost suggesting an oversized sparrow. Two species would have corrected our checklist nicely.

Then came Cirl Bunting. The unusual name ultimately derives from the Italian *zirlare*, “to chirp.” The male was striking, with bold yellow-and-black facial markings, a black throat, and an olive-green breast band contrasting with warmer chestnut tones along the flanks.

And then a fourth species: Yellowhammer, one of Europe’s classic farmland birds. The brilliant yellow male was especially exciting for Robert, who remembered a documentary discussing Yellowhammer as indicators of healthy agricultural landscapes. The association made sense here. Yellowhammer prosper where farmland retains hedgerows, field margins, winter stubble, plentiful seeds, and abundant insects for their young, while populations have declined sharply in many intensively managed agricultural landscapes. Finding one amid hayfields, hedges, and rough edges seemed perfectly appropriate.

Only a short time earlier our list had contained no buntings. Now we had four species in a single evening.

Thrushes provided another useful comparison. Song Thrush is smaller and warmer brown with neat arrowhead-shaped spots; Mistle Thrush is larger, paler, more upright, and marked with bolder rounded spots.

As good as the birding had become, we had not forgotten why we were there.

As evening softened, we positioned ourselves beside vole-rich fields where wildcats had been reported hunting. We scanned freshly cut grass, field edges, hedgerows, and every suspicious shape. Shadows lengthened. Again and again, something briefly became a cat in the imagination before resolving into vegetation or a rock.

No wildcat.

Driving back, however, Manuel suddenly spotted a mammal beside the road.

A Red Fox.

We enjoyed fleeting views as its reddish coat glowed in the fading light before it slipped into a hedgerow and vanished as if it had never been there.



The fields were unmistakably shaped by people—mowed for hay, bounded by hedges, crossed by roads—yet still concealed a surprisingly wild community. Voles tunneled beneath the grass. Foxes materialized and disappeared. Somewhere in the cover, wildcats waited for darkness before slipping into the fields to hunt.

Like our bear watches in Somiedo, not seeing the cat did not make the place feel less wild. Quite the opposite. The mystery was part of its power.

We returned to Cistierna knowing the cats were out there somewhere beyond the last light.

Tomorrow, we would try again.

Wed., Aug. 12 Total Solar Eclipse

There are days on a journey when everything seems to converge—wildlife, landscape, weather, companionship, and sheer good fortune. August 12 was one of those days.

It began before sunrise under a clear sky. We looked first not toward Earth but toward the planets. Six planets lay along the broad arc of the ecliptic that morning—Jupiter, Mercury, Mars, Uranus, Saturn, and Neptune—although some were much easier to see than others. They were not literally lined up in space; because the planets orbit the Sun in roughly the same plane, they appear along the same general pathway across our sky.

Beginning the day of a total solar eclipse with a tour of the Solar System seemed appropriate. The celestial show would not end with the eclipse either: the Perseid meteor shower was approaching its annual peak that night.

But first we had unfinished business on Earth.

We returned to fields where European Wildcats were known to hunt. Dawn was just beginning to soften the darkness, the fierce heat of the day had not arrived, and the countryside was nearly silent. We spread our attention across freshly cut meadows, hedgerows, and rough margins where cultivated land gave way to cover.

We scanned.

And waited.

Then a cat moved through the grass.

European Wildcat!

For several glorious minutes we watched it prowl through the meadow. This was no fleeting shape vanishing into a hedge. We could study the features we had hoped to see: the heavy gray-brown coat, strong dark dorsal stripe, and especially the thick blunt-ended tail with bold black rings and a black tip.

It looked familiar yet profoundly different—somewhere between a house cat and a tiger. Its movements were deliberate and silent, every step carrying the unmistakable purpose of a predator hunting through the grass. A domestic cat can resemble a wildcat superficially, but watching this animal moving through its own landscape erased any sense of domesticity. It belonged completely to the field, the hedgerows, and the dawn.

We were floored.

After the unsuccessful search the previous evening, the sighting felt all the sweeter. Once again Spain reminded us that wild animals operate on their own timetable—and that patience is sometimes rewarded spectacularly.

With the morning still cool and birds increasingly active, we continued with one of the most productive bird walks of the tour. European Goldfinch fed acrobatically on thistle seedheads, flashing yellow wing bars and brilliant red, black, and white faces. Nearby, tiny European Serin were streaked with brown and washed yellow-green.

Great Spotted Woodpecker added bold black, white, and red, while Pied Flycatcher hunted from exposed perches, darting after insects and returning to favored branches. The vegetation also held warblers, though seeing them required patience. We managed looks at Western Bonelli's Warbler and Garden Warbler, both new for the tour.

By late morning we returned to Cistierna feeling we had already experienced a remarkable day.



We had barely begun.

