Autumn Birding in Southern Portugal

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 18 September 2019







Bottelnose Dolphins by Keith Bucanan



Epaulet Skimmer by Stuart Harrison



Cory's Shearwater by Stuart Harrison

Report by Keith Buchanan Images courtesy of Stuart Harrison & Keith Buchanan



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane

Chawton Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

Tour participants: Keith Buchanan and Philip Thompson (leaders) with 11 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 12th September

Arriving in mid afternoon, the minibuses were organised and the short, 45-minute, drive to Tavira was completed. Tavira lies to the east of Faro and, being on the south coast, abuts the Ria Formosa reserve. Even in late afternoon it was hot, but we undertook a walk to the nearby saltpans as we had seen some waders there on our way to the hotel. The sun was directly in our eyes as we looked at the main group of birds, but we were able to identify a considerable variety of waders even though the numbers of each species was small. The group had a chance to compare and contrast Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Knot, Ruff, Sanderling and Little Stint, all in the same group. Another highlight was the flock of Slender-billed Gulls; this allowed us to pick up the differences from the very similar Black-headed Gulls nearby.

Back at the hotel, the group had a briefing about the rest of the week, then retired for a welcome dinner and an early night after the day's travelling.

Day 2

Friday 13th September

The day started with a pre-breakfast walk down to the beach near the hotel. On our way there, a couple of Hoopoes were seen, which is always a pleasure. In the strengthening light Mediterranean Gulls were spotted, as well as Black-headed and a single Slender-billed Gull. Sandwich Terns dived for fish out on the water and Grey and Ringed Plovers sidled out of the way of early dog walkers. Further round, a Western Reef Heron (also known as Western Reef Egret) was spotted feeding near Whimbrel, with a single Curlew amongst them. This gave a good opportunity to consider the differences between Curlew and Whimbrel. But the Western Reef Heron (grey phase) deservedly got most of the attention, being a rare bird in Europe. Working our way back to the hotel we admired the Sea Daffodils, which were in full bloom in the sand, but then it was time for breakfast.

After a delicious buffet breakfast, we drove east towards the Spanish border and the reserve of Castro Marim. We turned off on a gravel track and parked near the active salt works. Emerging from the vans we immediately spotted a flock of Greater Flamingos, which included some surprisingly immature birds – these were dull grey and only about two thirds of the size of the adults. Numbers of Slender-billed Gulls were feeding around them. Scanning the hillside opposite revealed the presence of two Stone-curlew sheltering from the sun under the trees. The more we scanned, the more we found! This activity was interrupted by a passing dark-phase Booted Eagle and an Iberian Grey Shrike which landed on the wires. We then started our walk around the saltpans, frequently flushing waders, including a Green Sandpiper, from the creeks. At the point where the commercial activities were prominent, we retraced our steps.

Our next stop was at the reserve's visitor centre. We were still disembarking from the vehicle when an excited cry from the leaders drew everyone's attention. A single White-rumped Swift was circling above us. This is a rare bird in Portugal. This was closely followed by two Pallid Swifts. Two Ospreys were also seen over the river. We walked along to a prominent viewpoint and scanned the saltpans. Good numbers of birds were present, particularly notable were the Caspian Terns resting on the sandy banks of the pans. By now it was lunchtime, and we settled down to our picnic at the shaded picnic tables of the visitor centre.

After lunch we headed west again and re-joined the sea amongst the manicured golf courses of the Algarve, at Quinta do Lago. The tide was in, so as we made our way along to the famous freshwater lake on the golf course, we had to skirt the edge of the fairway as the perimeter path was under water. As we approached the lake, we were greeted by the bizarre sight of a flock of Coots grazing on the fairway. They were then joined by a male and several female Black-headed Weavers (later we watched a male Black-headed Weaver weaving a nest).

A curious larva wriggling across the path caused some puzzlement and consternation – later investigation confirmed it as the larva of a Soldier Fly. The larvae are aquatic and use the elongated tube at one end to break the water surface and breathe.

The lake was very busy with birds, particular highlights being Western Swamphen, Glossy Ibis and Little Bittern. Migration of small birds was also in progress with Spotted Flycatcher, Common Redstart and Garden Warbler all in evidence. But after a long and tiring day it was time to head back to the hotel.

