

SEARCHING FOR THE IBERIAN IBEX

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## SHADOWS OF STONE



The majestic, graceful, mysterious wild goat of Spain's rugged sierras is making a spectacular comeback from the brink of extinction





The Iberian ibex, Spanish ibex, Spanish wild goat, or Iberian wild goat *Capra pyrenaica* is a species of ibex with four subspecies. Of these, two can still be found on the Iberian Peninsula, but the remaining two are now extinct. The Portuguese subspecies became extinct in 1892 and the Pyrenean subspecies became extinct in 2000.





The two subspecies *C. pyrenaica hispanica* and *C. pyrenaica victoriae* live along the Spanish Peninsula and have migrated and settled into the coast of Portugal.

TEXT AND PHOTOS  
BY ISMAELE TORTELLA

*H*ave you ever been witness to events in life so special that you regret not being able to have documented them in some way? I have experienced many wonderful moments during my time spent with the Spanish Ibex, many I have been able to capture in my own photographic style, while others remain only as personal memories.

When I began to write about my experiences, the first question I asked myself was, "*What has been my motivation?*" What causes those passionate about nature to make all those many sacrifices, just to catch a glimpse of the many wild scenes offered to us? I struggle to find the words to describe it! I believe that the only people who can truly understand my drive, are those who share the same passion and sensitivity towards nature as I do, donating not only time and money, but spirit, to search for wilderness.

My first contact with the Spanish Ibex *Capra pyrenaica* occurred during my first year of university in Madrid, Spain.

It was during my study of "Ingenieros de Montes" that I heard for the first time the description of a large member of the *Capra* spp. genus, which symbolizes the unique character of the Iberian territory. Immediately I began my research, trying to find as much information as possible about this animal. To my surprise I discovered that there was a large population less than an hour away from the great Spanish capital. Without thinking twice, I enquired about transport and located the precise area, and soon after found myself on the boundary in their world. It was in the Parque Regional de la Cuenca Alta del Manzanares, a rugged land of rocks and sloping stone faces, forming one of the largest granite mountain ranges in Europe.

Slipping between those large granite boulders, I was fully focused on the search for that unique Hispanic bovid, even neglecting to observe my surroundings. So I stopped, started to listen to the activity around me, and then discovered upon looking behind me a

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*Capra pyrenaica* are strong mountainous animals characterized by their large and flexible hooves and short legs. These physical adaptations allow them to be able to run and leap on bare, rocky, rough, and steep slopes. This gives them an advantage over potential predators that possibly cannot reach them because of the terrain.





The annual horn growth is influenced principally by age but can also be contributed by environmental factors and the growth made in the previous year. Even though the female ibexes are smaller, they have a faster ossification process and typically finish full bone development nearly two years before males.





Outside of rutting season, Iberian ibex generally establish two types of social groups: male-only groups and females with young juvenile groups.

meadow revealing a flock of many dozens of Storks *Ciconia ciconia* in search of food. I then turned to the sky, aware of the imposing forms of the Griffon Vultures *Gyps fulvus* soaring above my head, circling and plummeting with the thermal currents. I looked down, noticing for the first time the lizards *Podarcis hispanicus* creeping out of their hiding places, their growing curiosity outweighing their fear.

Just as nature was returning once more to its rhythms, I became aware of movement amongst the rocks. The form of a creature which might have even been a rock! And there in the shadow of a cliff, I saw the silhouette of a female "*cabra montesa*". It is true that this species is characterized by a large sexual dimorphism: females are smaller than males, with a maximum height of 60 cms and length of 120 cms, weighing approximately between 30 and 45 kg. In appearance they are similar to our domestic goat, the female's horns very small in comparison with the male's. With my binoculars out I began to notice others, and so my next task was to approach the herd of Ibex,

with as little evidence of my presence as possible. One of the scenes that struck me in particular involved an adult male standing on its hind legs in an agile effort to reach the fresh shoots of a stunted holm oak *Quercus ilex*.