After lunch came some optional birding and a well-earned siesta. Outside, the afternoon heat built. Inside, watches and phones increasingly became countdown clocks.

The eclipse was coming.

Late in the afternoon we headed toward our viewing site in the Cantabrian Mountains. Once settled in, I gave the group an eclipse presentation. We talked about the geometry of totality: the Moon passing directly between Earth and Sun while its dark central shadow, the umbra, sweeps across a narrow corridor of our planet.

By remarkable coincidence, the Sun is roughly 400 times larger than the Moon but also roughly 400 times farther away, so the two disks appear nearly the same size in our sky. We reviewed first contact, the partial phase, Bailey's beads—points of sunlight shining through valleys along the Moon's rugged edge, briefly revealing the relief of lunar mountains and crater rims—and the diamond ring, when one brilliant bead of sunlight remains beside the emerging corona. Then comes totality, when the photosphere disappears and the corona becomes visible. We also ranged farther afield—from the 1919 eclipse observations that tested Einstein's prediction that gravity bends light, to solar prominences, the Sun's roughly 11-year activity cycle, and the many ways eclipses have inspired awe, fear, and explanation throughout human history.

Then came a fun quiz, followed by the more serious subject of eclipse safety. Solar-viewing glasses stayed on throughout every partial phase and could come off only during totality. At the first return of direct sunlight, they had to go back on immediately.

Then there was nothing left to do but watch.

At about 7:30 PM the Moon began taking its first small bite from the Sun. Slowly the solar disk became a crescent, then a thinner crescent still.

The landscape changed in ways difficult to describe. The light weakened without taking on the familiar colors of sunset. Shadows sharpened. The temperature dropped. The mountains seemed to lose depth and color as an eerie metallic quality spread across the world.

We knew exactly what was happening.

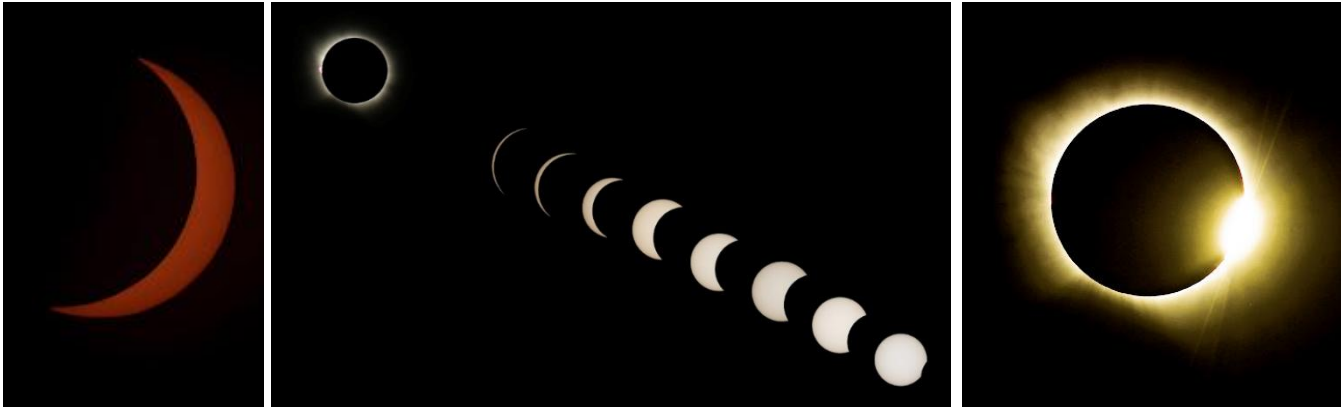
And yet knowing did almost nothing to prepare us.

The remaining crescent narrowed to a thread.

The world darkened with astonishing speed.

A final burst of light flashed at the lunar edge—the diamond ring.

And then the Sun went out.



Totality.

For roughly a minute and three quarters we stood inside the shadow of the Moon.

Where the Sun had been was now a perfectly black disk surrounded by the luminous white corona, streamers of solar atmosphere reaching outward into a sky that moments earlier had been bright. The horizon glowed with sunset colors while darkness enveloped us from above. Bright points emerged in the twilight. The mountains became silhouettes.

It was beautiful.

It was strange.

It was almost frightening in some ancient part of the mind that understands darkness at midday before the rational brain can explain it.

A total eclipse is entirely predictable. Celestial mechanics can calculate where the shadow will fall and when, to within seconds. Every stage can be diagrammed.

And still the experience feels impossible.

We were not merely looking at an astronomical object. We were standing on a moving planet while another world passed directly between us and our star. The black circle overhead was the Moon itself, about 239,000 miles away. The white corona belonged to a star roughly 93 million miles beyond it. The darkness around us was not night.

It was a shadow.

The Moon's shadow.

Víctor and Manuel were visibly moved. For all their years beneath Spanish skies, this was the first total solar eclipse either had witnessed. It was also the first total solar eclipse visible from mainland Spain in more than a century.

