



THE PERFECT HOLIDAY?

Alan Tilmouth suggests three Portuguese destinations that should keep the whole family happy

The first gaze out of the window on a morning, to check the weather and any avian activity, is an almost zen-like ritual for me (and I suspect for many birders) but it takes on a new energy when you're in a different location. When the location is a stunning river gorge in southern Portugal where the garden Blackbirds have become Blue Rock Thrushes, a flicked tail is more likely to be a Black Redstart than a Robin and the magpie flying past is of the Azure-winged variety, it provides a wake up hit that no amount of caffeine can replicate.

In these austere times, whether you're looking for somewhere that offers outstanding birding value in 2012 or perhaps need to combine a family holiday with your birding, southern Portugal may be just the right destination. Even 'out of season' trips in autumn/winter can be incredibly productive, a short trip in early October using the village of Mértola in Alentejo as a base produced over 130 species over three main areas.

Lisbon - Mértola

A short trip from the airport across the huge span of the Vasco de Gama Bridge lies the Reserve Natural de Estuarie da Tejo, the most important wetland area for birds in Portugal. The Giganta rice fields here hold Little, Cattle

and Great White Egrets – and dozens of White Storks. Each field has its own 'blend', some with big groups of Greater Flamingo with the occasional Glossy Ibis thrown in, others have vast numbers of wintering waders, large single species flocks of Black-tailed Godwit or Ruff with smaller numbers of Black-winged Stilts and Avocets patrolling the corners. Look closer and Little Ringed Plovers and Snipe are abundant along some of the marshy edges. Marsh Harriers quarter the fields and Black-shouldered Kites lounge on pylons and irrigation pipes in the midday sun.

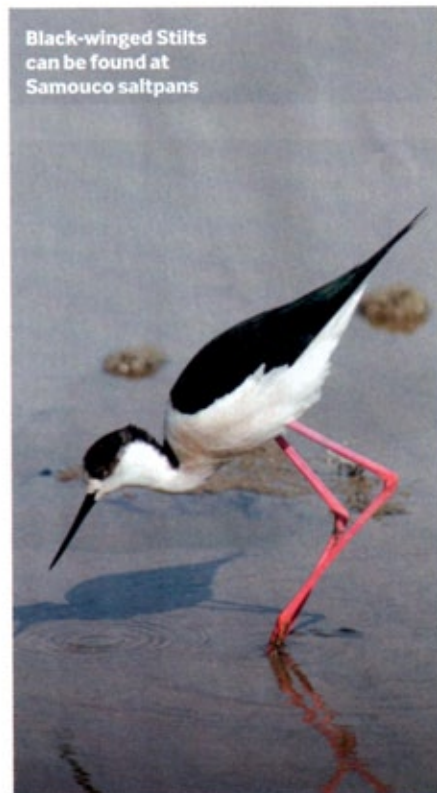
Nearby, the Samouco saltpans are thick with Kentish Plovers, liberally peppered with Ringed Plovers and Black-winged Stilts with perhaps a Little Stint or two among them.

We broke our journey to Mértola with a couple of stops recommended by our guide João Jara. At Atalya Farm we had superb views of another Black-shouldered Kite, along with three Ospreys.

Mértola – Guadiana Valley

The whitewashed walls of the Igreja Matriz mosque offer an impressive background perched high on the steep sided valley through which the Guadiana river flows. Early morning birding around the village was

Black-winged Stilts can be found at Samouco saltpans



Woodstock (Alamy)



Jose Pedro Fernandes (Alamy)



Juan Manuel Manero (Alamy)

Watch soaring Bonelli's Eagles at Alceria



Philip Magridge (Alamy)

Blue Rock Thrush is a common – and welcome – sight

characterized by close encounters with typically Mediterranean species, such as Cetti's and Sardinian Warblers in riverside scrub; Blue Rock Thrushes and Black Redstarts on the ancient town walls and Azure-winged Magpies travelled in numbers, with the occasional Southern Grey Shrike adding to the benefits of a post-breakfast wander. The village has a colony of easily watched Lesser Kestrels and Griffon Vultures are never far away as the temperatures rise.

Barely a few miles out from Mértola, our first morning destination was atop a large hill at Alcaria Rhuva for some raptor-watching. After a short stop with great views of Thekla Lark, we were driven up the steep path to the crown of the highest point for miles. As the morning warmed so did the birding with an impressive array of Black Kites, Black Vultures amongst the commoner Griffon Vultures, Short-toed and Bonelli's Eagles soaring up to eye-level.

Much of the area between Mértola and Castro Verde is a mix of steppe and farmland. These plains are among the best sites in Portugal for steppe species. We located several groups of Great Bustards, often strolling through thigh-high grassy hillsides. Little Bustards, though present, were encountered less frequently than roadside Hoopoes,

Southern Grey Shrikes and Stonechats punctuating the landscape. The occasional Tawny Pipit broke from the stubble flushed by a passing Hen Harrier while large flocks, of 50-60 Azure-winged Magpies marauded through isolated stands of eucalyptus.

The local knowledge of our guide produced some incredible moments from having four eagles, two each of Bonelli's and Spanish Imperial soaring overhead to roadside stops that had Black-bellied Sandgrouse whirling past from every direction.

Tavira Salt pans

East of Faro Tavira sits on a large estuary; a boat trip out into the large saline lagoons behind the dunes can be very productive. The big prize is Slender-billed Gull and Tavira is a great place to catch up with this scarce gull. The mudflats hold good numbers of Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls as well as lots of familiar waders mingling with the occasional enigmatic White Stork.

Behind the lagoon the salt pans act as a magnet for waders, pink-legged Black-winged Stilts dancing through tight flocks of Kentish Plovers, Little Stints and Curlew Sandpipers. A search amongst the roosting terns is worthwhile as Caspian Terns are regular throughout the year. The seemingly endless

Getting there

Flights from UK airports to Lisbon, by various operators, start at around £60 return, depending on the time of year you choose to visit

Websites

portugal-north.moonfruit.com
www.visitportugal.com
www.portugal.com

gull flocks, mostly Yellow-legged Gulls and Lesser Black-backed Gulls hold another prize with good numbers of another rare Mediterranean breeder Audouin's Gull; we (or at least our trusty guide) found up to a dozen to gaze it, in fact we had to be dragged away to lunch.

Portugal is under-birded and has many areas that look good for migrants, a vast west-facing coastline that offers much sea-watching potential and many 'unexplored' areas for birders who wish to seek out their own birds.

The compact nature of the various habitats and their easy accessibility combined with some great birds offer a great birding experience for a lot less effort than many 'bigger' destinations.