

# Wild Portugal: Birds, Flora & Prehistoric Art

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	Fly Porto and transfer to Castelo Rodrigo
<b>Day 2/4</b>	Côa & Douro valleys and surroundings
<b>Day 5-7</b>	Tejo International Natural Park & surroundings
<b>Day 8</b>	Fly Porto to London

### Departs

May

### Focus

Birds, plants, butterflies.

### Grading

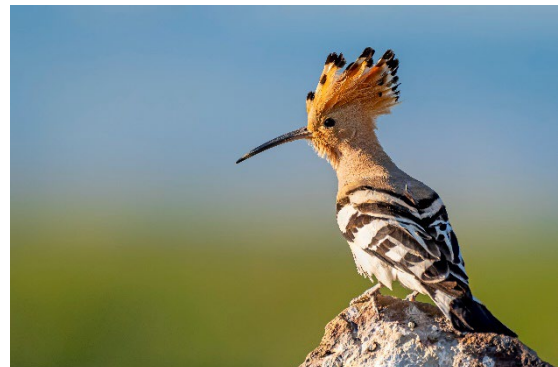
Grade A/B. Easy/moderate day walks.

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code PRT10) or brochure

### Highlights

- Cirl Bunting, Azure-winged Magpie, Hoopoe, Golden Oriole & European Bee-Eater
- Rewilding areas of the Côa Valley
- Night visit to view Europe's largest collection of Paleolithic rock engravings
- A range of endemic flora
- Visits to the Naturtejo UNESCO Geopark



From top to bottom: Egyptian Vulture, Rock Art in the Côa Valley, and Hoopoe.



Naturetrek    Mingledown Barn    Wolf's Lane    Chawton    Alton    Hampshire    GU34 3HJ    UK

**T:** +44 (0)1962 733051

**E:** [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

**W:** [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

## Introduction

This is an 8-day holiday in search of the birds and flora of Portugal's northeastern interior. It offers a combination of some of Portugal's finest and most contrasting habitats, from the open sun-drenched steppes and impressive river gorges in the Côa and Douro valleys to the protected natural region surrounding the Tagus River, cradling the Spanish border. We will explore these exciting and wild habitats during the course of this two-centre, week-long holiday. We will be focusing particularly on the birdlife of the region, but also enjoying the abundant and unusual flora of the plains and valleys, as well as any other wildlife we may encounter during the week.

## Itinerary

*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.*

### Day 1

### Depart London & travel to Castelo Rodrigo

We depart London this morning on our scheduled flight to Porto. On arrival we will drive north-east for around three hours to Castelo Rodrigo; our base for the first 4 nights. We will drive through open country, enjoying views of distant peaks and enjoying the rich farmland, broken by olive groves and the Cork Oak woodland. As we approach Castelo Rodrigo, we may see flocks of Iberian Magpies noisily feeding, whilst numerous raptors hunt overhead and Iberian Grey Shrikes are regularly seen on roadside posts and wires.

Castelo Rodrigo is a picturesque, quaint, hill top town steeped in history and located in a wonderfully rural part of north-eastern Portugal. With stunning views out across the plains to the nearby Spanish border and the wide Douro river valley, a walk around the narrow streets of this special town will be an ideal appetizer to the week ahead. We will stay within its walls at the special guesthouse Casa Cisterna, owned and cherished by Ana and António, who are both biologists and have a leading role in protecting and enhancing the wild areas of their region.

### Day 2

### Steppes & Valleys

After an early breakfast we will leave the hotel and travel across the gently undulating plains and farmland towards the valley of the river Douro. Whilst crossing this rural landscape we shall enjoy a 'mixed bag' of Iberian flora and fauna that we may come across before our picnic lunch by the river.

After lunch we will undertake a short exploration in a river gorge, very close to the Douro itself. The steep rocky slopes show spectacular formations over hundreds of million years old. The habitat here is ideal to find Blue Rock Thrush, Golden Oriole, European Bee Eater, Sardinian Warbler, Rock Bunting, Griffon Vulture, and Kestrel. Many butterflies and flowers can also be seen here, and, by the stream, we might have the chance to spot some local amphibian and reptile species.

Travelling back towards the hotel we may still encounter some of the stars of our tour, such as Iberian Grey Shrike, Montagu's Harrier and Black-shouldered Kite, whilst Corn Buntings and Thekla Larks fly up from the roadsides.

## Day 3

### Ermo das Águias rewilding area

Ermo das Águias is located roughly in the middle of the course of the Côa River, on a steep slope of the left bank, where the landscape of the river valley is marked by crags and rough scarps.

Despite a past of intense soil use across this area, the process of regrowth of the Pyrenean Oak woods and the association with holm-oaks and cork-oaks is already evident. The meadows are gradually recovering their floral diversity, which is now attracting greater numbers of insects, rabbits, and partridges. The slopes of this valley are regularly frequented by Golden Eagle, Black Stork and Griffon Vulture, all of which we hope to see during our time here.

Our lunch will be by the Côa River, sheltered by some Poplar trees. We will continue to explore this area by foot along the trails, hoping to add to our species list with Iberian Chiffchaff, Kingfisher, and Mediterranean Terrapin, before returning towards the hotel.

This evening there will be a very special opportunity to see the rock art of the Côa Valley. This area is world famous as one of the best sites for rock engravings, carved by the nomadic hunter-gatherers in the Paleolithic period some 20,000 years ago. To see these ancient engravings is both interesting and thought-provoking by day, but to see them by night brings added atmosphere and intrigue. We will travel to this special site and listen to the history behind the engravings, which has been classed as a protected UNESCO world heritage site.