For a few moments there were no birds to identify, mammals to search for, or geology to interpret. We simply stood together and looked up.

Then, much too soon, light appeared on the opposite edge of the Moon.

Another diamond ring.

The world rushed back.

The mountains regained their color. Shadows returned. The Sun became a brilliant crescent again, and we put our eclipse glasses back on. People laughed. Some cheered. Some were quiet. Some of us wiped our eyes.

We had come to Spain hoping for clear skies on one particular evening at one particular minute, and somehow everything had worked.

Then came an unexpected bonus. As the Sun sank behind the distant mountains, it was still partially eclipsed—a fitting final image from an extraordinary spectacle.

Back at the hotel, dinner and conversation gave everyone a chance to try to put into words something that seemed to resist explanation.

But the universe was not quite finished with us.

Later that night, we went back outside and stood or lay beneath the dark sky as the Perseids approached their peak. Earth was passing through debris left by Comet Swift-Tuttle, and tiny particles striking the atmosphere at tremendous speed produced streaks of light overhead.

We waited.

A meteor flashed.

Then another.

We had begun before sunrise with planets stretched across the sky. At dawn, a European Wildcat had materialized from a meadow and prowled through the grass. We spent the morning among birds, the evening standing in the Moon's shadow, and the night watching fragments of a comet burn through the atmosphere.

Planet parade.



Wildcat.

Total eclipse.

Perseids.

Even on a journey already filled with wolves, vultures, mountains, art, history, and wildlife, August 12 stood apart. For one extraordinary day, Earth and sky seemed to conspire to remind us how astonishing it is to be alive on this planet—and to be here together, paying attention.

Thurs., Aug. 13 Riaño to Segovia

Today was a travel day, with a long scenic drive south from the mountains toward Segovia. Yet by now we had learned that even a Spanish highway journey could suddenly become a birding adventure.

Somewhere along the route, Manuel and Víctor noticed several large birds in a field beside the highway. We passed before anyone could get a proper look, but something about them demanded investigation. After finding a safe way off the road, we worked our way back and began scanning.

Great Bustard!



We had not expected to find these enormous birds standing in the open in the middle of the day, and they can be remarkably wary. We quietly set up scopes and enjoyed several minutes of good views before the birds disappeared into folds in the rolling farmland.

Great Bustard are birds of open steppe and agricultural country, and adult males are among the heaviest living birds capable of powered flight, sometimes weighing well over 30 pounds. They spend much of their lives walking across open country, yet can fly strongly when those massive wings unfold. Their size, deliberate movements, and stately bearing made this unexpected stop one of the finest surprises of the trip.

We reached Segovia in time for lunch and a walking exploration of one of Spain's great historic cities. Set on a rocky ridge between river valleys, Segovia preserves nearly two millennia of Roman engineering, medieval walls and churches, Jewish and Muslim heritage, royal architecture, and later Christian monuments.

We walked through narrow streets toward Segovia Cathedral, a vast 16th-century Gothic structure rising above the Plaza Mayor. Built when Renaissance architecture was already spreading across Europe, it became one of the last great Gothic cathedrals constructed in Spain. Its pinnacles, buttresses, towers, and elaborate stonework dominate the skyline and earned it the traditional nickname "the Lady of Cathedrals."

Nearby, the Casa de los Picos offered a quirkier architectural detail: a façade covered with hundreds of granite blocks carved into sharp diamond-shaped points, as though someone had armored an entire Renaissance building.

Farther along the ridge, the Alcázar rose dramatically above the valleys, its towers and steep slate roofs giving it the appearance of a storybook castle. Over centuries it served as fortress, royal palace, prison, and military academy.



Then came Segovia's masterpiece: the Roman aqueduct.

Nearly two thousand years old and extraordinarily well preserved, it once carried water from the mountains into the city. Its monumental section rises almost 100 feet above the Plaza del Azoguejo in two tiers of elegant granite arches fitted together without mortar. Standing beneath stonework assembled by Roman engineers and still dominating the city after so many centuries was humbling.

Somewhere amid the history, architecture, and walking, ice cream seemed entirely appropriate.

As evening approached, hundreds of Spotless Starling gathered above the city and aqueduct. The flock contracted, stretched, folded back on itself, and flowed across the sky like a single organism. Then the setting sun caught the ancient stones and turned them gold.

It was an extraordinary final evening: Roman arches glowing in warm light, starlings swirling overhead, and a group of travelers who only ten days earlier had been relative strangers now standing together with a shared treasury of experiences.

That night we gathered for our final celebratory dinner, revisiting favorite birds, mammals, landscapes, meals, unexpected moments, and inside jokes. There was laughter and a few tears. This had become an exceptionally close-knit group, bonded not only by wildlife but by the extraordinary experience of standing together beneath the shadow of the Moon.

