



Andalusia | In a region better known for beaches than safaris, *Tim Moore* heads out in search of the Iberian lynx – the rarest cat on Earth

didn't have to wait long to see an Iberian lynx. There it was on the side of a wine box, staring out from a souvenir shelf at Seville airport. Plastered across everything from T-shirts to buses, *lynx pardinus* is the face of Andalusian wildlife. And what a remarkable face it is: slanted eyes, extravagantly tufted ears, a thick ruff of white fur slung from its jowls, like a forked beard. From the side, an Iberian lynx is a stub-tailed leopard the size of a Labrador. Head on, it's a shock-rock cat-wizard.

My rather more taxing challenge, in the company of globe-trotting wildlife guide Oliver Rampley and a revolving cast of local spotters, is an animate encounter with what is, according to the World Wide Fund for Nature, the rarest cat on Earth. The Iberian lynx once roamed in numbers across rural Spain and Portugal but throughout the 20th century the population was whittled down by motorists and hunters, who deep into the 1970s were paid a bounty to shoot them. When naturalists completed a thorough survey in 1996, they were horrified to discover that fewer than 100 remained: the Iberian lynx was on the tragic, scandalous cusp of extinction, a fate no feline species had suffered since the sabre-toothed tiger disappeared at the end of the last Ice Age.

The quest begins in the sandy, silent streets of El Rocio, a whitewashed spaghetti-western ghost town set beside the lonely lagoons and marshes of Coto Doñana national park. Once a year, at Pentecost, this desolation is shattered by a million rowdy pilgrims, who arrive from all across Spain in horse-drawn carriages for a weekend of worship and revelry. Then El Rocio goes back to sleep. Our Land Rover bumps past a colossal, eerie church and heads into Doñana, a pan-flat, windswept enormity of forest, sand and sea.

Europe's most important wetlands are home to 6m birds, many of them transients en route to or from Africa. Spread across the more solid bits of the Guadalquivir delta, there are also a few dozen lynx. Nobody will provide an exact number, and the animals' regular hunting grounds are never publicised. It's all a little cloak and dagger: our spotters, passionate conservationists to a man, prefer to remain anonymous, keeping a low profile to help the lynx keep theirs. The Land Rover pulls up by a gorse-clumped plain, fringed with cork oaks and pines. We get out, unpack an exciting array of high-powered optical instruments, and wait.

Ten years ago, there wasn't a lynx left in Doñana. The EU-financed conservation scheme, rushed into action after that shocking survey, was initially hamstrung by ignorance. So little was known about this scarce and elusive animal, and the breed-and-release programme revealed some dismaying habits. Female lynxes savaged prospective mates, and when the first two cubs were born, one promptly killed the other.



Clockwise from main: Oliver Rampley in search of the lynx in Doñana national park, Andalusia; a stork in its nest; an Iberian lynx; a stork crosses in front of the vehicle; the Hacienda de San Rafael; Tim Moore and Oliver Rampley birdwatching. Photography by James Rajotte for the FT
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Tracking collars showed that males often roamed 30km in a single day to find food, a nomadic lifestyle that accounted for 10 per cent of them every year in traffic accidents. But the scientists also established that the primary cause of the lynx's near disappearance wasn't cars or shotguns.

The lynx, it was found, existed on a one-a-day rabbit diet, but Iberia – said to be named after the Phoenician for 'Rabbit Land' – had lost 90 per cent of its floppy-eared herbivores to myxomatosis and haemorrhagic pneumonia. The conservation programme had another species to protect, and with the rabbit population now on the rise, lynx numbers are at last tentatively recovering. In 2017, 145 were released and about 450 live out in the wild across south-west Andalusia.

"If a lynx doesn't move, you cannot see it," says the spotter. He's been at this for 16 years, but is still deceived by their camouflage. Even that mad face can blend into the beige tussocks. "They close their eyes and – pif! – they disappear." Two fallow deer prance across the



clearing. At our feet, a dung beetle rolls away the leavings of a wild boar. We unzip a handsome suede hamper and feast on *croquetas* and *jamon*, courtesy of our hosts at Corral del Rey, the graciously restrained *casa palacio* in Seville's old town that is our first base. We do a bit more squinting and scanning. Then the spotter says we'll stand a better chance at dusk, when the lynx come out to hunt. We climb back in the Land Rover and drive on.

The vegetation hunkers down around us, squat wild olive trees and mastic bushes that shudder in the wind. Then the delta suddenly opens up, and we're staring across a yawning bleakness of mud and shallow brown water, bisected by a gravel causeway. As an environment, it doesn't exactly scream lynx. But it does squawk bird. The blustery hours ahead are littered with exotic feathery spectacles: flocks of iridescent glossy ibis and regal white egrets, flamingo-filled lagoons, the full spectrum of stilt-legged, prong-billed waders. Every stump and pole is topped with the scarecrow's wig of a stork's nest. Exhausted swallows, just back from Africa, squat in droves along the causeway. Rampley is an avian specialist, and his spy-grade Swarovski-spotting scope offers *Planet Earth* close ups of every purple crest and turquoise beak. I do my



best to master the core beginner's skill: attempting to locate very small things that somebody more experienced has spotted in a very large landscape. "See those slightly taller reeds in the second line of vegetation? Purple gallinule, just left of centre with its back to us." All good practice, I feel, for the moment those little big cats creep out of the distant gloaming. But that evening they don't, and after a fruitless, dim hour back at the clearing, we call it a day.