Day 3

Saturday 14th September

Today was our day to go north to the Alentejo. We set off early as the heat builds up during the day, arriving in the Castro Verde SPA (Special Protection Area) while it was still cool. Our first stop was at a small dam – the water level was very low – but a Little Ringed Plover and Green Sandpiper were visible. Calandra Larks came down to drink and the group got good views of these large, chunky larks. A pair of distant Griffon Vultures drifted over and a Dartford Warbler worked its way along the fence line. Walking down to a damp area with reeds etc, we found some of the delightful Violet Dropwing dragonflies, some in their characteristic 'obelisk' position.

Our next stop was caused by the sighting of a Black-winged Kite flying across our line of travel. Obligingly, it landed on telegraph wires and we all got a good look. High above, a pair of Cinereous Vultures passed by.

Moving on up to the rear entrance of the SPA, we scanned for Great Bustard, but without success. It was getting hot by then, so we proceeded to the LPN Centre where a delicious lunch of local food had been prepared. We ate out on the balcony, where there were wonderful views out over the surrounding landscape. After lunch we drove north of Entradas, where oaks provided shade, in the hope that the heat had driven the male Great Bustards to seek such shelter. As hoped for, in the distance, the large silhouettes of two male Great Bustards could be seen. In the field behind, a herd of cattle came towards the fence to have a closer look at us, bringing in their wake a large flock of Cattle Egrets.

Pleased with this success, we then headed to the chapel of Aracellis, perched on a high hilltop, which gives excellent views of the surrounding steppe. Although this visit was mainly for the views, a migrant Pied Flycatcher was quickly spotted in the trees below. In the far distance two Great Bustards were seen in the corner of a field and, shortly after, a stately procession of nine birds were seen working their way across another field. In the end, 13 Great Bustards were spotted – a fitting end to a great day. As we worked our way back towards Mertola, one of the vans got a puncture, initiating a search for the location of the tools and spare wheel. But with the assistance of many willing hands we soon got on our way again and arrived back at the hotel in good time for dinner.

Day 4

Sunday 15th September

Today was transfer day, but we started with a walk around the hotel. We walked down to the river, through the short saltmarsh vegetation, looking for Bluethroat. Although we didn't find any, we did flush a juvenile Spectacled Warbler and numerous Sardinian Warblers. Down on the river, a Little Tern was fishing and various waders fed along the river edge, including a Curlew, much less common than Whimbrel in the area.

After breakfast we drove round to the other side of the Tavira saltpans. As we walked along by the saltpans, we were amused by the antics of the Fiddler Crabs along the shore. Searching through the gulls lined along the embankment, two Audouin's Gulls were located, along with more waders. Audouin's was our target species and we therefore decided to move on.

Driving west, we made our way to the Salgados Lagoon. After a picnic lunch on the edge of the car park, we made our way down to the edge of the lagoon. In the surrounding Tamarisks and Figs various migrants were spotted – Whinchat and Turtle Dove being most notable. Many Yellow Wagtails, often juvenile, were moving around on the open areas. The water level in the lagoon was high, so fewer waders than normal were present. Nevertheless, a small flock of Black-tailed Godwits was joined by five Green Sandpipers. Many ducks and gulls were present, along with flocks of Greater Flamingo and Glossy Ibis. A single Black Tern flew past as we scanned the flocks of birds. Lesser Emperor dragonflies patrolled along the margins. But the time was moving on and we proceeded with our journey to the south-west corner of Portugal, and the pretty town of Sagres, our base for the next few days.

Day 5

Monday 16th September

Our day for the pelagic dawned sunny with a light breeze and we walked the short distance down to the harbour confident of a good trip. Bouncing out on the RIBs, we encountered a number of Cory's Shearwaters alongside the Yellow-legged Gulls. Occasional Gannets, from juveniles to mature adults, drifted by as we headed out several miles to the edge of the continental shelf.

We had only just cleared the harbour area when we encountered our first pod of Bottlenose Dolphins. We slowed as they investigated the boat, but not for long as we had some distance to go to get out far enough for other seabirds. After another 15 minutes we encountered a pod of Common Dolphins, some energetically leaping clear of the water, showing the 'hour-glass' shape on their flanks. But by now we had our sights on a fishing trawler and the large flock of gulls shadowing it. In amongst the gulls we started to pick out Great Shearwaters and Balearic Shearwaters.

Suddenly we were surrounded by a large pod – perhaps 50 strong - of Bottlenose Dolphins. They were jumping and porpoising all around us. Four or five at a time were bow-riding, and all ages were represented – a fantastic show! Chumming attracted a number of European Storm Petrels which fluttered around the boat, picking up morsels from the surface. As we headed back to port a large raft of Cory's Shearwater was located near the shore, and we had a good look at them before finally returning to port.

