

Autumn Birding in Southern Portugal

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 - 27 September 2017



Black-winged Stilt



Sceilphron destillatorium



Common Dolphin



Wilson's Storm Petrel

Report compiled by Philip Thompson
Images courtesy of Dave and Jenny Levy



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Tour participants: Philip Thompson (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 21st September

After flying from the UK and arriving safely into Faro Airport, we were soon loaded into the minibus and on our way to our first hotel of the tour in Tavira. Several of the common local birds were seen on the journey that culminated with our passing among the working salt pans alongside the hotel. Here we glimpsed several waders, gulls and passerines before pulling up at the hotel entrance, where we were soon allocated rooms and had some time to relax before a brief informal group meeting where we talked over some points of the coming trip before heading on to dinner.

Day 2

Friday 22nd September

Our first excursion found us heading east and visiting Castro Marim Natural Park. After a short journey we soon arrived and disembarked to take in the many species of birds present at one of the unused salt pans. Water levels this year were productive in attracting numerous waders, all actively feeding in the rich mud. Most obvious feeding among the waders were good numbers of Greater Flamingoes of various ages, the majority being youngsters. Particularly good numbers of Black-tailed Godwits were present alongside numerous smaller wading species such as Dunlin, Little Stint and Curlew Sandpiper. In the fringing deep drainage dyke a brief view of a fast retreating Bluethroat was obtained. We did a little better further around when some patient waiting allowed everyone at least a glimpse of this elusive and skulking species as it fed occasionally on the edge of the mud before hiding in the salt marsh vegetation. Several Kingfishers were seen during our walk, usually picked up as they called in flight and shot past. A delightful flock of Slender-billed Gulls showed beautifully in the morning sun and allowed a close approach and observation.

We slowly walked the raised earth embankment surrounding the pan heading towards the central actively-worked area of salt pans. Our aim was to try and spot the large roost of Audouin's Gulls that roost there. Unfortunately this year they had opted to use an area deep within the site and unapproachable allowing only very distant shimmering views through the telescopes. We did at least add Avocet, Black-winged Stilt and Little Ringed Plover to our wader tally.

We retraced our steps to reboard the minibus to drive around to the opposite side of the reserve, where we took our picnic lunch on the shaded visitor centre benches. Scanning the nearby wide estuary of the River Gardiana, an Osprey was spotted perched on a convenient post. Once lunch was finished we took a very short walk to overlook the nearby pans. Several Spotted Redshanks were present among a similar range of waders from our earlier walk. Otherwise things did not offer much new so, in light of the hot midday sun, we opted to curtail any further walking and to then drive to our second destination of the day.

This was the very attractive freshwater lagoon of Quinto do Lago, which we reached after an hour's transfer. Here we were met with a rather different selection of birds. Highlights included the resident Little Bitterns, Glossy Ibis, Western Swamphen and the introduced Black-headed Weavers. Ducks present included numerous Gadwall and Shoveler. In the pine sheltered between the lagoon and the sea a few migrant passerines were present, the highlights being an elusive Subalpine Warbler and a couple of Pied Flycatchers. Hoopoes and

Iberian Magpies added a splash of colour and exoticism to the show. Among the Odonata present were several Iberian Bluetails and the scarce Long Skimmer, a recent colonist of this part of Europe.

Day 3

Saturday 23rd September

Today was spent exploring the inland region of the Alentejo, which began with a rapid transfer north and first stop within the southern region of the Castro Verde Special Protection Area. The day got off to an exciting start with the sighting of a cruising Spanish Imperial Eagle heading towards us as we drove, necessitating a rapid stop and disembarkation! We were just in time for a close flyover giving outstanding views of this very rare raptor. By lucky chance this was then shortly followed by an adult Bonelli's Eagle swooping past low overhead also!

At our first scheduled stop we spent some time by the roadside scanning the surrounding open country and enjoying the incredible silence of this thinly populated region. During this stop we picked up a great mix of birds; notably a few small parties of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Little Owl and a couple of distant Griffon Vultures. The gently sloping field behind us held a large winter flock of Calandra Larks that flew up from time to time indicating how many there were, most being invisible once settled among the dried yellow grasses. We then drove on a short distance to view across a small irrigation dam that held plentiful water still. The muddy edges held a small number of Green Sandpipers and Little Ringed Plovers with a single Common Sandpiper. A rather out-of-range pair of Mute Swans looked rather out of place! Another good find beneath the dam wall was a beautiful Violet Dropwing dragonfly.