The following 48 hours showcase the remarkable scope of the Andalusian environment. One moment we're peering hopefully across flooded roads and paddy fields, through lenses spattered with rain; 20 minutes later it's all blue sky and rolling flanks of prickly pear. We relocate to the palm-fringed Hacienda de San Rafael, an airy, rustic mansion with a *Game of Thrones* firepit in the courtyard. A day passes in the splendidly patrician company of Javier Hidalgo, an eighth-generation sherry baron brought in as an additional guide. He is a wildlife obsessive, tweed fanatic and the oldest registered jockey in Europe. "Perhaps you would like to see a marbled teal duck?" he calls out, teasingly, as we train our binoculars across a flooded sand pit. "In fact, look – there are four." Rampley whoops in disbelief: it's an incredible rarity. Later, over several glasses of his moreish bone-dry *manzanilla*, Hidalgo cheerfully confesses that as a boy, in a less enlightened age of conservation, he once shot 100 marbled teals in a single day.

There are more weird and wonderful birds, estuaries girdled with samphire and borage, grand dinners in the Hacienda's lofty, candlelit refectory, and a night out in Seville with the hotel's gregarious owner, Anthony Reid, scoffing tapas in secret bars hidden away behind grocery counters. But all we've seen of a lynx is a scatter of desiccated droppings: bleached rabbit bones on a bed of fur.

On the last day, we team up with another spotter and drive beyond Doñana, down a series of ever sketchier trails into deep scrubland. "First we find the rabbit," he says, as we set off on foot. "Then we find the lynx." He points out a pile of fresh droppings, then a perfect paw-print, long claws pressed deep into the ochre sand. We come to a broad meadow studded with shrubs, rising gently to a line of umbrella pines, perhaps 200 metres distant. "A good place," our guide murmurs. "We wait here."

In the four remaining hours of daylight, I will become extremely familiar with this vista. I scan the tree line at varying degrees of magnification, my eye sockets wedged into little circles of rubber. I employ my fledgling bird-craft to spot an azure-winged Iberian magpie, a honey buzzard and a flock of little brown-green things. As the tension recedes, a degree of cabin fever sets in. I creep up behind Rampley, cup my



hands and whisper, "I tawt I taw a pudgy cat." We sit out a terrific cloudburst under a broad holm oak, then emerge to see the capricious Andalusian elements grace the sky with a double rainbow.

The sun dips and the first rabbits emerge, sniffing the air and the gilded shrubs, lolling about. But their care-free behaviour seems inconsistent with the imminent threat of violent death, and I begin to give up hope. This process is complete when we get the big scope out, and I cop a high-zoom eyeful of two of them doing what rabbits do best. Dusk begins to settle; the tree line blackens. We agree to give it five minutes.

"Shh! Here, shh! Come, come!" The spotter beckons me urgently to the scope. I crouch, squint and there it is, ambling out of the pines with proprietorial insouciance, spotted, tufty, magnificent. The combination of extreme zoom and last-gasp drama makes it seem enormous. "A young male," whispers the spotter, excitedly. "He's new, no name." The conservation team gives every lynx a name, but this one has yet to come to its attention.

I watch the lynx freeze, set himself, and smack a vast set of front paws into a small bush. I expect them to emerge with a limp bunny, but it's just the first act of a madcap feline romp, batting at fresh air, scrabbling about with an invisible adversary. From Shere Khan to a daft tabby. I adjust the focus, and ask the guide what sort of name you give a lynx. "We have Kahn, Hongo, Litio, Navio, Noa . . ." He continues, but I've tuned out, easing the scope rightward, tracking young Timmy as he saunters on into a hopeful future, across a suddenly rabbitless meadow.

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Tim Moore was a guest of Altana Europe (altanaeurope.com) which offers a four-night birdwatching and lynx tracking trip from €2,950 per person (based on two people travelling), including three days in the field with Oliver Rampley, Swarovski equipment, transfers and full-board accommodation at the Corral del Rey and Hacienda de San Rafael (aluzcollection.com). EasyJet (easyjet.com) has flights to Seville from four UK airports and five other European cities

More wild encounters in Europe

Wolves in France After being wiped out by hunting in the 1930s, wolves returned to the Alpes-Maritimes in the early 1990s, spreading over the border from Italy. Despite opposition from farmers, they have thrived and now number an estimated 360, though they remain hard to spot. Maximise your chances on a three-day trip with Undiscovered Mountains, led by an expert tracker and with two nights

in mountain refuges, from €603. undiscoveredmountains.com

Bison in Poland Herds of European bison, the continent's largest land animal, can still be spotted in the forests of eastern Poland. Visit in winter, when snow cover makes tracking easier, and you might see wolves and lynx too. A week's trip with Naturetrek costs £1,495. naturetrek.co.uk

Bears in Estonia About 700 brown bears live in the wild in Estonia, half of those in the Alutaguse taiga forest, a two-hour drive east of Tallinn. Visitors can spend the night in a hide, where sightings of bears and their cubs are common, helped by the long hours of daylight in summer. A two-day trip with Natourest, staying in a hide, costs €105 per person. natourest.ee; visitestonia.com

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