After a picnic lunch on the Cabranosa Heath, we ascended the small hill favoured by migration watchers to see what raptor migration was in progress. Almost immediately the first of a number of Short-toed Eagles came

drifting by. Up to seven were seen at one time, along with dark- and pale-phase Booted Eagles, Black Kites and a Peregrine. A short walk through the pine trees revealed many Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Common Redstarts, Northern Wheatears and Common Whitethroat – all migrating south. To finish, we drove along to Cape St Vincent, the most south westerly corner of mainland Europe, and finished with a coffee at a nearby café.

Day 6

Tuesday 17th September

A pre-breakfast walk, out on the headland, produced a beautiful sunrise over the bay. We walked along the cliff edge, searching for migrants as we went. Whinchats and Northern Wheatears popped up regularly and Sardinian Warblers scolded us as we went past. Mewing Yellow-legged Gulls rose from the cliff edges as we peered over at the calm sea below. Rock Doves were wheeling around the cliffs and a shoal of fish moved through the water at their base. A Black Redstart showed briefly before disappearing over the edge. A Dartford Warbler appeared as we worked our way back to the hotel for breakfast.

After our buffet breakfast, we drove round to the Vale Santo area and stopped to scan the heath. It was another lovely morning and Crested Larks were hopping around, with Stonechats sitting on the tops of bushes. Moving on, we passed farm buildings and a Little Owl was spotted, staring disapprovingly at us from a hole in the roof. Parking up again, we scanned the heath before walking along a track in the direction of Cape St. Vincent. Scanning carefully through the many Wheatears and larks produced a number of Tawny Pipits, their pale sandy colour blending perfectly with the sandy heath. On the way back, a Greater Short-toed Lark gave good views, being nearer to the path than many of the other small birds hopping around the disturbed ground near the farmhouse.

Moving on again we parked at the end of a track near some Giant Reed. A walk down the track revealed an elusive Spectacled Warbler and some singing Greater Short-toed and Thekla Larks. A large fig tree in the centre of a field held abundant, but elusive, migrants as well as a large mob of Iberian Magpies. Common Whitethroat and Garden Warbler were among those identified. Several juvenile warblers, flitting among the fig leaves, proved an id challenge! Returning to the vehicles, we moved round to our lunch spot on the Cabranosa Heath. After lunch, watching at the raptor viewpoint produced a Bonelli's Eagle, Honey Buzzard and Egyptian Vulture, all circling together – a fine end to a birding day.

Day 7

Wednesday 18th September

Two of our number left early for the airport but the rest of us departed after a leisurely breakfast. We arrived at the Ria Formosa reserve in Faro in late morning. The tide was out, and it was another lovely day as we strolled along the walkway adjacent to the reserve. Two Ospreys appeared in the distance, clearly fishing, and we watched their always fascinating behaviour. Fish seemed plentiful - we could see Grey Mullet hunting in the shallows and large shoals of Gilt-head Bream in deeper water. Fiddler Crabs were active on the mud, many males signalling to each other with their enlarged claws. A highlight was two Caspian Terns fishing over the lagoon. Spoonbills fed alongside the channels and various waders, including a very pale Greenshank, were feeding on the mud. Large numbers of Greater Flamingo could be seen in the pans and we enjoyed the spectacle of a large group flying over to join them. A lone White Stork was also out on the flats, but then a large group flew by - presumably on migration, although small numbers do overwinter here.

Back at the vehicles, a little reorganisation of packing took place to put away binoculars etc, then it was up to the airport for our flights home.

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Sagres Sunset by Stuart Harrison