Moving on, we undertook a slow exploration of the dry arid grasslands, scanning occasionally in the hope of picking up any Bustards. We were out of luck and with time running on, we continued on to the LPN Visitor Centre where we enjoyed a splendid local lunch on the outside tables. For the remainder of the afternoon we continued in our slow progress and periodic scanning but only found numerous passage Northern Wheatears to add to our earlier list of species.

Day 4

Sunday 24th September

The morning was spent walking from the hotel and exploring some of the salt marsh, river and saltpan habitats that were in close proximity. A nice selection of waders was present, joined by passing Spoonbills and Flamingoes. The scrub was rather disappointing with only a few Willow Warblers mixed with the ubiquitous Sardinian Warblers.

We then completed the loading of the minibus and set out for Sagres where our next hotel lay. En route we called in at Salgados Lagoon where we spent an hour or so birding before our picnic lunch. Birds present were a varied selection of species with notable new finds including Black Tern and a single Bar-tailed Godwit, obligingly standing next to a Black-tailed Godwit relative for comparison. Ducks, waders, terns and gulls made up the majority of species with good numbers of Glossy Ibis showing close by, and a couple of Swampheens skulking at the reedy edges.

We enjoyed our lunch near the beach beneath a large shady tree keeping the hot sun at bay. A few of the group opted for a quick paddle in the sea before we set out to complete our journey. Once in Sagres we were soon

allocated rooms with some time to relax and explore the hotel and enjoy the fine views over the harbour and out to sea.

Day 5

Monday 25th September

The morning was spent undertaking a pelagic trip out to the edge of the continental shelf in search of seabirds. As we left the coastline behind us we were fortunate to enjoy pleasant calm seas and a number of excellent encounters with pods of Common Dolphins that swam alongside the boat and could be seen beneath the surface as they kept pace with us. Turning our attention to the birds, we sought out a deep-sea trawler that drew in a multitude of birds, most notable being the numbers of Great Shearwaters that allowed a very close approach as they loafed on the surface, being reluctant to fly. Less obvious were the diminutive Storm Petrels that periodically passed by the boat as they kept up a constant roving search for food, most of which were European Storm Petrels but did include a couple of Wilson's Storm Petrels, one of which came particularly close and executed the 'walking-on-water' feeding manner and allowed for clear diagnostic distinction from the commoner European Storm Petrel. Harassing the gulls were a number of Great Skuas.

Back on land we retired back to the hotel to freshen up and change clothing before meeting up once more and heading out in the minibus for our afternoon itinerary. We began with a short drive to the Cabranosa heath and a picnic lunch in the shelter of 'The Hedge' shelter bed. From here we drove on to park near the mound of the Cabranosa raptor viewpoint. During our time spent here patiently scanning the skies around us, a fine mix of raptors were seen in small numbers, most notably a couple of Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed Snake and Booted Eagles, and a stunning black melanistic form of Montagu's Harrier.

We next drove on to have a quick scan across the Vale Santo heathland where we were very fortunate in quickly picking out a trio of Little Bustards that were slowly moving through the heathy plants. Elated with our success, we continued on to take a brief stop at the headland of Cape St. Vincent before retracing our steps and taking a pleasant coffee break looking out to sea.

Day 6

Tuesday 26th September

The early risers took a sort walk before breakfast out onto the nearby headland overlooking the harbour. A few small passerines were present, mainly comprising Yellow Wagtails and Northern Wheatears, but the highlights were a fine male Blue Rock Thrush on a small building roof and, rather unexpectedly flushed from the scrub, were a trio of resting Short-eared Owls!

After breakfast we set out on the main day's excursion beginning with a stop at the Vale Santo farm buildings where we watched a pair of Little Owls peering out from among the roof tiles, a couple of Hoopoes and a pair of Tawny Pipits on the roadside pasture. We had another encounter with two Little Bustards in a similar area to yesterday before driving on to take a pleasant walk through the vegetated sand dune system with its rich array of specialised and endemic plants. Passage passerines seen during the walk included several flycatchers and warblers and a Common Redstart.

We then returned to the Cabranosa mound to spend some further time raptor watching after our picnic. Again patience was required as we picked up various species, initially quite distantly, but with luck we had close

overhead encounters with Honey Buzzard, Booted and Short-toed Snake Eagles and Black Kite. With nothing new appearing on the horizon we took a walk among the pines in search of anything of interest. Finds included the same melanistic Montagu's Harrier coming much closer, another Short-eared Owl and some rather frustratingly elusive dragonflies that were reluctant to allow a close approach when settled and persisted in their rapid patrols up and down the shelter of the pine track. It was decided that they were most probably all Lesser and Blue Emperors. The hoped for Migrant Emperor remained unfound.