Navigating my way through the stony terrain was a delight. Shifting through the narrow channels left by the rocks, impressed by that weathered scrub typical of the Mediterranean, discovering their kingdom. The closer I got, the more aware I became of the strong odour characteristic of the genus *Capra* spp., the vegetation too becoming more visibly chewed and reduced. I was right there among them. To avoid causing any more alarm, I decided to pause in the shade of a rocky ridge. Almost parallel to my position on the hill facing me sat an adult male, easily distinguishable by its size. The males can weigh as much as 110 kg, the dark fur and enormous curved horns giving an air of majesty. I stood watching him for an hour as he lay on the rocks enjoying the soft sun, staring at me all the while, curious to see if posed any threat. When at last he

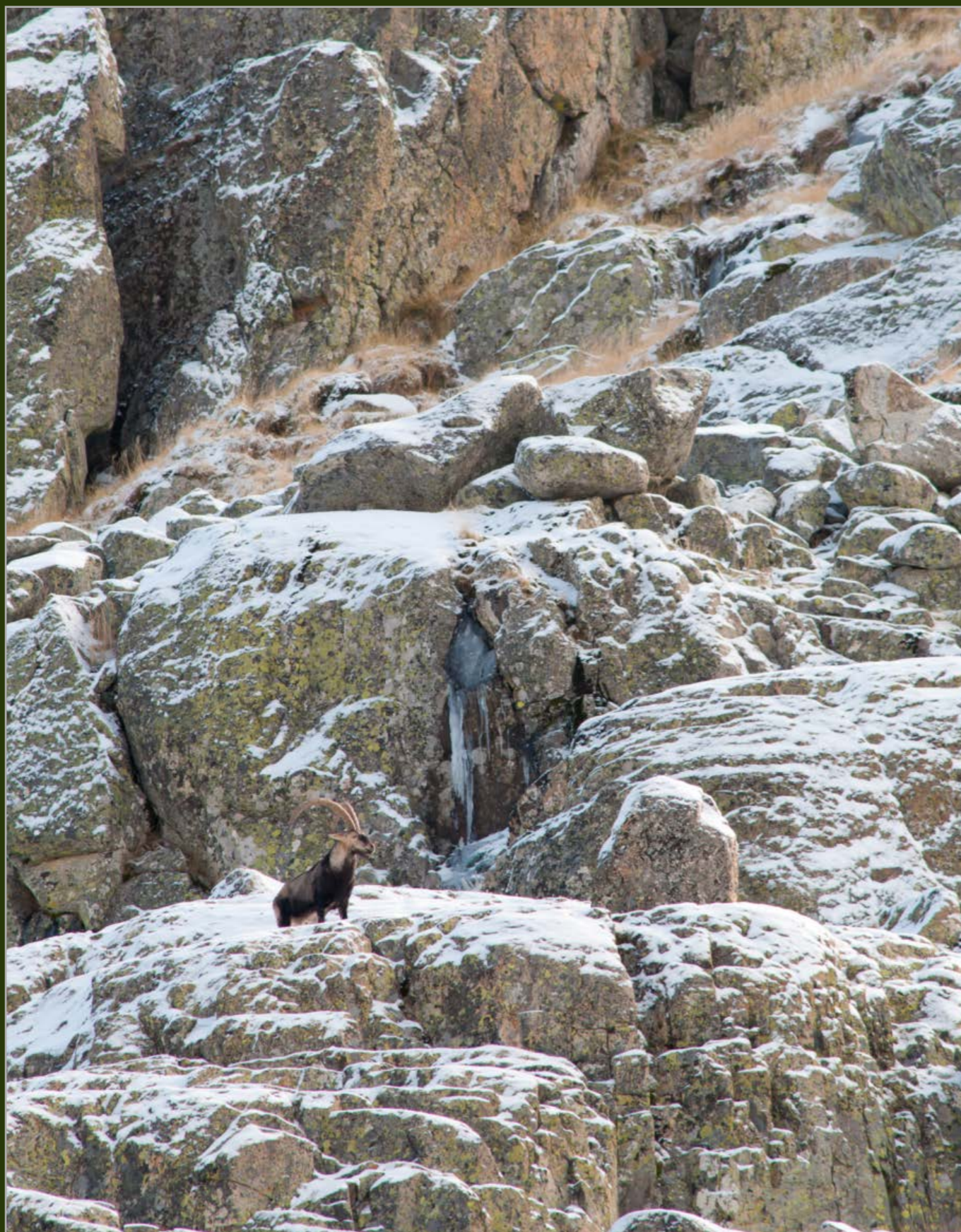
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Populations of *C. pyrenaica* have decreased significantly over the last centuries. This is due to a combination of contributing factors such as great hunting pressure, agricultural development and habitat deterioration. There are also a series of threats in an effort towards ibex conservation; such as population overabundance, disease, and potential competition with domestic livestock and other ungulates, along with the negative effects of human disturbance through tourism and hunting.





