

Autumn Birding in Southern Portugal

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 - 26 September 2018



Bluethroat



Greater Flamingo



Slender-billed Gulls

Report and images compiled by Keith Buchanan



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Day 1

Thursday 20th September

The main incoming flight to Faro was well into the evening and so by the time we got loaded up and were heading west to our hotel it was already getting dark. Fortunately a taxi protest on the road did not delay us, but nevertheless, it was completely dark when we arrived at our comfortable hotel in Tavira. The tantalising glimpses of salt pans in the headlights whetted our appetite for the following day.

Day 2

Friday 21st September

With a longish journey in prospect, we left our hotel at 0830 and initially headed due east towards the Spanish border. Just before the border we turned due north and began making our way up through the hills towards the Alentejo. As we approached the lovely old town of Mertola we turned west towards Almodovar and the change in landscape from the wooded hills of the Algarve to the flat, cereal-growing steppes of the Alentejo started to become clear. We turned north again and began to wind our way slowly through the minor roads which penetrate the Castro Verde SPA (Special Protection Area, designated under the EU Birds Directive). Southern Grey Shrikes began to appear on the wires and mobs of Iberian Magpies flew up from the road verges into neighbouring trees. Stopping just after a bridge to do a general scan, we admired the Red-rumped Swallows hawking above us while noting the migrant Northern Wheatears with their characteristic, upright, stance. Just then the cry of 'raptor' went up and we turned round to see a magnificent adult Spanish Imperial Eagle circling to the south. A great start!

Proceeding north, our next stop was at a small dam. We stopped at the entrance road for something sitting had caught our attention. After getting a scope onto it we identified it as a Short-toed Snake Eagle, perching on top of an electricity pole. We drove on to the reservoir itself, a relatively new creation but already attracting a varied bird fauna. Around the shore we located Little Ringed Plover, Snipe and Common Sandpiper. Out on the water was a small party of Gadwall and Little Grebes.

Leaving the reservoir, we proceeded to work our way north, stopping to scan for our main quarry – Great Bustard. It was getting hot by this stage and the Bustards were elusive – no doubt sheltering from the sun, but we did find spiralling groups of Griffon Vulture, benefitting from the thermals generated by the heat.

Our lunch stop was at the LPN centre at Vale Goncalinho. Here we were treated to a sumptuous meal of traditional Portuguese food, served on the veranda under welcome shade. Here Common and Red-veined Darters kept us company.

We left the LPN centre to continue our quest for Great Bustard and turned west at Entradas to locate trees which might offer shade for the birds. Scanning under the trees brought no success, but suddenly two male Great Bustards appeared on the horizon, at a field boundary, in the full heat of the sun. Some birds just don't read the manual! Delighted with this, we started heading south east again and made our way up to the lovely little chapel of Aricelli which sits perched on a high hill overlooking the surrounding steppes. We enjoyed the lovely views from the shade of the chapel building, and were entertained by a Swallowtail butterfly, circumnavigating the chapel.

It was time to head back down to the coast again, and as we made our way through the salt pans to the hotel we noted the waders present, particularly the Black-tailed Godwits, probing with their long straight bills.

Day 3

Saturday 22nd September

We awoke to another hot and sunny day. Some of us took an early morning walk and enjoyed the waders feeding on the shore as well as taking the time to have a good look at the Mediterranean Gulls and how they differed from Black-headed Gulls. We were also rewarded with good views of a Bluethroat which popped up out of the low vegetation. After breakfast we headed due east towards the Spanish border and the Castro Marim reserve. We noted that the salt pans were quite full of water as we parked near the commercial salt works. On the hillside above, a hunched shape turned out to be a Stone Curlew, and the more we scanned the more we picked out. We halted our count at 16! A small group of Greater Flamingoes was wading in the adjoining salt pan but our attention was soon drawn to a noisy group of gulls beyond them. These turned out to be Slender-billed Gulls and we watched them for some time, admiring their slender necks and flush of delicate pink on the chest of the adults. As we walked along the causeways Thekla Larks flew up regularly and Lesser Emperor dragonflies patrolled the ditches. Towards the end of the causeway we found Kentish Plover and a very large group of Black-tailed Godwit.

We drove to another part of the reserve, where the visitor centre is located, to have our picnic. As we scanned the pans at this end, two Western Ospreys flew over. The heat haze made long distance viewing tricky but we picked up a large group of Greater Flamingoes, around the feet of which was an equally large group of Pied Avocet.

