

Portugal: the Iberian specialities uncorked

Bryan Bland

With Portugal as our oldest ally (a commercial treaty with England was signed in 1294 and an alliance established in 1373), it seems singularly inappropriate that most British birders opt for Spain when seeking the specialities of the Iberian peninsula. Yet Portugal offers a similar selection in one sixth of the area (only a little larger than Scotland), making it arguably the preferred option for a birding trip where time is of the essence.

It seems unfair that one of the most iconic birds which Portugal has to offer - *Aquila adalberti* - has even had its English name appropriated by the country's larger neighbour. Iberian Imperial Eagle would surely be the more accurate and more equitable appellation since it started to breed again in Portugal in 2003 after

Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus* Tagus Estuary, Portugal, November 2005 (Faisca).

In Europe, Black-shouldered Kite occurs only in the extreme southwest, although it has recently expanded its range from Iberia to southwest France. Of a total European population of around 1,300 birds, Portugal hosts over 100, with many in the cork-oak forests around Lisbon.



an absence of 20 years. Furthermore, a glance at the *EBCC Atlas of European Breeding Birds* (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997) reinforces a common misconception that many other raptors which are common in Spain are virtually absent in Portugal, including Griffon Vulture, Black Vulture, Golden Eagle and, to a lesser extent, Lesser Kestrel. The same applies to other top-target European species such as White-rumped Swift, which the EBCC Atlas shows as being restricted to Spain.

Yet, on a memorable day's birding on 16th June 2011, João Jara and I enjoyed close views of both White-rumped Swift and Spanish Imperial Eagle within a few minutes of leaving our hotel at **Mina de São Domingos**, and continued in rapid succession with Short-toed Eagle, Black Vulture, Griffon Vulture, Lesser Kestrel (30 pairs at Mertola and another 30 at the ruined railway station at Casével), another Spanish Imperial Eagle, Booted Eagle, yet more Griffons, Montagu's Harrier, Bonelli's Eagle, Black Kite, and Red Kite as we drove around the **Mertola-Castro Verde** area before transferring to the Portas de Rodão for spectacular views of the Western Palearctic's only resident Rüppell's Vulture (with Egyptian Vultures, Black Storks, and yet more Griffons), and then on to our appropriately named Herdade da Poupa (Hoopoe hotel) beyond Rosmaninhal, where another healthy population of Griffon, Black and Egyptian Vultures awaited us - plus a magnificent pair of Golden Eagles. Literally hundreds of raptors in 24 hours, including several kettles of 30-50 Griffon Vultures but, in all, representing 15 species. Nor were raptors the only highlights of this single day. The open steppe landscape beyond **Mertola** yielded both Great and Little Bustards, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Stone Curlew, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrikes, Black-eared Wheatear and Roller. A quick scan of the Oeiras river valley below Mertola produced Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting, Bee-eater and Kingfisher. And everywhere, absolutely everywhere, Azure-winged Magpies abounded. Given more time, a search of one of the many oleander-filled wadis would have added Rufous Bush Robin - and even



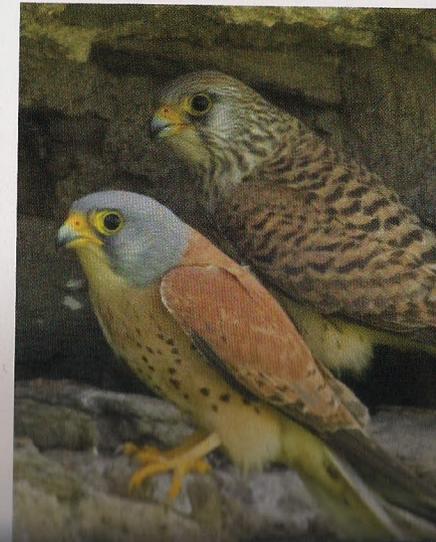
White-rumped Swift *Apus caffer*, **Mertola**, Portugal, June 2011 (Antonio Gonçalves). This swift is irregularly distributed over much of Africa, with a small population in the Atlas of Morocco. When the EBCC atlas was published (1997), the only European birds were in Spain, but now this sought-after species can be seen in Portugal too.

Male Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax*, **Castro Verde**, Portugal, March 2008 (Faisca). The Portuguese population of Little Bustard is estimated at a healthy 13,000 - 18,000 birds, with the highest density in the northern Alentejo. In Iberia, the species is partially migratory, wintering mainly in the southwest of the peninsula.