The Spanish ibex is most easily recognised by the striking, backward-arching horns of the male, which can grow up to an astonishing 75 centimetres long.

looked away, I knew this was a sign of acceptance, but now the sun was leaving me and it was time to go. After an hour's walk back down, I turned my binoculars once more towards the Ibex. He was still there on that rock, visible only by the dim light of the rising moon.

This was only my first outing, and it was followed by many more in that Park, discovering the different environments colonized by the Ibex. My desire to find out all I could about this animal led me to follow them throughout the year, studying the behavior. From the first warm period in May when the kids are born, until the arrival of that magical period most sought after by wildlife photographers; the courting. This takes place between November and December and is the one time of year the males can be seen to join with the females, the rest of the year they generally live apart. With the aim of photographing such an engaging moment, I joined forces with a group of

fellow photographers in the Parque Regional de la Sierra de Gredos (Comunidad Autonoma de Castilla y León). It is at this time you may be able to witness the 'rutting' between adult males, which battle in order to determine who amongst them has mating priority over the females. Once they have established this kind of briefly-lasting hierarchy, males will trail after the various females sniffing their urine, finding out if they are ready to mate. During this particular expedition, the finest photographic moment took place on the last day, when after many days of sunshine it began to snow. The snow gave a very different atmosphere to the scenery, most magical and unreal, the white falling from the sky mingling with the dark colours, softening patches of rough rock.

Following this animal throughout the year has allowed me to understand more about the natural world, adding a piece to my jigsaw puzzle of knowledge... ●



The gestation period for the female Spanish ibex is 161 to 168 days, with a peak birthing period in mid-May.



Two juveniles play as they practice their sparring skills. Historically, the Spanish ibex was found throughout the Iberian Peninsula, in southwest France, Portugal, and Spain.



The species has become extinct in several areas within its northern range, including Andorra and the Pyrenees.





The Iberian ibex is a mixed feeder between a browser and a grazer, depending on the plant availability in their home range. Thus, the percentage of each type of resource that is consumed will vary altitudinally, geographically, and seasonally. The ibex also has a special mechanism in the kidney that stores fat to be used as energy during cold winter times.



The population in the Iberian peninsula is now estimated at 50.000 individuals.



Numbers increased since the '90s, when population was at 7.900 individuals.



During rutting season (November/December) males interact with females.





The Iberian ibex shows remarkable sexual dimorphism, with males being greater in size and weight and also having larger horns as the females. The enormous, truly spectacular horns of the ibexes are different among wild caprids as they curve out and up and then back, inward, and, depending on subspecies, either up again or down.





The Spanish ibex's coat is chestnut brown, with darker and lighter patches. Large, flexible hooves and short legs help it run and leap across its mountainous habitat.

The male Spanish ibex uses its horns to fight other males during the mating season, which takes place in November and December.



Mixed male-female groups are also common during the rest of the winter after the end of the rutting period, when food is scarce.





The Spanish ibex has a unique way of signaling others when a potential predator has been spotted. First the ibex will have an erect posture with its ears and head pointing in the direction of the potential predator. The caller will then signal the other ibexes in the group with one or more extremely loud, shrill alarm calls.