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SIZE When examining lynx prints, Benitez and other guides first try to gauge whether they're trailing a male, female or juvenile lynx.



DIRECTION Even a few scant tracks can at least point to a general area to concentrate a search.

FRESHNESS Judging the newness of a print can be difficult, but is key to gauging the urgency of a search. Seeing deep tracks right after a rain shower can mean the lynx is very close by.



In Search of Spain's RARE IBERIAN LYNX

Government-sanctioned culling, trigger-happy farmers and road traffic together nearly wiped the Iberian lynx off the map. Now travelers are flocking to rural Spain for a chance to see one of Europe's rarest wild cats up close.

BY JAMIE LAFFERTY

THE WRITER Miguel de Cervantes knew about the Iberian lynx. In his masterpiece, "Don Quixote," lynx eyes evoke lethality; mischievous boys are "lynxes that nothing escapes." Cervantes's readers would have understood the references instantly: The wild cats once prowled the Spanish countryside in abundance.

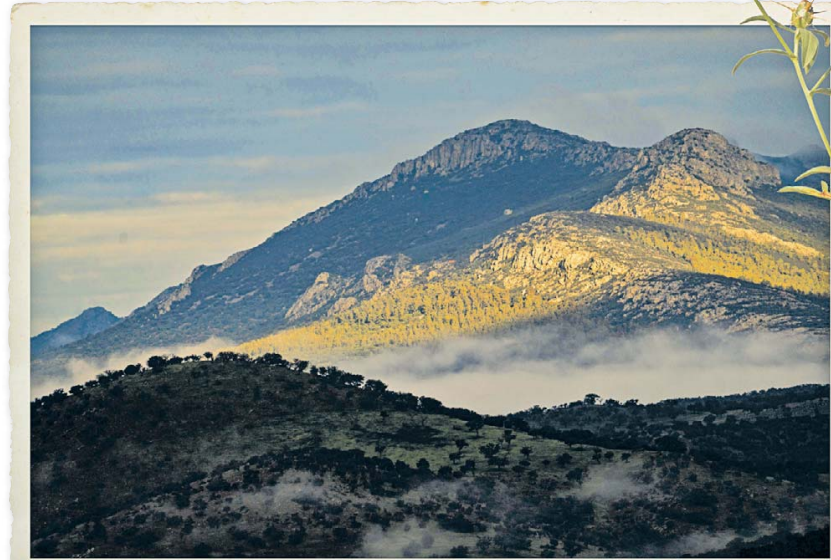
Four hundred years after "Don Quixote," the lynx had become a less relatable metaphor. A victim of government-sanctioned culling, trigger-happy farmers and rising road traffic, the Iberian lynx was on the verge of extinction by 2002, with just 94 cats left in their natural habitat.

Now, thanks to a two-decade conservation initiative in southern Spain and parts of Portugal, there are around 2,700 lynx in the wild, making it one of the world's most miraculous comeback stories. In a captive breeding program, conservationists trapped wild cats and bred them under controlled conditions. Cubs were tagged before being released into the wild. Nuria El Khadir Palomo, director of CBD-Hábitat, one of the organizations instrumental in the recovery, said that although in some areas the population still "requires active management and constant monitoring," in other places, the populations are self-sustaining.

As the number of cats has grown, so has a burgeoning safari trade. For around \$350 a day, I booked a trip with one of the ecotourism companies that have popped up in recent years. I arranged to meet Samuel Plá Benítez of Lynxperience for a three-day search in Extremadura, a western rural region of Spain. Benítez pivoted to a career as a guide after working for decades in lynx conservation.

Each morning, we'd set out to explore this corner of the country, one part of what is sometimes called La España Profunda, or Deep Spain, for the way it has resisted urbanization. Like any safari guide, Benítez had warned there were no guaranteed sightings. As the smooth highway north of Seville stretched into the vastness of pastoral Extremadura, the chances of finding a lynx, which remains rarer than the snow leopard or the Bengal tiger, felt impossibly small.

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Top: An Iberian lynx makes a rare appearance; naturalist guide Samuel Plá Benítez searches for the cat; how Benítez reads lynx prints. Above: Late afternoon sun hits the hills of Extremadura.

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

In Spain, an Unlikely Rare-Cat Safari

DAY 1
Beginning the Search



FROM MY VANTAGE point on a cold, wind-battered hilltop north of the white-walled city of Llerena, little moved. Rolling hills rose to become mountains. Below, the Matachel River ran smooth in the silent dawn.