Adult Rüppell's Vulture *Gyps rueppellii*, Portas de Rodão, Portugal, June 2011 (Joaquim Muchaxo). Rüppell's Vulture is endemic to a relatively narrow band of arid sub-Saharan Africa but, for several years now, small numbers have been seen in southern Spain. This particularly obliging individual has lingered at de Rodão (see *Birding World* 22: 118-119).

Male and female Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*, **Castro Verde**, Portugal, April 2009 (Faisca). The European breeding range of Lesser Kestrel is declining but, in Portugal, numerous breeding pairs hold a total of over 500 pairs.



in a day's birding around Lisbon can be particularly rewarding. Probably the best times for British birders to visit are April/May and August/October (with peak numbers of waders between November and February). But spring is in early March with Iberian Yellow Warbler migration and December/January the highest totals of Glossy Ibises and Greater Flamingos (some 4,000 of each). Even in June (a comparatively quiet time) there is no shortage of birds.

Alentejo is the biggest producer of cork in the world and the cork-oak forests are rich in biodiversity, hosting a good population of Black-winged Kites with their cabochon-ruby eyes, and, on a lower budget) plus Azure-winged Teal galore, Short-toed Treecreepers, and European and Red-necked Nightjars.

The Tagus (Tejo) Estuary has extensive saltmarshes, reedbeds, paddyfields and salt-pans converted to shrimp ponds and all of the usual north European species either winter there or visit on passage – the occasional Nearctic rarity (which have included Willet and Greater Yellowlegs in recent years). Breeding birds include Collared Pratincole, Cattle Egret, and feral Common Goldeneye, Yellow-crowned Bishops and Black-

headed Weavers (like finches in oriole's clothing). Winter brings Penduline Tit, Bluethroat and Spanish Sparrow.

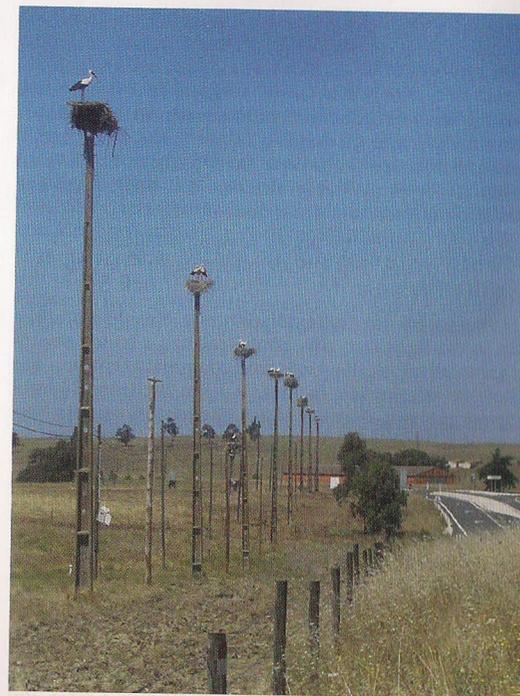
At Barroca pasture and ricefields we saw Booted and Bonelli's Eagles, Purple Heron, Little Bittern and Gull-billed Tern. From late July, large flocks of Little Bustards are present, moulting and reluctant to fly. Little Bustards can also be found at Ponta da Erva from July to February.

Pancas is good for Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrikes, Sardinian Warbler, Rock Sparrow, Cirl Bunting, Bonelli's Warbler, Iberian Chiffchaff, both nightjars, Booted Eagle (common from March to August), Short-toed Eagle (scarcer) and, of course, Black-shouldered Kites. Temminck's Stints are regular in autumn and recent winters have brought a Sociable Plover.

At Alcochete (a delightful little town) and Samouco salt-pans we saw such typical waders as Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Dunlin, Kentish and Ringed Plovers, Black-winged Stilt and Black-tailed Godwit; in the Sado estuary a large flock of Greater Flamingos was already in residence; and, at the Escaroupim egret colony (20km north of the Tagus Estuary), there were at least 1,000 nests of Cattle Egret, 200 of Little Egret, 40 Night Heron, 40 Spoonbill, 5 Grey Heron, plus a single Squacco Heron nest. In 2005, there was also the first nest of Glossy Ibis here.