After this we headed west, past Faro, to the Quinta do Lago and its very important freshwater lake, one of the very few freshwater sites on the south coast of Portugal. The tide was fully in when we arrived which meant we had to traverse around the edge of the golf course rather than walk on the shore. This gave the golfers amongst us the chance to assess the skill of the approach shots to the green ... The lake was immensely busy with birds and we knew we were getting close when we heard the short honking calls of the many Gadwall present. We were soon enjoying good views of both a juvenile and an adult Little Bittern, resting in the reeds. We also enjoyed the bizarre sight of flocks of coots grazing on the surrounding fairways. Two species of terrapin were obligingly on view as well as the many bird species. In terms of behaviour, one of the most interesting sights was that of a Great Crested Grebe with three tiny striped chicks because it was being assisted in the feeding of the chicks by another sub-adult grebe, presumably from an earlier brood. As we made our way back the tide had retreated and we were able to make our way around the shore, back to the car park; followed by our drive back to the hotel.

Day 4

Sunday 23rd September

This was our transfer day and we started with an early morning walk around the vicinity of the hotel. We had particularly good views of a very obliging Zitting Cisticola. The salt pans provided a good opportunity to compare Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin and Sanderling, which were all at close range. Greater Flamingoes flying overhead provided a spectacular backdrop.

Afterwards we drove round to the other side of the salt pans. There was less water in these pans and consequently more waders. A solitary Greenshank contrasted with the many Grey and Ringed Plovers. A lone White Stork was possibly one of those which would overwinter and not make the journey further south. A Kingfisher flashed across the pans and a single Audouin's Gull was detected in a large roost of Yellow-legged and Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Then we started our journey west in earnest and arrived at the Salgados lagoon in time for our picnic under the trees near the beach. It was another very hot day and a heat haze hung over the lagoon, which was quite dry on the seaward side. Migrant Whinchats and Northern Wheatears were found in the lagoon side scrub. An obliging Iberian Yellow Wagtail provided an opportunity to examine its distinguishing features. Leaving the lagoon in mid-afternoon, we arrived at our hotel in Sagres in good time for dinner.

Day 5

Monday 24th September

This was the morning for our pelagic. It was already hot when we set off from the dock in Sagres and soon we were bumping over the swell in the RIB. As the weather was good we headed straight out towards the edge of the continental shelf several miles offshore. As we headed out through the rafts of resting Yellow-legged Gulls and passing Northern Gannets we encountered a single Common Dolphin and, very soon afterwards, the rest of the pod of these sociable mammals. Moving further on we began 'chumming', and started to attract other seabirds. Cory's Shearwaters were seen regularly and European Storm Petrels began to appear. Great Shearwaters were then drawn to the boat and we were able to approach some quite closely, giving good opportunities for photographs. A single Balearic Shearwater flew by soon afterwards. Further Common Dolphins were encountered before excitement was raised when a number of Wilson's Storm Petrels began circling the boat. Almost back in the harbour, a further Balearic Shearwater provided a fitting end to a very successful pelagic.

Returning to the hotel, after a short break we drove round to the Cabranosa heath, with its raised viewpoint, to have our picnic under the pine trees. We joined the local Portuguese raptor monitors on the raised viewpoint to look for the raptors and other birds which follow the coast down to this point. At this point the birds are too far west to make a safe sea crossing, so many circle round for a period before turning east to (hopefully) find a shorter crossing point. We were intrigued by a group of seven Honey Buzzards which were accompanied by three Sparrowhawks and two of the Honey Buzzards were actively interacting with the Sparrowhawks. A walk in the surrounding woodlands produced a group of five Turtle Doves and a Peregrine Falcon. As it was by now very hot, we dropped some of the group off at the hotel and some came back to Cabranosa for another raptor-watching session. However, things were quieter now due to the heat, although a large flock of Red-billed Choughs provided a noisy distraction.

Day 6

Tuesday 25th September

We started the day with an early morning walk on the adjacent headland of Ponta da Atalaia. Not many migrants were present but a Northern Wheatear was spotted. Large numbers of gulls were roosting on the cliffs and some time was spent pondering the somewhat variable leg colour of Yellow-legged Gulls! On the way back, a female Blue Rock Thrush was spotted on top of a nearby building.

After breakfast we drove to the Vale Santo area to look for the small population of Little Bustards which occurs there. None were visible so after looking through the Thekla larks, Yellow Wagtails etc we went back to Cabranosa. Again, many Honey Buzzards were passing through, showing a lot of the colour variation which is typical of this species. Walking through the surrounding area produced Spotted and Pied Flycatchers, Woodchat Shrike and several more Turtle Doves.

To finish the day we went down to Cape St Vincent, the most south-westerly point in Europe, where the group enjoyed ice creams and the view.

Day 7

Wednesday 26th September

For our final day, we returned to Vale Santo, where it was extremely windy. Two juvenile Montagu's Harriers were quartering the ground around the approach road. After scouring the area we managed to locate two Little Bustards in the distance, which everyone managed to view in the scope.

