

Autumn Birding in Southern Portugal

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 September - 1 October 2013

Report compiled by Philip Thompson



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leader:	Philip Thompson Dave Nevitt
Participants :-	Richard Vincett Janice Vincett Gareth Jenkins David Pope Jennifer Pope Andy McLoughlin Steve Jones Ken Leggett Colin Taylor Mick Tapper Jen Tapper Chris Carter Alan Wilding Anne Wilding David King Margaret McLeish

Day 1

Wednesday 25th September

Once the group had all assembled from the various UK flights we transferred directly to our hotel in Tavira. After allowing time for everyone to check in and freshen up we met in the hotel reception to take a walk exploring the surrounding area of salt marsh, estuary and scrub in which the hotel is set. The first birds encountered, and which would become familiar during the tour, were several Crested Larks scurrying around the sandy ground and scolding Sardinian Warblers in the Tamarisk giving fleeting views.

Scanning across the tidal estuary a small number of white-winged Mediterranean Gulls were picked up among the widespread Yellow-legged Gulls. Wading birds were the main focus of attention with a broad range of species present on the tidal shores and salt pans. A total of 20 different species were seen during our walk of which the highlights were both species of Godwit, Black-winged Stilts, and Curlew Sandpiper. Towering over the scuttling and diminutive Plovers, Dunlin and Stints were 20+ Greater Flamingos, most of which were rather dingy plumaged youngsters. Other taller wading birds comprised several White Storks, Spoonbills, herons and egrets.

After a couple of hours gentle ambling the toll of an early morning start for many of the group began to tell. We returned to the hotel to relax before dinner and an early night.

Day 2

Thursday 26th September

Our first full day in the field was spent exploring several coastal areas of the Rio Formosa and Castro Marim National Parks. We began with a trip east along the coast to Castro Marim where we spent the morning. Once again wading birds were at the forefront of our observations. The saltpan where we began our first walk held a good level of water this year and as a consequence a fine array of birds. A similar selection of species to yesterday was seen but also included our first Spotted Redshank, Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers and Common Snipe. We slowly walked around the raised embankment between the pan and a tidal creek. Unusually a rather moribund Black-necked Grebe was spotted lying on the exposed mud in the creek, which perked up a little to begin swimming and hopefully go on to a full recovery.

We continued our walk for a view over the salt pans at the heart of the reserve, which unfortunately were being actively worked with heavy machinery and workers. This resulted in the well-known large roost of scarce Audouin's Gulls being displaced further away, to only provide rather unsatisfactory views through the shimmering heat haze. Good numbers of Greater Flamingos and Spoonbills were seen throughout the area. We retraced our steps to then drive on to the visitor centre in the north-eastern corner of the reserve alongside the Gardiana River, which forms the border with Spain. Additional birds seen here were a small number of Caspian Terns and an Osprey perched distantly in a dead tree within the reserve. We rested here to have a picnic lunch before moving on once more.

Our afternoon was then spent in the western end of the Rio Formosa NP with a visit to the freshwater lagoon within the golfing complex of Quinto do Lago. Here we were to encounter a different selection of birds that depend on this rare resource of fresh water on the Algarve coastline. Most notable of these was a single Little Bittern, several good sightings of Purple Swamphens, various species of duck which included a rare vagrant female White-headed Duck and a single introduced Black-headed Weaver in the reed beds. The surrounding vegetated dune scrub held several warblers and flycatchers as well as the ever popular Hoopoes and Iberian Magpies. Overhead the splendid sight of a flock of 200+ Glossy Ibis passed by, a species which until fairly recently was a very rare bird in Portugal.

Day 3

Friday 27th September

The weather took a turn for the worse today with a front coming off the Atlantic bringing heavy showers and strong winds. Things did not bode well but we managed to avoid all of the rain and our day was not affected unduly. In contrast to the previous days spent on the coast we travelled inland to the wide-open spaces and semi-steppe of the Alentejo. After an earlier start we made good time on the open roads to arrive in the Alentejo by early morning allowing us time to scan and travel through this large area. At our first roadside stop after a little careful scanning a few fast flying Black-bellied Sandgrouse were picked up by most of the group joined by the view of a couple of Black Vulture and Spanish Imperial Eagles clearly unbothered by the strong wind. A short move up a dirt road to a recently constructed dam lake produced a Dartford Warbler seen by some by the vehicle and Little Owl perched on a group of nearby boulders. The edge of the lake had attracted a couple of Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers and a Green Sandpiper whilst among the recently planted olives scurried numerous Red-legged Partridges.

We moved on, passing through a couple of typical small rural villages before being brought to an abrupt halt outside one such village with the sighting of four Great Bustards very close to the road. They strode sedately away after providing some excellent views for the whole group. Whilst stopped here we were also able to pick up a small number of Black-bellied Sandgrouse that flew in and settled on the ground. Due to the heavy grazing from the local livestock the grass was very short enabling us to see these elusive birds on the ground, although their incredible cryptic colouring still made them difficult to pick out for some. As a final bonus another couple of Imperial Eagles were sighted cruising the wind along a nearby ridge, periodically dropping out of sight to then reappear shortly after as they effortlessly rode the air currents.