Species Lists

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

					S	eptem	ber		
	Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1	Red-legged Partridge	Alectoris rufa		3	✓			✓	
2	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata		30		2			
3	Gadwall	Mareca strepera		30	✓	✓			
4	Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope		1					
5	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		✓		✓			
6	Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca		1					
7	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina		6		4			
8	Common Swift	Apus apus	✓	✓					
9	Pallid Swift	Apus pallidus		2		1			
10	White-rumped Swift	Apus caffer		1					
11	Great Bustard	Otis tarda			15				
12	Rock Dove	Columba livia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
13	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
14	European Turtle Dove	Streptopelia turtur			1	1	1		
15	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Western Swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio		3					
17	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus		✓		√			
18	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra		✓		√			
19	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis		6		✓			
20	Greater Flamingo	Phoenicopterus roseus	2	40	30	30			150
 21	Eurasian Stone-curlew	Burhinus oedicnemus	_	10					
22	Eurasian Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus		√		✓			
23	Black-winged Stilt	Himantopus himantopus	✓	✓		√			
24	Pied Avocet	Recurvirostra avosetta		✓		3			
25	Grey Plover	Pluvialis squatarola		✓		✓ /			✓
26	Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula	✓	· ✓		· /			· /
27	Little Ringed Plover	Charadrius dubius	,		1	,			
28	Kentish Plover	Charadrius alexandrinus	✓	✓	1	✓			✓
29	Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus	· ·	· ✓		√	1		· /
30	Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata	ľ	1		1	'		_ ·
31	Bar-tailed Godwit	Limosa lapponica		2		ı			-
			✓	∠ ✓		✓			-
32	Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa	✓	✓		2			/
33 34	Ruddy Turnstone	Arenaria interpres	4						-
	Red Knot	Calidris canutus							-
35	Ruff	Calidris pugnax	1	4		_			
36	Curlew Sandpiper	Calidris ferruginea	6	1		6 ✓			
37	Sanderling	Calidris alba							√
38	Dunlin	Calidris alpina	✓	√		√			✓
39	Little Stint	Calidris minuta	2			2			
40	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	✓	√		_	1	1	1
41	Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus		1		5			
42	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	✓	✓		✓			✓
43	Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia		1					1
44	Slender-billed Gull	Chroicocephalus genei	30	50		✓			<u> </u>
45	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	✓	✓		✓			<u> </u>
46	Audouin's Gull	Ichthyaetus audouinii				2			
47	Mediterranean Gull	Ichthyaetus melanocephalus	✓	✓		2			✓

					S	eptem	ber		
	Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
48	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus					1		
49	Yellow-legged Gull	Larus michahellis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Caspian Tern	Hydroprogne caspia		5					2
52	Sandwich Tern	Thalasseus sandvicensis		✓		✓	2		
53	Little Tern	Sternula albifrons	1			1			
54	Black Tern	Chlidonias niger				1			
55	Great Skua	Stercorarius skua					4		
56	European Storm Petrel	Hydrobates pelagicus					20		
57	Cory's Shearwater	Calonectris diomedea					150+		
58	Sooty Shearwater	Ardenna grisea					1		
59	Great Shearwater	Ardenna gravis					15		
60	Balearic Shearwater	Puffinus mauretanicus					3		
61	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia		1		1			30
62	Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus					✓		
63	European Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis					1	8	
64	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo		✓		✓			
65	Glossy Ibis	Plegadis falcinellus		3		60			
66	Eurasian Spoonbill	Platalea leucorodia	30	50	30	40			20
67	Little Bittern	Ixobrychus minutus		1					
68	Western Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	✓	· ✓	50	✓			
69	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	✓	√	6	6	6	✓	3
70	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	✓	√	√	✓			✓
71	Western Reef Heron	Egretta gularis		1					
72	Western Osprey	Pandion haliaetus		2					2
73	Black-winged Kite	Elanus caeruleus			2				
74	Egyptian Vulture	Neophron percnopterus						1	
75	European Honey Buzzard	Pernis apivorus						1	
76	Griffon Vulture	Gyps fulvus			6			'	
77	Cinereous Vulture	Aegypius monachus			2				
78	Short-toed Snake Eagle	Circaetus gallicus				1	7		
79	Booted Eagle	Hieraaetus pennatus		1	1	1	3		
80	Bonelli's Eagle	Aquila fasciata		1	1		3	1	
81	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus				1		- '	
82	Black Kite	Milvus migrans				ı	3		
83	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo			1		3		
					I			4	
84	Little Owl	Athene noctua		_	✓	H ✓		1	
85	Eurasian Hoopoe	Upupa epops	2	3	V				
86	Common Kingfisher	Alcedo atthis	1	3		2	4		
87	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major			_		1	1	
88	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus			5		1	3	
89	Peregrine Falcon	Falco peregrinus					1	1	
90	Iberian Grey Shrike	Lanius meridionalis	1	1	6	3			
91	Iberian Magpie	Cyanopica cooki	√	√	√	✓	√	✓	
92	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	√	✓	✓	6	✓		✓
93	Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax						3	
94	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula			√				
95	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone			√				
96	Northern Raven	Corvus corax			✓				
97	Great Tit	Parus major		✓					
98	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis						✓	