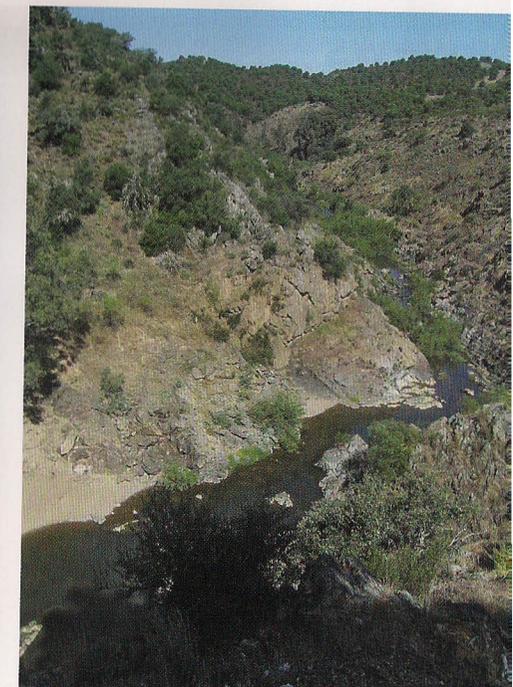
Alentejo, Portugal, June 2011 (Bryan Bland).

The open steppe landscape beyond Mertola is home to both Great and Little Bustards, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Curlew, Calandra and Short-toed Larks, Southern Grey and Woodchat Shrikes, Black-eared Wheatear and Roller.



Portugal, June 2011 (Bryan Bland).

The open countryside of Portugal is full of birds. Here, along this stretch of road, a White Stork's nest is on every utility pole.



Mertola, Portugal, June 2011 (Bryan Bland).

The Oeiras river valley (below the delightful old hill town of Mertola, which hosts 30 pairs of Lesser Kestrels) offers Blue Rock Thrush, Rock Bunting and Bee-eater.

All in all, Mediterranean birding at its best – and all to be seen on a day's drive from the capital. Significant also is the fact that, for a non-birder partner, Portugal offers attractive countryside, picturesque towns, fascinating history and a range of activities (from shopping to thermal spa treatments) which most hotels are only too eager to arrange – the perfect choice for a short break for the family or for the most obsessive birder.

Obviously the most effective way to clean up on the specialities in the minimum time is to engage the services of a local expert such as João. But do-it-yourself options are also possible. There is a network of good roads, first-class accommodation, superb cuisine, and a guaranteed warm welcome everywhere.

At the moment, TAP Portugal airlines offer six flights a day from London Heathrow and one from London Gatwick. Lisbon is only two hours away.

Recommended contacts

João Jara /Birds & Nature Tours: www.birds.pt; e-mail: joao.jara@birds.pt; tel.: +351 913-299990 (Birding Tours in Portugal, including Madeira and the Azores).
Silvia Aires (Portugal Tourism) TCP/ARPT Centro de Portugal, Casa Amarela, Largo de Sta Cristina, 3500-

Tivoli Oriente Hotel, Lisbon. Av.D. João II, Lot 1.14.01.1990, Lisboa, Portugal. Tel. +351 218-915100; email: reservas.hto@tivolihotels.com; www.tivolioriente.com (a well-appointed and convenient hotel near to the airport and railway station with an 'experience team' to arrange a variety of activities)

Hotel São Domingos, Mina de São Domingos, 7750-1 Mertola.

Hotel Rural Herdade da Poupá, 6060-454 Rosmaninhal, Portugal. email: herdade.poupa@gmail.com; tel. +351 277-470000; www.herdadeapoupa.com (a spectacular hotel in the centre of the Tejo International Natural Park, truly away-from-it-all).

Hotel Fonte Santa, Temas de Monfortinho, 6060-070 Temas de Monfortinho, Portugal. Tel. +351 277-430300; email: hotelfontesanta@ohotelsandresorts.com; www.ohotelsandresorts.com (a thermal spa hotel, with excellent cuisine, to the north of the Tejo International Natural Park and near the attractive hill towns of Idanha-a-Velha, Monsanto and Penha Garcia).

Active-Boat Trips, Incentivos Outdoor. Tel. +351 277-541196; email: grupos@incentivosoutdoor.com; <http://passeiosnotejo.blogspot.com> (for Rüppell's Vulture viewing; the most comfortable birding boat ever – fully padded).

Bryan Bland, Norfolk.

The best site guide to Portugal is *A Birdwatchers' Guide to Portugal and Madeira* by Colm Moore, Goncalo Elias & Helder Costa (1997) – Eds