Our next stop was alongside the main Mertola/Castro Verde road where we were very fortunate in picking up a large flock of Great Bustards in the parched and golden grasslands totalling 22 birds. With a successful morning under our belts it seemed timely to head to the LPN Visitor Centre for our lunch appointment, where the local ladies from Castro Verde amply provided us with a meal of gargantuan proportions! Whilst eating our meal we were able to watch a couple of films explaining the importance of the area for birds and some of the work carried out. After lunch we moved on taking the lesser dirt roads to culminate in a stop at the Chapel de Aracelis set atop one of the highest points of the area which provides a splendid view of the surrounding area. The strong wind made for a rather buffeted visit and no soaring raptors! It only remained to make the return journey to our coastal hotel through some heavy rain showers.

Day 4

Saturday 28th September

Today we transferred from our Tavira base to Sagres in the far southwest where we would spend the remainder of the tour. We firstly had a pre-breakfast walk around the general hotel area to check over some other pans and marsh. Our main objective was achieved in finding, and unfortunately flushing, a large roosting flock of 29 Stone Curlews!

With breakfast and loading formalities completed we set off towards Salgados Marsh an hour's journey away. Here we would spend the morning birding at this vitally important but threatened site. Work had already commenced in draining/developing the site. After various enquiries it would possibly seem that all is not lost with the site and that the current works are being carried out to improve access with boardwalks and to generally 'restore' the site! There will doubtless still be some building development so we will have to wait and see next year what condition this site is in...The current works had dug a large drainage ditch across two thirds of the lake resulting in a radical reduction in open water of a much shallower depth. The large drained area of mud was still damp with numerous puddles with the result that there was a profusion of small waders actively feeding mainly comprising Dunlin and Ringed Plover. The remaining water held a large number of Glossy Ibis, White Storks, Spoonbills and Greater Flamingos, but due to the shallowness, few ducks. Scurrying among the isolated patches of reed were several Purple Swamphens. We then walked through the Fig scrub to the boardwalk alongside the coastal dunes. These bushes held several migrant Willow Warbler and Chiffchaffs.

We moved on a short distance to a nearby café for refreshments before taking a rough sandy track to an area of pine woodland overlooking a small area of marsh for our picnic lunch. We were then due to complete our journey to our hotel overlooking the harbour in Sagres, but stopped en route to admire a hunting Black-winged Kite seen from the motorway. We arrived at the hotel in good time to allow everyone an opportunity to check, relax and explore the surrounding area before dinner.

Day 5

Sunday 29th September

We began the day with the short drive from the hotel to an area of grassland on the Sagres peninsular. En route we encountered a large flock of 30+ Pallid Swifts, mixed with swallows, feeding low over the heath providing excellent views of these generally tricky birds to confidently ID. As we neared our parking area we passed through a group of semi-derelict farm buildings on which a pair of Little Owls were prominently perched surveying their territory. The walk through the grassland area produced little of note. Scanning the general area several raptors were spotted, most of which were Booted Eagles but also included an Osprey, Honey Buzzard and a few Short-toed Eagles all of which were rather distant.

We then relocated to an area of sandy heath full of specialist and endemic plants. On alighting from the vehicles we were gifted with the arrival of a group of raptors soaring low overhead comprising 2 juvenile Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed and Booted Eagles and a Black Kite all of which gave great views to compare the relative diagnostic markings and profiles for future reference! A walk was then taken through this wonderful habitat among which several species of elusive flitting Sylvia warblers teased joined by a small number of Spotted and Pied Flycatchers.

Lunch was taken in the lee of the Aleppo Pine shelter bed overlooking the Dittrichia heath. From here we then took a slow walk towards the Raptor Viewpoint hillock. A Nightingale was briefly spotted shooting into cover to never be seen again. Among an area of taller pines an Iberian Chiffchaff was picked out on call but could not unfortunately be spotted. Once at the viewpoint small numbers of raptors were passing of a similar nature to our earlier group (and in all likelihood, due to the nature of this spot, were some of the same birds completing their circuit of the area).

Day 6

Monday 30th September

The day dawned with low cloud and drizzly rain so we delayed our start till 10:30 when the rain eased. With sea conditions still unsuitable for any boat-based activities we spent the morning taking a walk from the hotel to the Ponta da Atalaia for some shore-based sea watching. A few passerine migrants were flitting among the low coastal scrub on the headland before we arrived at the point. We were soon able to pick up numerous Northern Gannets passing, of which the majority were young birds in an assortment of plumages. These were joined by 30+ Cory's Shearwaters, which showed the difference in size, colouring and flight characteristics for the group to distinguish. Also of note were a couple of Common Scoter, a Great Skua and pair of Shags. On the return walk a Blue Rock thrush was spotted on the rooftops of the nearby villas.

Our intention next was to return to our previous picnic spot but plans changed when on the drive there a trio of Little Bustards were seen in flight over the grassland, necessitating a stop and scan. Lunch was taken here while the group hopefully took up a vigil. We were rewarded with a second sighting of the birds as they flew and relocated a short distance. Also present were a trio of Little Owls perched along a low ruined wall that kept interest alive as we waited. A stop at Cape St. Vincent was taken next where a couple of Black Redstarts, more shearwaters and Gannets were seen alongside a little shopping!