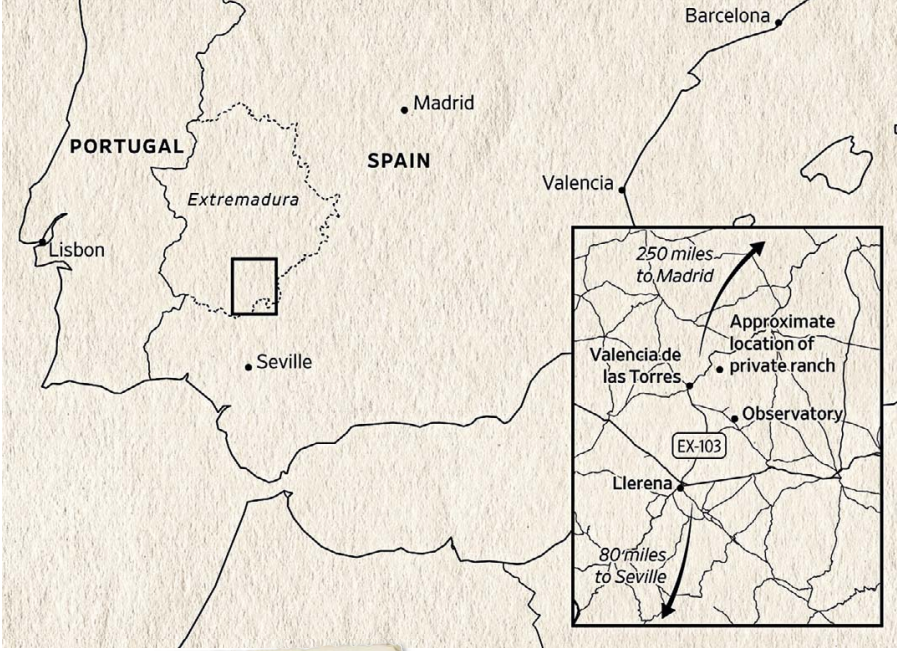
We had come to what Benítez described as his “secret mountain,” a short walk from a public wildlife viewing area at a bend in the river. Then, a mischief of magpies began a ruckus, chattering and hopping from branch to branch of a scraggly tree. Benítez searched for the English word to describe the birds’ behavior. “They’re snitches,” he said, raising a stubby thermal scope to one eye. “Maybe they have seen a lynx.”

After a moment, he passed the device to me and ahead, at great distance, I saw three spectral outlines tumbling around on a nearby peak. I looked away from the infrared scope but could see nothing. The Iberian lynx was right there and still invisible. “I think maybe it’s a mother with cubs, but it’s hard to tell from this far,” Benítez said.

Thermal imaging gave him a huge advantage for spotting the cats, but otherwise he relied on hard-won experience. With tourists, he refuses to

use radio trackers, the type employed by conservationists to keep tabs on the animals. Instead he looks for scat and footprints, which were harder to spot in the winter because of the frozen ground.

Later that afternoon, we tried our luck in the public viewing area. The experience was largely ruined by an unhappy toddler in a Paw Patrol chair. Lynxes were nowhere to be seen.



I looked away from the infrared scope but could see nothing.

The Iberian lynx was right there and still invisible.

Quivering trees, slate river



The rabbits are plentiful almost beyond belief. Through the scope, they appear like snow on the mountainside.



COMPARED TO Extremadura, the neighboring region of Andalusia has eight times more residents and millions more annual international tourists. “So it’s normal that we have more animals than them, no?” Benítez said.

He had just picked me up from Casa Rural Cieza de León, a charming inn in Llerena, my base camp 90 minutes north of Seville. We made a quick pit-stop at a bakery in the village of Valencia de las Torres and then continued on, as a dense fog formed around us. Once we got off the main roads, Benítez often drove, scouted and interpreted at once, sometimes steering with his elbows.

We were heading to a private ranch to which my guide had paid for rare ac-



cess. Hunters pay big money to enter the grounds, but they are given express instructions to focus on deer and partridge, and leave the felines well alone.

As we drove, Benítez told me more about his two decades working on lynx restoration, before making the switch to tourism. He had found the work rewarding, if not lucrative, because it was ultimately successful: In 2024, the cats’ conservation status was upgraded from “endangered” to “vulnerable.”

During the busiest months, he guides up to 20 days a month. He explained that while felines are the biggest prize for each safari outing, guests are constantly surprised by the less heralded wildlife. I nodded, but I’d have been lying if I said I hadn’t come for the lynx—or pretended that the distant views through the scope on Day 1 had been entirely satisfying.

