

Prime-time Portugal

Portugal is all too frequently overlooked as a prime birding destination. Having seen it for himself, *Richard Bonser* says it's about time more birders visited.

Monday morning dawned bright, and the Lisbon cityscape was backed by the blue sky typical of Iberia. The previous evening

I had taken a walk along the city's picturesque waterfront, enjoying the architecture left as a legacy of Expo '98.

Today I teamed up with João Jara, one of the country's foremost birders. He whisked me off to the Tagus Estuary, just over a quarter of an hour's drive from the city centre.

The first stop was an area of reedbeds and shallow scrapes near Alcochete that are a magnet to thousands of birds, particularly during winter and migration. Three weeks before my visit, the area had hosted Portugal's first Willet.

I was more than impressed with a stunning male Little Bittern, with its gleaming orange bill, looking at us astutely from the reed edge. The harsh croaking of Great Reed Warblers and the odd *tsweep* from Yellow Wagtails of the endemic Iberian subspecies were a welcome background sound. An open area

of water held a healthy flock of 28 Glossy Ibises and a handful of Purple Herons, while the *tzit-tzit-tzit* of Zitting Cisticolas greeted us at every damp thicket.

Yellow fever

Introduced species thrive in the Lisbon area. Two of these, Yellow-crowned Bishop and Black-headed Weaver, accounted for the little flashes of yellow that whizzed across the reed-fringed channel in front of us. João then showed me the weaver's nest, long and exquisitely woven into the reeds.

Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint were all present on the adjacent salt pans. Little Terns patrolled the skies alongside pristine Collared Pratincoles, nipping insects while on the wing.

Good numbers of Greater Flamingo and Purple Gallinule occur on the estuary throughout the year, and their vivid plumages are always a welcome sight. I was also privileged to see a pair of Marbled Duck looking settled in potential breeding habitat, now a rare sight in Portugal.

What is great about the Tagus is its

diverse range of habitats, all within just a few miles of Lisbon city centre. Black-winged Kite, one of Europe's most sought-after raptors, proved rather common in some pockets of arable land. Black Kites and Booted and Short-toed Eagles patrolled the skies, at one point together in the same scope view.

Scanning some woodland for a breeding pair of Bonelli's Eagle, a male Montagu's Harrier zapped over a poppy-strewn cornfield at almost point-blank range. This whole network of fields is an important wintering site for Little Bustard, which can usually be found in good numbers and often show well.

A short way down the track we came to some prime cork woodland. This area is a breeding site for Great Spotted Cuckoo, Golden Oriole, Azure-winged Magpie and small numbers of Western Bonelli's Warbler.

It was nice to watch species typical of

The arable land around the Tagus Estuary is home to good numbers of Black-winged Kite (inset), a species whose European range is almost wholly confined to Iberia.

MAIN IMAGE: RICHARD BONSER; INSET: FRANK MCCLINTOCK (WWW.BIRDING-IN-PORTUGAL.COM)





Black-headed Weaver is one of several introduced species established in Portugal, but nowhere else in the Western Palearctic.

RICHARD BONSER



FRANK MCCLINTOCK (WWW.BIRDING-IN-PORTUGAL.COM)

Little Bustard is closely connected with the Alentejo region's traditional farming system; if the abandonment of this continues the species will be lost in Portugal.

this rather scarce habitat, as well as a rather curious Woodchat Shrike and several Tree Sparrows, evidently doing much better in Portugal than they are in Britain. A return at dusk produced Red-necked and European Nightjars singing side-by-side.

Hérons above

Next on the itinerary was a visit to a huge heronry near Salvaterra de Magos. It was packed to the rafters with Spoonbills, Cattle and Little Egrets and good numbers of Night Heron. An Osprey was fishing in

the braided river channel, and an evening visit to a breeding colony of Collared Pratincoles rounded off what was a perfect taster of the area's birding potential.

The next morning we drove south to another estuary, the Sado. I managed to persuade João that we should detour to Carcavelos, where we quickly located a dozen or so Crested Mynas, another of Lisbon's introduced specialities.

The Sado Estuary lies between the Tróia peninsula and the fishing port of Setúbal. Like the Tagus, it is a bird-rich

area with extensive lagoons and salt pans.

Hundreds of Dunlin, Knot and Curlew Sandpipers were huddled together at the feet of Greater Flamingos over high tide. In winter, thousands of wildfowl congregate on the estuary to make use of its rich food source.

Every roadside telegraph pole appeared to have a White Stork on a nest, some with young and others still incubating. Among the vineyards and the continual sound of dozens of Serins and Nightingales, a small group of European Bee-eaters sallied from an area of bare trees, while Western Bonelli's Warblers were plentiful in the nearby pines.

After a leisurely lunch, João and I

headed south and inland to Castro Verde in the Alentejo region – the most important pseudo-steppe area in Portugal.

The site is classified as a Special Protection Area for birds, and I was grateful to be accompanied for a few hours by staff from the Environmental Education Centre at Vale Gonçalvesinho. While hearing about the Castro Verde Sustainable Programme and the ways in which farmers are incentivised not to harvest between certain dates, the birdlife in front of me was truly amazing.

Montagu's Harriers were everywhere, Spanish Sparrows could be found breeding in White Stork nests and Calandra Larks were singing across the wide open plains. This was a place where Azure-winged Magpies were true roadside birds.

Much is being done to safeguard the special birds of the area. I counted more than 50 Lesser Kestrels, all nesting in purpose-built towers and buildings constructed by the Liga para a Protecção da Natureza. Great Bustard, Europe's heaviest bird, thrives in the rolling countryside, along with its smaller congener, Little Bustard.