On the return drive we stopped at a rather forlorn unfinished area of housing where we were able to find one of the local Blue Rock Thrushes for those of the group that had missed the earlier bird. To round off the trip we

were then entertained by the large flock of local Red-billed Choughs swooping over the cliffs in their customary effortless way.

Day 7

Tuesday 1st October

An early start to catch the various flights prevented any further birding activity beyond looking from the vehicle windows as we drove to the airport and our safe journeys home...

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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	September/October						
			25	26	27	28	29	30	1
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		1	50	20	3	4	
2	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	2	30		12			
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓		✓			
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		12		4			
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		1					
6	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		4					
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		2					
8	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>						2	
9	White-headed Duck	<i>Oxyura leucocephala</i>		1					
10	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>						50	
11	Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>		1					
12	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		12		1			
13	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		8					
14	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	20	30	12	6			
15	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	5	10		40			
16	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		200		70			
17	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	25	50	50	10			
18	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>		1					
19	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		30	75	✓			
20	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	6	2	5			
21	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	6	20	20	30			
22	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>						65	
23	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				7		2	
24	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		6		12			
25	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		1			1	1	
26	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>					3		
27	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				1			
28	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>					2		
29	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>					2		
30	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			1				
31	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>			4				
32	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		2			4		
33	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		1			1		
34	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>			6				
35	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1		1		2	1	
36	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>					30	5	
37	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		2	8	3	4	6	
38	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1		1		
39	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>			26				
40	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>						3	
41	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		8		4			
42	Crake sp. Spotted?	<i>Porzana porzana?</i>		1					
43	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓		✓			
44	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓		✓			
45	Eurasian Stone-Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedichnemus</i>				29			
46	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	8						
47	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	4	✓	✓	✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	September/October						
			25	26	27	28	29	30	1
48	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	2	20		1			
49	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	2			2			
50	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	3	3					
51	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	6	✓	2	✓		7	
52	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>		3	1				
53	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	15	✓		4			
54	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		4					
55	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	2	✓		6			
56	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	1	2		2			
57	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	12	✓		2		1	
58	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	1	2		H			
59	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		1					
60	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	6	✓		2			
61	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	1	✓		H			
62	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		2	1	2			
63	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	1	6		4	1	1	
64	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	10	✓		4			
65	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	1	2		4			
66	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	6	6		✓			
67	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	2	5		1			
68	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	3	4		1			
69	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	30	✓		✓			
70	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
71	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus</i>	6	3					
72	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>		100+					
73	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				✓			
74	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
76	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>		4					
77	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	8	✓				3	
78	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>				2		6	
79	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>						1	
80	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>			10				
81	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
82	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		1	2				
83	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>					2		
84	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
85	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>	H	H	2	1	2	4	
86	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>						2	
87	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		1			30	8	
88	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		4					
89	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		3	1	1			
90	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>		2	15	2			
91	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>				1			
92	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>					3	1	
93	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		3		2			
94	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		✓	✓	✓			
95	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	2	2	4	8			
96	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>					4	46	
97	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>				4	6	20	
98	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>			12		6		

	Common name	Scientific name	September/October							
			25	26	27	28	29	30	1	
99	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		2	6				2	
100	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			H					
101	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
102	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>					10	✓		
103	Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>			1		6			
104	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>			2					
105	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		2			1	1		
106	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	4	✓	1	4	6			
107	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓	✓				2	
108	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	4	✓	✓	6	2	15		
109	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		2						
110	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		3		8	4	2		
111	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		1		6	12			
112	Iberian Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus ibericus</i>					H			
113	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>					1			
114	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	2	4		4	6	8		
115	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>					1	2		
116	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			1			1		
117	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>						1		
118	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>			2		6	6		
119	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	6	✓	4	✓	✓	✓		
120	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		2						
121	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓	✓	20	✓	✓		
122	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
123	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>					1			
124	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				2	2	5		
125	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>					1			
126	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			4	6	6			
127	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	2	6	6	2	10	✓		
128	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	1	1	✓	✓	✓	8		
129	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>					1	1		
130	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>					4			
131	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		2	1	2	3			
132	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
133	Black-headed Weaver	<i>Ploceus melanocephalus</i>		1						
134	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>		1	3	15	6	4		
135	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		4	2	4				
136	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>			2		2	2		
137	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>					H			
138	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>						H		
139	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		✓			2			
140	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓		6	6	12		
141	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>				6	12			
142	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			1					
143	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			✓	8	✓	✓		

Mammals

Rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Butterflies

Swallowtail, *Papilion machaon*

Clouded Yellow, *Colias crocea*

Long-tailed Blue, *Lampides boeticus*

Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*

Small White, *Pieris rapae*

Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*

Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*

Meadow Brown, *Maniola jurtina*

Reptiles & Amphibians

European Pond Terrapin, *Emys orbicularis*

Moorish Gecko, *Tarentola mauritanica*