## Day 4

### Vale Carapito & Santa Maria de Aguiar Dam

Vale Carapito is located near Vilar Maior, a medical village situated on the northern border of Sabugal, close to Spain. Crossed by the Cesarão stream, a small tributary of the Côa River, the riverside gallery of ash trees runs through meadows where cattle and Roe Deer graze. Pyrenean Oak woodland line the slopes, where countless species of birds can be seen, including Golden Oriole, Hoopoe, Honey Buzzard, Booted Eagle and Woodchat Shrike. Dragonflies and Mediterranean Terrapins take refuge in the aquatic corridor and a variety of butterfly species hover over the flowering meadows. Complementing the rich natural heritage, we have the history and built heritage of Vilar Maior, landmarked with its 13th century castle standing out from its highest point.

Before returning to the hotel, we will stop by a local dam and reservoir for a short walk along its shore, searching for more flowers, butterflies and dragonflies. Both the lake and its surrounding fields are frequented by a number of Griffon & Egyptian Vultures, as well as the likes of European

Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Black Kite, Red Kite, Short-toed Eagle, Booted Eagle, Woodchat Shrike, Iberian Magpie, and several species of larks and warblers.

## Day 5

## Transfer to Tejo International Natural Park

Today it is time to say farewell to our hosts and leave Castelo Rodrigo, travelling southward to Termas de Monfortinho, our new base for the duration of the tour. This small location, on the border with Spain and within the Tejo Natural Park, has been famed since roman times for the quality of its thermal springs.

On the journey south we will cross some excellent habitat and will make regular stops should any exciting birds be encountered. One site of significant interest is to the Toirões bog: a significant rewilding project that has transformed what was once an overexploited mining ground to a wetland oasis, providing refuge to Otter, Black Stork and Grey Heron, as well as recently, a breeding pair of Marsh Harrier.

We will expect to arrive at our hotel in the afternoon, where we will refresh and take dinner, before completing our checklists and unwinding after a long day.

## Day 6 & 7

## Tejo International Natural Park & Surroundings

Over the next two days, we will explore the Region of Tejo International Natural Park. Across the 26-thousand-hectare park, birdlife is prolific, and we will hope to see many target species such as Iberian Imperial Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Blue Rock thrush and Lesser Kestrel just to name a few!

Conditions permitting, we will split our two days across the park and its surroundings in the following sites:

### Tejo International Natural Park

The border section of the International Tagus River and the surrounding valleys is one of the least occupied and frequented areas of Portugal. The Tagus and Erges river valleys have a truly "wild" character and provide a considerable scenic value. On certain slopes, as in the area around Segura, scarped shaped outcrops rise from the ground forming deep rocky canyons and contain the charismatic flowering species from southern European landscapes, namely Cork and Holm Oak woods, and dense olive groves. In the lesser fertile soils, *Cistus ladanifer* is dominant.

Through Segura's roman bridge, we will cross the border into Spain and drive to the nearby Spanish old town of Alcántara, crossing the Tejo River over a 2000-year-old roman bridge. In town, a walking tour on the old part will lead us to the old monastery, now occupied by a large colony of White Storks, shared by Jackdaws and Lesser Kestrels.

## Penha Garcia & Idanha-a-Velha

Fossils from the Penha Garcia Ichnological Park are the key feature of one of the most important geosites of the Naturtejo Global Geopark under UNESCO. In the quartzite cliffs shadowing the Ponsul river valley, 36 different animal behaviours dating back to 480 million years ago have been identified through the fossil records. Biological patterns line the vertical quartzite beds, like paintings exhibited in an impressive art gallery, representing the life modes of marine communities that once inhabited a now non-existent sea in the southern hemisphere. Evidencing extraordinary abundance and preservation, some of the most complex behavioural patterns developed by trilobites during their lifetime are to be seen, providing classic evidence of the evolution of this major group of arthropods.

Nestled between the Pônsul River and three gentle hills, we find the modest Idanha-a-Velha. Underneath its humble urban constructions lie the ruins of a city with a vast history. Founded by the Romans at the end of the 1st century BC, it was called *Oppidum Stipendiarium* in the time of Augustus, becoming *Civitas Igaeditanorum* between 69 and 96 AD (reign of the Flávios), at which time it was promoted to a *municipium*. The current village offers a glimpse, here and there, of the remains of this Roman city. The city and its territory were integrated into the Suebi kingdom, and in 585, with the end of the Suebi kingdom, the Visigothic kingdom begins, maintaining some of the city's vitality. In 715, Egitânia was taken by the Muslims, but it is not clear whether they lingered here. But its key position, between the Christian and Muslim world, gave it a strategic importance that the Roman road from Mérida to Braga reinforced. During medieval times it was possessed by the Templars, and later by the Order of Christ, who would maintain guardianship over it. The isolation the village experienced resulted in the preservation of its main points of interest, having been legislated in Portugal in the restricted group of 'Historical Villages'.

## Day 8

## Fly London

We will return to Porto late morning and board our return flight to London Gatwick.

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## Tour Grading

Grade A/B. During our stay in the Côa Valley, we will be following the format of a traditional birding tour, with no strenuous walking involved, although we will be making a few early starts! We will be a fair amount of time botanising and bird watching on foot, taking a number of easy/moderate day, or half day, walks. Paths may be uneven and/or slightly steep in places, so good footwear is recommended.

## Food & Accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday with just alcoholic drinks and personal items being extra. We will be staying in excellent family-run establishments. All rooms in both hotels having private facilities and a swimming pool.



## 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](http://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.

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Erges River Canyon (Fernando Romao)