

## In search of the rarest cat on Earth

Last February me and my family left for a small Holiday to Sierra Andujar, Spain in hope of glimpsing the Iberian lynx. With just over 200 individuals this truly is the rarest cat on earth and should be European wilderness icon. A few years before I have been lucky to see one only for a few seconds when I visited the area just a day. Sierra Andujar is known as one of the best place to sight this rare animal. This time we weren't so lucky, although saw many other interesting wildlife.

In historic times the Iberian lynx ranged all over Iberia and even into western and southern France. Currently known as Iberian lynx, this name is actually false as you can see in his historic distribution, and should be named Pardel lynx. In more recent times, over the last millennia, the lynx was confined to Iberia and as being hunted it's range gradually declined. Diseases like myxomatosis and VHS in the 20<sup>th</sup> century among its main prey, the rabbit, further decimated lynx populations. Breeding and reintroduction programs lifted populations with currently two main areas of occurrence; Sierra Donana en Sierra Morena (which includes Sierra Andujar).

During our stay we saw lots of wildlife. Spanish Imperial eagle chasing off black vultures, Spanish ibex, moufflon, red and fallow deer, red-legged partridge and many raptors. The lynx we've missed. In 2013 a new outbreak of rabbit diseases occurred. While rabbits a few year before were plentiful, these days they were scarce. A few years before adult lynx felt no need to chase of their offspring out of their own territories, resulting in high changes of lynx sightings. These days all semi adult offspring has left parental territories. More lynxes on the move caused more incidents. Already within the first 2 months of 2014, 4 individuals were killed on the Cordoba Sevilla highway. Or so I have been told.

Having animals in captive breeding stations, in semi wild enclosures and in wild populations all contribute to their long term existence. This is true for the Iberian lynx but also for many other endangered wildlife species such as European bison, Przewaldski horse, Saiga antelope, Caucasian leopard, Iranian cheetah and many others. But in the end what we really need is more places, more wilderness areas which aim to restore their indigenous mega

faunal species assemblages, both for ecosystem functioning as for the survival of our wilderness icons.

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