Wild Portugal: Birds, Flora & Prehistoric Art

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

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

Departs
Late April – Early 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, Iberian 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, Toadflax *Linaria aeruginea*, Collared Pratincole. Images ©Shutterstock and Fernando Romao.

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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


Douro Valley

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, hilltop 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 Duoro 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.


Blue Rock Thrush

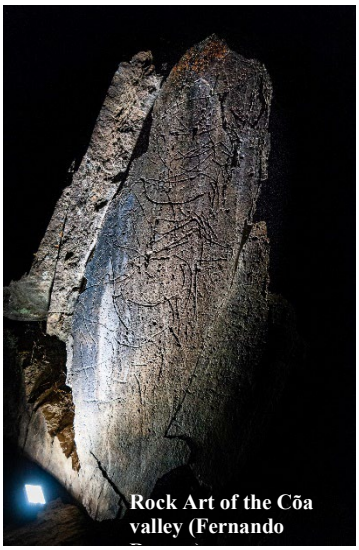
After lunch we will undertake a short exploration in a river gorge, very close to the Douro itself. The steep rocky slopes show spectacular formations over hundreds of million years old. The habitat here is ideal to find Blue Rock Thrush, Golden Oriole, European Bee-eater, Sardinian Warbler, Rock Bunting, 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 land use across this area, the process of regrowth of the Pyrenean Oak woods and the association with Holm Oaks and Cork Oaks has already become evident since the rewilding work began. The meadows are gradually recovering their floral diversity, which is now attracting greater numbers of insects, European Rabbits and Red-legged 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 Spanish Terrapin, before returning towards the hotel.


Rock Art of the Côa valley (Fernando

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

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 woods line the slopes, where seemingly countless species of birds can be seen, including Golden Oriole, Hoopoe, Honey Buzzard, Booted Eagle and Woodchat Shrike. Dragonflies and Spanish Terrapins take refuge in the aquatic corridor and a variety of butterfly species dance 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 and Egyptian Vultures, as well as the likes of European Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Black Kite, Red Kite, Short-toed Snake 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 International 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 the Toirões bog, a rewilding project that has transformed what was once an overexploited mining ground into a wetland oasis, providing refuge for Otter, Black Stork and Grey Heron, as well as, more recently, a breeding pair of Marsh Harriers.

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

Days 6 & 7 Tejo International Natural Park

Over the next two days, we will explore the Region of Tejo International Natural Park. Across the 26,000-hectare park, birdlife is prolific, and we will hope to see many target species such as Spanish Imperial Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Blue Rock thrush and Lesser Kestrel, to name but a few!

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

The border section of the 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, great escarpments rise up and form deep, rocky canyons and which contain much of the characteristic flowering species of southern European landscapes, within huge stretches of Cork and Holm Oak woods and dense olive groves. In the less fertile soils, *Cistus ladanifer* is dominant and fills the air with its heady scent.

Via Segura's 2000-year old Roman bridge, we will cross the border into Spain and drive to the nearby Spanish old town of Alcántara. A walking tour of the old part of town will lead us to the old monastery, now occupied by a large colony of White Storks and 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.

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 survived through the Suebi kingdom and Visigoth periods, was at an important meeting point between the Christian and Muslim worlds and spent time under control of the Templars. The isolation of the village has resulted in the preservation of its main points of interest and it currently enjoys protection under Portugal's 'Historical Villages' scheme.

Day 8 Fly London

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

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 spend a fair amount of time botanising and birdwatching 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 have 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, 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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Idanha-a-Velha