From the passenger seat, I often spotted rabbits fleeing down dirt roads and scampering under bushes, many joined by red-legged partridges. Rabbits, Benítez explained while looking through binoculars from his moving truck, account for around 90% of the lynx diet.

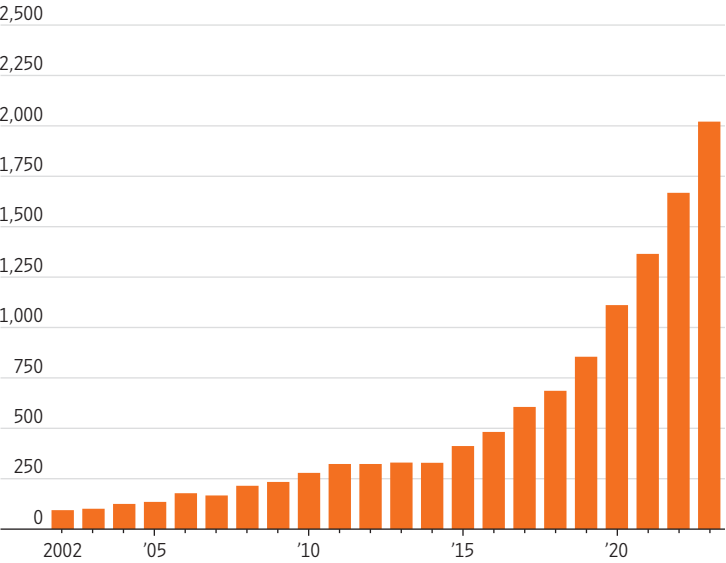
“It’s the same for many of our raptors,” Benítez added, pointing out the birds of prey that were our constant companions. “If we have a problem with the rabbits, we have a problem for so many animals.”

The wind was biting, so we stopped by the wreckage of an old farm building to seek shelter. Benítez set out a charcuterie board of local meats and cheeses on the back of the truck, and I took a look through the thermal scope. Rabbits dotted the mountainside like patches of snow. When the restoration project chose locations to release lynx, rabbit abundance was the first and most important factor. “If they’re not here, we have nothing,” Benítez said.



Plenty of red-legged partridges

Total lynx population in Spain and Portugal



Source: Spain Ministry of Environment

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

Sunrise on the banks of the Matachel River, a go-to stop on a safari in the region.



While felines are the biggest prize for each safari, guests are constantly surprised by the less heralded wildlife: rabbits, red-legged partridges and birds of prey.



The wilderness blends into the built environment in lynx country.



I felt a creeping desire to give in and get warm, but just as I started to work out how to say that to Benitez, he calmly told me that the lynx had finally arrived.



JUST AFTER sunrise, we drove through more fog, our headlights only making the visibility worse. As lynx numbers continue to rise, traffic will once more become an issue. In recent years, local dogs posed problems, too, as did the occasional farmer who had lost a chicken. “Working with the people was the hardest part,” Benitez said. “I think that’s the same all over the world, no?” He had heard a tip from some former clients that the mournful yowls of lynx had been heard overnight near the public viewing area, so we reinstalled ourselves nearby on his secret mountain. I tucked my hands in my pockets as the cold hours ticked away. I felt a creeping desire to give in and get warm, but just as I started to work out how to say that to Benitez, he calmly told me that the lynx had finally arrived. I prepared to grab the thermal scope, but this time we didn’t need it. I struggled to keep my cool as I spotted a pair of cats just ahead. They picked their way along the top of a crumbling dry-stone wall like tightrope walkers. In the frosty air, with their starchy beards and extra-

gant ear tufts, they looked magisterial. They weren’t kings of the jungle, exactly, but as one paused and looked straight at me, I thought it looked at least princely—and in lieu of something grander, that the old wall made for a fine throne.

Plan a trip
Lynxperience offers wildlife packages of Extremadura from around \$350 per person a day, including accommodations, meals and access to the private estate. For the greatest chance of seeing Iberian lynx in the wild, it’s best to block out three or four days. While they can be spotted year-round, winter generally offers the best experience as it coincides with the breeding season and avoids the heat of Spanish summer. From around \$320 per person, **Wild Andalusia** offers guided lynx safaris in the Sierra Morena mountain range, in the neighboring region of Andalusia. **Doñana Wings**, another operator, focuses its operations in the Doñana National Park, a coastal nature reserve and wetlands 40 miles southwest from Seville, with packages starting from \$245.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JAMIE LAFFERTY; ANNA HUIK FOR WSJ; ILLUSTRATION: ANNIE NG/WSJ; ADOBE STOCK (FLOWERS)