Returning to the hotel, the group checked out and we headed off east. We had a picnic at Boca do Rio and then walked along the track beside the reedbed. Pied Flycatchers were present in the woodland on the valley side, as well as the only Blue Tits of the trip. Investigation of a derelict well by the side of the track revealed several Crayfish and a Mantis which had got stranded deep inside the stone structure.

We proceeded to the beach, where an archaeological dig investigating a Roman fish paste 'factory' was in progress. The sea breeze was a welcome relief on another hot day.

On arrival at the airport with time to spare, we went to the Ria Formosa National Park which commences at the end of the runway. The tide was in, which limited the number of waders, although Whimbrel and other species were spotted on the vegetated islands. Large numbers of Greater Flamingoes were present but the highlight was a Western Osprey hunting over the shallow waters of the salt pans. This seemed a suitable end to the trip as we drove back to the airport to catch our flights home.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			21	22	23	24	25	26
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	✓	✓	✓			
2	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		4	1			
3	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	5	✓	7			
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	40			
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			3			
6	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		1	6			
7	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>				20		
8	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>				5		
9	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>				2		
10	European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>				10		
11	Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>				3		
12	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	5	10	10			
13	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		5				
14	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		65	10			200
15	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>			2			
16	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		2	7			
17	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	3	30	6		23	20
18	Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>		2				
19	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	30	4	✓		✓	✓
20	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	8	10		2	2
21	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	2	✓	✓			✓
22	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				✓	✓	✓
23	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			10		1	
24	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		2				1
25	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>				7	8	
26	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	8					
27	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	1					
28	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>						1
29	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>						2
30	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				3		
31	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>	1					
32	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	1					
33	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	3		1	3	6	4
34	Eurasian Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>				5		
35	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1		
36	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>	2					
37	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>						2
38	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		6	6			
39	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓			1
40	Eurasian Stone-Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>		16				
41	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		4	2			
42	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	1	✓	✓			x
43	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		60	2			
44	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		3	10			1
45	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		12	✓			1
46	Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	2	1				
47	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		1	6			

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			21	22	23	24	25	26
48	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1					
49	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	12	100	50			
50	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		2	10			
51	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		4	2		1	3
52	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓			12
53	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			1			
54	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		1				
55	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	2	2	1			
56	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		4	4			2
57	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	2	4	1			6
58	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>		2	2			
59	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	6	10	20			6
60	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓			
61	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>		30				
62	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus melanocephalus</i>		✓	✓			
63	Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyaetus audouinii</i>			1			
64	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>						1
67	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		1	1			
68	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		1	1			1
69	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				3		
70	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	1					
72	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>				5	4	2
73	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
74	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>		1				
75	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	1					
76	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			1			
77	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	4	2	3			
78	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	6	1			1	
79	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>		1		1	1	
80	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	✓	✓				1
81	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓			
82	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				21	2	
83	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	4					
84	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	6					
85	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>						2
86	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓					
87	Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
88	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>						2
89	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		3				
90	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>				✓	✓	✓
91	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
92	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>				3	2	
93	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>						1
94	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		3	6		3	2
95	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>				2		
96	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
97	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
98	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1	1	1	3	2	

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			21	22	23	24	25	26
99	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>	1					
100	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				1	1	
101	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		1		1		1
102	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	1		2	1		
103	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
104	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	12		6		1	6
105	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>					1	1
106	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			1		4	
107	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	h				6	4
108	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
109	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>			1	2	2	4
110	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>					2	
111	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>						2
112	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					✓	h
113	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				1		
114	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		h	10	✓	✓	✓
115	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				✓	✓	✓
116	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		6		1		
117	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				1		

Mammals

Western Hedgehog, *Erinaceus europaeus*

Iberian Hare, *Lepus granatensis*

Fallow Deer, *Dama dama*

Brown Rat, *Rattus norvegica*

Common Dolphin, *Delphinus delphis*

Reptile & Amphibians

Iberian Water Frog, *Rana perezi*

Spanish Terrapin, *Mauremys leprosa*

Large Psammmodromus, *Psammmodromus algirus*

European Pond Terrapin, *Emys orbicularis*

Moorish Gecko, *Tarentola mauritanica*

Butterflies

Swallowtail, *Papilion machaon*

Clouded Yellow, *Colias crocea*

Southern Brown Argus, *Aricia agestis cramer*

Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*

Iberian Marbled white, *Melanargia lachesis*

Large White, *Pieris brassicae*

Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*

Small Tortoiseshell, *Aglais urticae*

Meadow Brown, *Maniola jurtina*

Dragonflies

Lesser Emperor, *Anax parthenope*

Red-veined Darter, *Sympetrum fonscolombii*

Blue Emperor, *Anax imperator*

Other species

Crayfish sp.

Blue shark, *Prionace glauca*