

Capital birding

If you're looking for a destination that combines the comforts of a city with stunning sights like flocks of Greater Flamingos, displaying Great Bustard and eagles overhead, Lisbon could be the ideal choice, says **Alan Tilmouth**.



Southern Grey Shrike is one of the target birds at the Tagus Estuary. As with other members of the shrike family, it creates a 'larder' by impaling prey on branches.

Cities probably don't feature too highly on many birder's 'must-visit' lists. European capital cities in particular are much more likely to be left behind once out of the airport and hire car compound. A glance across the Tagus Estuary at night into the vast areas of darkness that fan out east and west along the southern shores from the snake-like Vasco da Gama bridge, before fading into a network of saltmarshes and rice fields, is enough to realise that Lisbon, Portugal's capital, might be a little different.

For birders used to catching up on some sleep while covering big distances between hotels and good birding areas, being tipped out of the car into an explosion of birdlife, just 20 minutes after leaving your city centre hotel, can be a little disorientating. Close your eyes to crowds of elegant Iberian commuters and open them to flocks of equally elegant flamingos and egrets.

Rich with birds

On falling and rising tides, the south shore of this major estuary teems with movement as huge flocks of Greater Flamingos, Spoonbills and Little Egrets make the commute to favoured feeding areas. Wildfowl crowd the water edges, pressed close like passengers on public transport, while large waders jaywalk the mudflats during periods of passage. Turnstones roost on brightly coloured John Dory-like artisanal fishing boats, while dumpy Ringed Plovers scurry on the foreshore, the occasional sandy hue of a Kentish Plover standing out among them.

Scan the grassy banks and expect to find the dark low-flying silhouette of a Marsh Harrier, as well as the occasional perched Peregrine Falcon. Clouds of dark ducks – Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Teal and Mallard – along with pink pinpricks of Greater Flamingos, rise in the distance in chaotic murmurations, urged into flight by a pair of patrolling Bonelli's Eagles, a small number of which claim the estuary as their hunting grounds. The Bonelli's drift across with skyscrapers as a backdrop rather than cliffs, a reminder that Lisbon lies just a short distance to the north.

High tides hide the feeding areas and the birds retreat to the network of rice fields, salt pans and arable



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Just a few miles from the centre of Lisbon, the Tagus Estuary offers elegant flocks of Greater Flamingos and waders such as Avocet and Collared Pratincole.

land extending south from the estuary and reached along dusty tracks flanked with holm oaks, patrolled by secretive Azure-winged Magpies. Spotless Starlings act as sentinel guards, and now and then a Hoopoe flicks away on rounded wings from the grassy verge – these areas are rich in birdlife. Beyond one muddy gate is a motionless Squacco Heron, over the next rise White Storks stare back from a farm track, and a blaze of yellow reveals one of the local exotic Yellow-crowned Bishops that shine brightly from the phragmites stands. Southern Grey Shrikes are another possibility in the right habitat in this landscape.

Each salt pan seems to have its own blend of birds: a posse

of Black-winged Stilts here, an avalanche of Avocets on the next, while periodically a Green Sandpiper breaks for cover. Zitting Cisticolas dart among the tamarisks and in autumn and winter Bluethroats perch up among the squadrons of European Stonechats along the scrubby track sides. In the summer months a small number of Collared Pratincoles breed in protected areas off the estuary, hawking the skies over nearby fields.

Within easy reach

For travellers with more time available, a short hour's drive south opens up the rolling steppe habitat and river valleys of Portugal's Alentejo region, and with it access to many Iberian specialities.

The stony fields peppered with sheep offer some great birding, from majestic Great Bustards browsing on the high skylines to the torpedo-like fly-pasts of the local Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Raptors are abundant, with Spanish Imperial Eagles mixing it in the skies overhead with the occasional Bonelli's, and Short-toed and Booted Eagles throughout the spring and summer months.

While Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin and Western Orphean Warbler are the big passerine prizes in the breeding season, the sheer numbers of birds in this farmland as compared to the near desert-like conditions of parts of the British countryside provide a satisfying backdrop. Clouds >



CHRIS KNIGHTS

Head to Portugal's Alentejo region for the bizarre sight of displaying Great Bustards.



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Collared Pratincole (above) and Montagu's Harrier (below) are part of a new project combining tourism and conservation.



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RICHARD BONSER

Left: Yellow-crowned Bishop is a native of Africa, but feral birds have successfully colonised Portuguese wetlands such as the Tagus Estuary.

Right: stunning river valleys in the Alentejo region offer the opportunity to look for Blue Rock Thrush.

Below: the region also holds important colonies of Lesser Kestrel.



NATALINO FENECH

of Corn Buntings compete with soaring Calandra Larks over fields filled with Crested Larks and the occasional Tawny Pipit.

River valleys such as the Guadiana Valley Nature Park offer a complete contrast, with dramatic pine-fringed rocky gorges in which to search for the ever-enigmatic Blue Rock Thrush or pick out one of the small number of White-rumped Swifts to breed in southern Europe. Lifting your eyes skyward is almost certain to be rewarded with the ubiquitous Griffon Vultures, but in the right locations these share their airspace with smaller numbers of Black Vulture and Golden Eagle.

Protecting species

The Alentejo region holds important colonies of Lesser Kestrels, with a number of specially adapted nesting towers or abandoned farm structures occupied, as well as a nestbox scheme located on a high bridge above a dramatic river gorge. It is these diminutive raptors, along with another slim-line breeder, Montagu's Harrier, as well as the Tagus Estuary Collared Pratincoles, that form the core of a unique new offer blending volunteering, local conservation work and guided birding from the long-established Birds and Nature Tours Portugal.

The new Birds and Conservation five-day short break will see participants experience the best of birding in southern Portugal, and also get involved in a number of local conservation projects. One morning will be spent helping to monitor Collared Pratincole breeding colonies on the Tagus Estuary, while later

in the tour participants will be able to spend time up close with Lesser Kestrels and Montagu's Harriers in the Guadiana Valley Nature Park as young birds are ringed.

These activities offer a unique opportunity to help add to the knowledge of threatened species at a European level and give participants a chance in a lifetime to observe endangered species at ultra-close range. Developed to help visiting birders contribute directly to the conservation of these three species, a significant part of the tour price goes

directly to the two protected areas involved with the project, helping to purchase rings, radio devices and monitoring equipment for future use in these conservation projects.

Lisbon and Alentejo offer some great birding with little travel effort, and can easily be combined with the cultural delights of Portugal's capital city to satisfy non-birding partners. With a programme designed to put back into the conservation of some key rare breeders in the region, it offers a short-break destination with a unique twist. ■



MIGUEL ROLO

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Visiting

- For more information about the Birds and Conservation break and other tours, contact Birds and Nature Tours (www.birds.pt; email booking@birds.pt; tel: +351 913 299 990).
- Visit Portugal: www.visitportugal.com.
- Several airlines fly to Lisbon from UK airports including TAP Portugal (www.flytap.com), easyJet (www.easyjet.com) and Ryanair (www.ryanair.com).

Further reading

- *A Birdwatcher's Guide to Portugal, the Azores and Madeira Archipelagos* by Colm Moore, Goncalo Elias and Helder Costa (Prion, 2014, £17.99) – order from £15.99 at bit.ly/bw271Portugal.

Online resources

- A checklist of all birds recorded in Portugal: www.birdlist.org/portugal.htm.