					S	eptem	ber		
	Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
99	Thekla's Lark	Galerida theklae						✓	
100	Crested Lark	Galerida cristata	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
101	Greater Short-toed Lark	Calandrella brachydactyla						✓	
102	Calandra Lark	Melanocorypha calandra			✓				
103	Sand Martin	Riparia riparia		✓		✓			
104	Barn Swallow	Hirundo rustica	✓	✓		✓		✓	
105	Common House Martin	Delichon urbicum		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
106	Red-rumped Swallow	Cecropis daurica	✓	✓	✓	✓			
107	Cetti's Warbler	Cettia cetti				1			
108	Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus trochilus		1	5	2	4	✓	
109	Zitting Cisticola	Cisticola juncidis		✓	✓	✓			
110	Garden Warbler	Sylvia borin		1				2	
111	Common Whitethroat	Sylvia communis					4	3	
112	Dartford Warbler	Sylvia undata			1			3	
113	Spectacled Warbler	Sylvia conspicillata				1		1	
114	Sardinian Warbler	Sylvia melanocephala	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
115	Spotless Starling	Sturnus unicolor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
116	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
117	Spotted Flycatcher	Muscicapa striata		2		1	✓	✓	
118	European Pied Flycatcher	Ficedula hypoleuca			1		✓	✓	
119	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros					1	1	
120	Common Redstart	Phoenicurus phoenicurus		2			✓	✓	
121	Blue Rock Thrush	Monticola solitarius			2			1	
122	Whinchat	Saxicola rubetra			1	3	3	3	
123	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
124	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
125	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	✓	✓	√	√	✓	✓	✓
126	Black-headed Weaver	Ploceus melanocephalus		30					
127	Western Yellow Wagtail	Motacilla flava iberiae	1	1	√	✓	✓	✓	
128	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba			✓	✓			
129	Tawny Pipit	Anthus campestris						3	
130	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		✓		2	✓	✓	
131	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina				_	✓	✓	
132	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis		✓	✓		✓	✓	
133	European Serin	Serinus serinus		10					
134	Corn Bunting	Emberiza calandra		10	6			1	

Mammals

1	Western Hedgehog	Erinaceus europaeus			1		
<u>'</u>	Western Heagenog	Limaceus europaeus			'		
2	Iberian Hare	Lepus granatensis	1		1		
3	Rabbit	Oryctolagus cuniculus		1			
4	Common Dolphin	Delphinus delphis				✓	
5	Common Bottlenose Dolphin	Tursiops truncatus				50	

Reptile & Amphibians

1	European Pond Terrapin	Emys orbicularis	✓			
2	Red-eared Terrapin	Trachemys scripta	✓			
3	Moorish Gecko	Tarentola mauritanica	✓			

				S	eptem	ber		
Common name	Scientific name	12	13	14	15	16	17	18

Butterflies

1	Swallowtail	Papilion machaon				✓	
2	Small Copper	Lycaena phlaeas		✓			
3	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	Leptotes pirithous	✓				
4	Long-tailed Blue	Lampides boeticus	✓				
5	Common Blue	Polyommatus icarus			✓		
6	Adonis Blue	Polyommatus bellargus				✓	
7	Red Admiral	Vanessa atalanta				✓	
8	Painted Lady	Vanessa cardui	✓				
9	Wall Brown	Lassiommata megera				✓	
10	Meadow Brown	Maniola jurtina		✓			

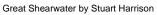
Dragonflies

1	Lesser Emperor	Anax parthenope	✓			
2	Broad Scarlet	Crocothemis erythraea	✓			
3	Yellow-veined Skimmer	Orthetrum nitidinerve		✓		
4	Southern Skimmer	Orthetrum bruueum		✓		
5	Epaulet Skimmer	Orthetrum chrysostigma		✓		
6	Red-veined Darter	Sympetrum fonscolombii	✓			
7	Common Darter	Sympetrum striolatum		✓		
8	Violet Dropwing	Trithemis annulata		✓		

Other Taxa

1	European Eel	Anguilla anguilla	✓			
2	Grey Mullet	Chelon labrosus				✓
3	Gilt-head Bream	Sparus aurata				✓
4	Hermit Crab	Paguroidea group			✓	
5	Fiddler Crab	Uca species		✓		
6	Spiny Sea-urchin	Echinoidea group			✓	
7	Soldier Fly	Stratiomyidae	✓			







Violet Dropwing by Stuart Harrison