Day 7

Wednesday 27th September

Waking at our usual time for breakfast, we were soon heading directly for the airport and our homeward flights. The only sightings of the day were of the regular birds seen from the minibus windows. Once back in the UK, another Naturetrek adventure came to an end.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			22	23	24	25	26
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		4			3
2	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		2			
3	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓		✓		
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓		✓		
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓		✓		
6	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	✓		4		
7	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>				50	
8	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>				2	
9	European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>				12	
10	Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>				2	
11	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	6	7	12		
12	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	5				
13	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	50		25		
14	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>				1	2
15	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			5		
16	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	1		50	3	
17	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	12	3	40		
18	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>	1				
19	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	10	6		✓	✓
20	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	4		12	8	3
21	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓		
22	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			15	✓	✓
23	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				6	
24	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1		4	1	
25	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	2				
26	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>				4	4
27	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>				2	1
28	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>				2	
29	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>		6			
30	Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>		1			
31	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>				1	2
32	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	1		1		
33	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>				1	1
34	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1			
35	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>		1			
36	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>		2			
37	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	3		1	1
38	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	1		2	6	6
39	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>				3	2
41	Western Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	4				
42	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	4		4		
43	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	✓		✓		
44	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	30	✓	✓		
45	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	30		30		
46	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		3	1		
47	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	4		3		

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			22	23	24	25	26
48	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓		✓		
49	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	1	4			
50	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	10		4		
51	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		1	1		
52	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	100	1	✓		
53	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>			1		
54	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	10		4		H
55	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	1		1		
56	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	30				
57	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓		✓		
58	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	2				
59	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		4			
60	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	10	1	6	5	2
61	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	1				
62	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	6	✓	4		
63	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	1	✓	✓		
64	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	40	✓	✓		
65	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	12	✓	2		
66	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓	✓		
67	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	1				
68	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓		✓		
69	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>	✓		✓		
70	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>	40				
71	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>	2				
72	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	6	✓	1	2	
75	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>			2		
76	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>			1		
77	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				5	
78	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>		20			
79	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		1			
81	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1			2
83	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>					4
84	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	4		H		
85	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	6	3		2	3
86	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				H	H
87	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	1	✓			
88	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	1				
89	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	12	✓	✓		
90	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓		
91	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>			2		50
92	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>		10			
93	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>		6			
94	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		6			2
95	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>		70			
96	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	2
97	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>				✓	✓
98	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>				2	6

	Common name	Scientific name	September				
			22	23	24	25	26
99	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	2				
100	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1		6	6	
101	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			4		
102	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	✓	✓	✓		
103	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		H			
104	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		8	3	1	4
105	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	10	✓	✓		✓
106	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	H				
107	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>					1
108	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>		3			
109	Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>	1				1
110	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
111	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
112	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
113	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>	2				
114	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				2	2
115	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	1				1
116	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			4		2
117	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
118	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
119	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>					1
120	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			1		3
121	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	2				✓
122	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
123	Black-headed Weaver	<i>Ploceus melanocephalus</i>	7		3		
124	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>		20	4		
125	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>	2	6	12	4	10
126	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		2			1
127	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		2			1
128	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>		2			2
129	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>					6
130	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>					2
131	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
132	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					1
133	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		6			20

Mammals

Iberian Hare, *Lepus granatensis*

Common Dolphin, *Delphinus delphis*

Rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Reptile & Amphibians

Iberian Water Frog, *Rana perezi*

Moorish Gecko, *Tarentola mauritanica*

European Pond Terrapin, *Emys orbicularis*

Large Psammodromus, *Psammodromus algeris*

Butterflies

Swallowtail, *Papilion machaon*

Bath White, *Pontia daplidice*

Geranium Bronze, *Cacyreus marshalli*

Long-tailed Blue, *Lampides boeticus*

Small White, *Pieris rapae*

Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*

Lang's Short-tailed Blue, *Leptotes pirithous*

Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*

Southern Brown Argus, *Aricia cramera*
False Mallow Skipper, *Carcharodus tripolinus*

Meadow Brown, *Maniola jurtina*

Dragonflies & Damselflies

Iberian Bluetail, *Ischnura graellsii*
Lesser Emperor, *Anax parthenope*
Long Skimmer, *Orthetrum trinacia*
Southern Darter, *Sympetrum meridionale*
Violet Dropwing, *Trithemis annulata*

Blue Emperor, *Anax imperator*
Keeled Skimmer, *Orthetrum coerulescens*
Red-veined Darter, *Sympetrum fonscolombii*
Broad Scarlet, *Crocothemis erythraea*
Black Percher, *Diplacodes lefebvrii*