We were especially grateful to Víctor and Manuel. Their field skills had found remarkable birds and mammals, but they had given us something greater than a list of sightings. Through their expertise, warmth, humor, patience, and generosity, they had shared their country and culture with us. Spain was richer because we experienced it through their eyes.

Fri., Aug. 14 Segovia to Madrid | Departures

After breakfast we packed our bags one final time and began the drive toward Madrid, with time for a little bonus birding before the airport.

By now one phrase had become part of our group vocabulary: “soul-satisfying views.” We were not interested merely in ticking a species off a list. We wanted enough time to really watch a bird—to see its markings, understand its behavior, and enjoy its presence.

Crested Lark provided exactly that. Instead of brief roadside glimpses, we had leisurely looks at their pointed crests, streaked plumage, and sturdy bills. Eurasian Magpie offered another reminder not to overlook the familiar. They had been so common throughout the trip that we had rarely stopped to study them closely, but in bright sunlight their seemingly black feathers shimmered with iridescent greens, blues, and purples—almost peacock-like in their brilliance.

After so many days of birds appearing, vanishing, circling overhead, or hiding in bushes, it felt wonderfully appropriate to finish by simply slowing down and really looking at birds we had seen many times before.

Then came one final raptor.

A Booted Eagle perched in a tree.

It felt like a fitting bookend. Our first travel day had exploded into a roadside raptor bonanza, where Manuel and Víctor’s expertise with birds of prey first became obvious. Raptors—and especially the great seasonal movement through Spain that they know so intimately—had remained a theme throughout our travels. Now one last eagle seemed to be waiting to send us on our way.

Almost the instant we returned to the vans, rain poured down.

We laughed at our timing.

Looking back, it was hard not to marvel at our good fortune. Before the trip, headlines about heat, drought, and wildfires had caused concern, yet for most of the journey we enjoyed clear air and workable conditions. Against slim odds we watched an Iberian Wolf chase Red Deer across a misty valley. The elusive European Wildcat eventually stepped into a meadow at dawn. Clear skies held for the total solar eclipse, with planets before sunrise and Perseid meteors later that night.

Again and again, wildness reminded us that nothing was guaranteed—and then surprised us.

As Madrid and the airport drew closer, the reality of departure settled in. There were hugs and promises that sounded less like goodbye and more like “see you soon.”

We had traveled from Madrid’s parks and museums to wolf country, bear country, alpine limestone, medieval villages, Roman monuments, and the shadow of the Moon. We had watched wolves hunt, vultures sail past cliffs, wildcats stalk meadows, and meteors fall through the night sky.

And much too quickly, our journey across Spain had come to an end.

But journeys like this do not really stop at the airport. They live on in the birds we remember, the landscapes we can still picture, the stories we keep telling, the fellow travelers who were there beside us when it all happened, and the friends whose paths will cross again.

Hasta pronto, amigos.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Steve Grace, SG), Totality (SG), Great Tit (Violette Wood, VW), Iberian Green Woodpecker (SG), Eurasian Tree Sparrow (SG), Short-toed Treecreeper (SG), Alcazar in Segovia (SG), Black Swan (SG), Stone Pine (SG), Spotless Starling (George Lauterbach, GL), Eurasian Magpie (GL), Egyptian Goose (GL), Monk Parakeet (GL), Cityscape (Alexandria Cahill, AC), Sunset (VW), Butterfly (GL), Wall Lizard (GL), La Peral Somiedo (SG), Chamois (VW), Scenic Landscape (VW), Poppies (VW), Spanish Eagle (SG), Puebla de Sanabria (SG), Patio (VW), Puebla de Sanabria (SG), Scenic Landscape (AC), Puebla de Sanabria (SG), Butterfly (VW), Eurasian Jay (VW), European Robin (VW), Moth (VW), Western House-Martins (VW), Celtic Musicians (VW), Culis Monumentalibus (VW), Spanish Cuisine (SG), Oviedo (VW), Covadonga (SG), Asturiana de la Montaña (Casina) cow (SG), Great Spotted Woodpecker (VW), White-throated Dipper (GL), European Robin (VW), Eurasian Griffon (SG), Picos de Europa (SG), Eurasian Nuthatch (GL), Common Chaffinch (GL), Eurasian Jay (GL), Great Tit (GL), Alpine Accentor (GL), Yellow-billed Cough (SG), White-throated Dipper (VW), Yellowhammer (GL), Red-backed Shrike (GL), Group Birding (AC), European Wildcat (SG), 85% Eclipse (GL), Eclipse Sequence (VW), Near Eclipse (VW), Booted Eagle (SG), European Bee-eater (SG), Spanish Eagle (SG), Bearded Vulture (SG), Great Bustard (GL), Roman Aqueduct (SG)