A couple of Black Vultures soared among larger numbers of Griffons, while an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle looked as majestic as ever, epaulettes glistening in the evening haze. European Bee-eater, European Roller and a flock of Black-bellied Sandgrouse all added a splash of colour, and the birding continued to the last, as a Red-necked Nightjar 'chugged' away in scrub outside our superb accommodation at Herdade de Malhadinha Nova, Albernoa.

Next was another day of glorious sunshine, binoculars standing at the ready on the breakfast table. A male Black-eared Wheatear took a drink from the hotel's swimming pool, a pair of Red-rumped Swallows were nesting and a Black-winged Kite hovered nearby.

Heading east through the white-washed town of Castro Verde, a group of almost 100 Griffon Vultures, settled on a cow carcass, provided impressive viewing. We visited an area excellent for Rufous Scrub Robin and Western Orphean Warbler – both surprisingly easy to locate, especially in late spring – while

Calandra Lark is a specialist of the arid interior of Portugal, and can be found in good numbers in the Alentejo.

many Azure-winged Magpies and Southern Grey Shrikes were noted.

The pretty town of Mértola, perched precariously on a riverside gorge, would be a perfect base to explore the region, and wandering through its sleepy cobbled lanes was like entering an enchanting time warp. Nearby, João pointed out a pair of White-rumped Swifts that showed superbly in the skies over their nest site in a roadside tunnel.

The area is characterised by rocky gorges, and probably the best of these is Pulo do Lobos. Crag Martin, Blue Rock Thrush and Rock Bunting are all easy to find and, with a little patience, Black Stork and Bonelli's Eagle can be observed among the hordes of Griffon Vultures.

Larking around

Having left the rolling steppes and interior of the country behind, in less than an hour we were at Castro Marim on the Algarve. This is the best place in Portugal to observe Lesser Short-toed Lark, while huge numbers of migrant waders can be present in the area.

Greater Flamingos nestled tightly on one of the lagoons, while Audouin's and Slender-billed Gulls eventually showed themselves. A lone Stone-curlew looked on curiously as we drove around the extensive salt pan network. Just like every other place we had birded, and with his holiday home nearby, it was obvious that João knew the area well.

During the evening, we joined up with the guys from Turismo de Portugal and were expertly sailed around the Ria Formosa by Ricardo and Sonia of Natura Algarve. This was ecotourism at its best – Sonia is a marine biologist, so she was able to explain the way in which this fragile ecosystem's flora and fauna hinge together. She was also familiar with all the waders, terns and Audouin's Gulls that we saw. In order to get close to the wildlife, we were able to switch to a silent, smaller engine, enabling better views with little disturbance. The day ended with an excellent dinner, at which I was the only one not called João!

I awoke rather hazily, most probably due to the residue of the previous evening, but in no time at all the birds started coming thick and fast. Another



MARKUS VARESVIJO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

exotic, Common Waxbill, was easy to locate at Tavira salt pans, along with many Avocets, Black-winged Stilts and several species of *Calidris* wader.

It was almost as if João had saved the best until last with our final stop at Quinto do Lago, a pool surrounded by lush vegetation with an elevated, well-positioned hide.

The area was alive with Little Bitterns and some of the showiest Great Reed Warblers I had ever seen, while a neck-collared Crested Coot was a good find among its commoner cousins. European Bee-eaters and Red-rumped Swallows buzzed around our heads and, as if this wasn't enough, a handful of very obliging Purple Gallinules was present at the reed edges. Then, just as we were about to leave to head to the airport, one of my most surreal and lucky birding experiences occurred: a Red-necked Nightjar calling and showing in the open in broad daylight.

One huge advantage of Portugal is its size. Travelling from Lisbon to the Algarve takes just over a couple of hours and, with the Alentejo steppe region in between, there is little driving between birding sites in comparison with neighbouring Spain. Portugal is a sleeping giant in the European birding stakes, and with a whole host of Iberian specialities all that remains is for you to go there and see them for yourself. ■

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to: João Jara of Birds and Nature Tours for his birding guidance and

being the inspiration behind the trip; João Portugal, João Micaelo, Pedro Mathias and their colleagues from Turismo de Portugal for organising the trip; and Ricardo Barradas and Sonia Manso of Natura Algarve and the staff at the Environmental Education Centre at Vale Gonçalves, Castro Verde.

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Contacts

- **João Jara/Birds & Nature Tours**
+351 913 299 990; booking@birds.pt;
www.birds.pt
- **Turismo de Portugal**
0845 355 1212; www.visitportugal.com
- **Turismo de Lisboa**
+351 210 312 700; www.visitlisboa.com

Further reading

- *Collins Bird Guide* by Killian Mullarney, Lars Svensson, Peter Grant and Dan Zetterström (second edition, Collins, £25)
- *A Birdwatcher's Guide to Portugal and Madeira* by C C Moore, G Elias and H Costa (Prion, £14.99)
- *Where to Watch Birds in Spain and Portugal* by Laurence Rose (Hamlyn, now out of print but available secondhand)

To order the above titles, please use the Birdwatch Bookshop form on page 47 of the January issue.

Birding resources

- **Liga para a Protecção da Natureza** (League for the Protection of Nature) www.lpn.pt
- **Natura Algarve** www.natura-algarve.com
- **Sociedade Portuguesa Para o Estudo Das Aves** (Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds, BirdLife partner in Portugal) +351 21 322 04 30; www.spea.pt