

Autumn Birding in Southern Portugal

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly to Faro and transfer to Rio Formosa
- Day 2/4** Birdwatching excursions from Rio Formosa (east Algarve)
- Day 5/6** Birdwatching excursions from Sagres (western Algarve)
- Day 7** Transfer to Faro, and fly UK

Departs

September-October

Focus

Birds

Grading

Grade A. Easy day walks

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code PRT07) or brochure

Highlights

- Visit Algarve's flagship reserves: Rio Formosa, Castro Marim & Quinto do Lago
- Little Bittern, Spoonbill, Collared Pratincole & Audouin's Gull
- Look for Great & Little Bustards on the plains around Castro Verde, Alentejo
- Spanish Imperial Eagle & Black-winged Kite, plus Black & Griffon Vultures



Great Shearwater (by John Wilsher)



Hoopoe (by Menno van Duijn)



Sagres boat trip (by John Wilsher)



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Introduction

Lying at the far south-western tip of mainland Europe, Portugal's beautiful Algarve region occupies a strategic position on the 'eastern Atlantic flyway' and is one of the continent's top bird-watching destinations in late September. Famous for its golf courses, beaches and winter sunshine, there's another side to the Algarve, away from the high-rise hotels and beach-bound holidaymakers – and on this tour we'll take you off the tourist trail, to the windswept cliffs, sand dunes and heaths of the west coast, the marshes and saltpans of the south, and the Cork Oak forests and wide open plains of the Alentejo. Though often overlooked in favour of the much larger neighbouring landmass of Spain, Portugal has a very distinct identity of its own. A relaxed pace of life prevails away from the tourist hot-spots and we're sure you'll soon be seduced by southern Portugal – not only by its excellent bird-watching opportunities, but also by its beautiful language, charming people, and delicious food and wine. As we make daily excursions in search of the region's special birdlife, we'll also find ourselves immersed in the rich history and culture of the south, where fine Moorish architecture and the near-medieval subsistence agriculture of the Alentejo provide a stark contrast to the 21st century bustle of the Algarve coastline.



Little Bittern (by Merino van Duijn)

This is a 2-centre tour, combining a visit to the Alentejo steppe in search of Great Bustards and other birds of the plains and woodlands, with coastal wetlands and migration watching at the far western tip of Portugal. Expected highlights are a pelagic boat trip for seabirds, and such species as Spanish Imperial Eagle, Bluethroat and the exotic Glossy Ibis.

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Itinerary

Day 1

Fly Faro

Our tour begins with a flight to Faro from where it's just a short drive to our accommodation for the next three nights – a superb hotel located in the hills outside the town of Tavira, nestled within olive groves and cork oak woodland. This is the perfect base from which to explore the lagoons, reedbeds, saltpans and marshes of the Algarve's flagship reserves. We hope to be able to offer flights from regional airports today, aiming to have everybody in Portugal by lunchtime. For anybody wishing to take later flights, the hotel is about 28 miles (40 minutes) from the airport in a taxi.

Days 2 – 4

Algarve wetlands and Alentejo steppe

Over the next three days we'll explore the Algarve's flagship reserves of Rio Formosa, Castro Marim and Quinto do Lago. Among the many species that we will search for during gentle excursions each day are Spoonbill, Greater Flamingo, White Stork, Little Tern, clusters of Little and Cattle Egrets, Purple Swamphen, Audouin's Gull and Collared Pratincole. At this time of year the lagoons and saline-rich marshes along the coast provide an important stopover for migrant birds and rarities. While researching this tour we saw both Buff-breasted and Upland Sandpipers, as well as Little Bittern, Squacco Heron, Black-winged Stilt, Glossy Ibis, Kentish Plover, Caspian Tern, Red-crested Pochard, confiding Bluethroats and many more species. Little Ringed Plover, Avocet and Collared Pratincole will also be on our list of target species.

We will also drive north from Rio Formosa for a day to the wide plains of Castro Verde in the Alentejo. Within the Castro Verde Special Protection Area we hope to see Europe's largest flying bird, the Great Bustard, as well as Little Bustard, Black-bellied Sandgrouse and Stone Curlew. Several exciting raptors hunt over these open plains, and we'll survey the rugged steppe country from the region's highest point, Ermida de Nossa Senhora de Aracelis, for Hen Harrier, Black and Griffon Vultures, Black-winged Kite, the magnificent Spanish Imperial Eagle, and Little Owl.

If time permits, we might also head towards the River Cobres, a tributary of the Guadiana River, which provides an opportunity to enjoy the Alentejo's famous 'montado' scenery of Cork and Holm Oak woods. Among the smaller species we'll be hoping to find in the steppes and scrub here are Crested, Thekla, Wood and Calandra Larks, Corn Bunting and Azure-winged Magpie.

Having explored the lagoons and wetlands of the central and eastern Algarve, and the steppes of the Alentejo, we next travel west to our base for the latter three nights of this 6-night holiday – a very comfortable hotel situated just a short distance from a fort which served as Henry the Navigator's 15th-century School of Navigation in Sagres, which produced some legendary explorers including Magellan and Vasco da Gama.

Days 5 – 6

Migration-watching, Sagres to Cape St. Vincent

The volume and variety of bird species passing across the southern tip of Portugal each autumn is impressive and makes for some exciting migration-watching, particularly of raptors. Blue Rock Thrush, Black Redstart and Red-billed Chough are resident on the sea-cliffs, while from our strategic viewpoint, and accompanied by Portuguese researchers and other keen birders from around the continent, we'll be looking for migrants such as circling Egyptian and Griffon Vultures, Honey



Wilson's Storm-petrel by J Willsher

Buzzards, Hobby, Black Kite, Booted and Short-toed Eagles, harriers, and many other birds of prey. Other possible highlights may include Spectacled Warbler, Black Stork, Short-toed Lark, Tawny Pipit, Eleonora's Falcons, and Iberian Chiffchaff.

The seabird-watching between Sagres and Cape St. Vincent can be equally impressive and, while we won't be embarking on such great voyages of discovery as the illustrious alumni of Henry the Navigator's School, if conditions are right we will be able to enjoy a pelagic boat trip in search of seabirds off this rugged coast. During a morning's boat excursion from Sagres we should see a mouth-watering selection and close views of species which may include Balearic, Cory's, Sooty and Great Shearwaters, European and Wilson's Storm-petrels, and Great Skua, particularly if we are lucky enough to encounter a trawler. Gannet and Yellow-legged Gull will be abundant; add to all this an exciting encounter with a huge pod of Common Dolphins and this 'mini-pelagic' could be the highlight of our autumn week away.

Day 7

Fly UK

Regretfully we must make our way back to Faro for our return flight but, if we have time, we will stop at the Ludo Marsh near Faro Airport for a last taste of Portugal and its wildlife. Here, amongst a good range of birds we can hope to see Purple Gallinule plus perhaps Osprey, Purple Heron, Little Bittern or Collared Pratincole. This is also a marvellous place to watch terrapins, easily visible loafing on half-submerged logs or on mud banks at the reed-bed edge.

Tour grading

Most of our walks will be between two and five kilometres in length and at a slow pace so that we can enjoy the birds and other wildlife we encounter. Breakfast will be taken at around 8.00 a.m. and we aim to leave between 8.30 and 9.00 a.m. for each day's excursion. We will break each day with a leisurely lunch, generally a picnic, and will usually be back at our hotel quite by 6.00 p.m. for tea or an evening drink. At both hotels breakfast and the evening meal will be taken at the respective hotel restaurants. During the first three nights this involves an excellent buffet. On some days there will be optional early morning or late evening bird walks. All walks and excursions are optional to allow you to take a day off if you wish.

Weather

Late-September is a prime time for migrant birds; it is also an ideal time to visit southern Portugal as daytime temperatures are around 70-80°F and the evenings cool. We can expect plenty of sunshine but a range of layered clothing is required, with a light water/windproof garment for the pelagic.

Food and accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday. Both hotels are very comfortable 4-star properties with swimming pools.

Regional Departures

Faro is a popular destination and subject to confirmation we hope to be able to offer direct flights from a selection of regional airports including Gatwick, Stansted, Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh and Bristol. Contact us for details, or make your preference known clearly to us upon booking.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.