

Autumn Birding in Southern Portugal

Naturetrek Tour Report

22nd – 28th September 2022



Red-veined Darter by Ian Tulloch



Little Bittern by Ian Tulloch



Great Shearwater by Ian Tulloch



Long-eared Owl by Peter Booth

Tour report by Philip Thompson



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

Day 1

Thursday 22nd September

With the group arriving on a number of flights, the early arrivals were met and taken to a nearby café outside the main terminal where they enjoyed some fresh air, coffee and cakes while they awaited the final arrivals. All went well and we were soon heading to our hotel in Tavira to check in.

With the hotel formalities completed and everyone rested a little we enjoyed a fine three course lunch before we still had ample time to have a pleasant walk from the hotel grounds and an exploration of the extensive salt-pan complex of the local area. We noted a wide range of wading birds totalling 13 species, with Kentish Plover and Black-winged Stilt being most notable from a UK perspective. Among the gulls we managed to find a single Audouin's Gull passing over. Similarly, a couple of Caspian Terns put in an appearance to add to the highlights. We experienced several fleeting glimpses of the ever-elusive wintering Bluethroats among the saltmarsh shrubs growing on the embankments and waters edge. Not forgetting the iconic Greater Flamingos that were present in good numbers. After this exciting and diverse introduction to the birds of the region we returned to the hotel to freshen up before our dinner.

Day 2

Friday 23rd September

The early risers went for a pre-breakfast walk to the tidal estuary and saltmarsh where we enjoyed a lovely sunrise in the calm and peaceful conditions. We also obtained some excellent views of a number of wader species on the sandy shoreline alongside several Mediterranean Gulls. A relaxing circuit was taken before we returned to the hotel for breakfast.

Our main day was firstly taken up with a visit to the Castro Marim NP to the west of Portugal on the Spanish border. Our first stop and walk led us around the embankment alongside a range of salt-pans and saltmarsh on the eastern edge of the park. The initial highlight was a group of Slender-billed Gulls feeding on the first pan we scanned alongside our parked vehicle. The early light showed off the delicate pink flush of their plumage. In the shallow waters of the lagoon a range of waders were present comprising mainly Black-tailed Godwits joined by smaller numbers of Little Stints, Pied Avocets, Dunlin and Black-winged Stilts. Overshadowing the waders were several roosting Greater Flamingos. As we slowly walked the raised embankments, we kept a sharp eye out for any Bluethroats in the adjoining ditches with a couple providing the usual fleeting glimpses. Our route led towards the centre of the active working salt-pans where we picked out the large flock of roosting Audouin's Gulls in the shimmering haze. Retracing our steps, we then drove on towards the eastern side of the NP with a short stop at a low hillside dotted with scattered trees. Here were a number of cryptic Stone Curlews lying up in the shade of the trees.

Moving on we reached the large Visitor Centre overlooking the River Guadiana forming the border with Spain. We made use of the covered picnic seating for our lunch and rest. This was followed by a short walk to overlook the nearby salt-pans. A further mix of waders were seen including Common Greenshank and Spotted Redshank.

Next, we undertook a rather lengthy transfer back westwards towards Faro with a visit to the Quinto do Lago golf complex and the freshwater lagoon at its heart. Once parked we took the boardwalk alongside the tidal estuary

with the usual array of waders and gulls with a couple of Spoonbills mixed in. Our main destination was the lagoon and as we approached it was not long before the promised Hoopoe and Iberian Magpies made an appearance on the golf fairways. Among the fringing reeds we also soon found our first Black-headed Weavers with, despite the season, some territorial singing being uttered by a couple of males. The ever-reliable Little Bitterns did not disappoint, with up to four birds seen indicating a successful breeding season, as most were juveniles. Proving a little more elusive, we eventually got reasonable views of a Western Swamphen as it swam and picked its way among the tall reeds, plucking young stems to feed on the bases. Turning our attention to the screening pine shelter-bed behind us we found a couple of interesting passerine migrants, with both Spotted and Pied Flycatchers and a few warblers being seen. Most notably, a rather elusive and mobile Western Olivaceous Warbler was feeding among the thick foliage in the crown of one pine making observation difficult of this rarely seen passage warbler. We relaxed, making best use of our available time before making our way back to the vehicle and on to the hotel at the end of an eventful day!

Day 3

Saturday 24th September

With an earlier start this morning we made excellent time on the transfer from the coast into Alentejo and the Castro Verde SPA. We made our first stop at a roadside junction where we scanned the open landscape and distant hills for birds. All was initially pretty quiet so we moved on to a small reservoir that was particularly low in water this year. Drifting over from the surrounding hills we picked up several Griffon Vultures among which a couple of Cinereous Vultures were included. A distant ringtail Hen Harrier was sighted quartering the edge of the hill before passing over out of sight.

A number of further stops were taken to scan the surrounding countryside in the hope of spotting any of the special steppe birds. Our searches proved fruitless despite our best efforts in eminently suitable habitat. We consoled ourselves with the numerous Northern Wheatears, Stonechats and Willow Warblers working their way south. After a slow and steady circuit we eventually arrived at Castro Verde where we paused in a tree-lined residential street where we disembarked and scanned the foliage of the trees above our heads among which we found two Long-eared Owls peering back at us! Excellent views were obtained before we quietly moved on without having upset or disturbed the birds, that were clearly content and accustomed to passing humans.

We then drove on a short distance in the town for our lunch destination at the home of a local lady who provided us with a wonderful, and bountiful, array of local dishes for a mammoth three course lunch. Once replete we headed back out into the field to try a few further areas to search for prize birds, ultimately finishing at the hilltop Chapel de Aracelis where we took in the expansive view to be had. All that remained was the long transfer back to our coastal hotel.

Day 4

Sunday 25th September

We began the day with another walk from the hotel among the saltmarsh vegetation alongside the main river. We were mainly hoping to find a more amenable Bluethroat for the group, as the previous birds had all been fleeting sightings before the birds had vanished into cover. We succeeded in our quest with a bird perching long enough for a couple of good photos!

Next, we completed our check-out and loaded the vehicle for our transfer to Sagres in the south-west of Portugal. We broke the journey at the half-way point with a visit to Salgados Lagoon. Here the water levels were conducive to a diverse mix of wildfowl, waders, gulls and wading birds. A rich list of waders were seen that included our only Red Knot of the trip. Spoonbills, Flamingos, Glossy Ibis and White Storks were all present, either feeding or roosting. Passerine migrants were a little thin, but included the familiar Northern Wheatears, Stonechats and typical warblers. Having spent an enjoyable couple of hours we returned to the vehicle for our picnic lunch.

Driving on we made a further stop in the unspoilt coastal bay of Boca do Rio where we walked up onto the cliffs followed by a further walk alongside the large reedbed. In the clifftop scrub we found sheltering Subalpine and Dartford Warblers, whilst at sea a few passing Northern Gannets and Shags. The reedbeds were strangely quiet but we did pick up a female Western Marsh Harrier that settled in a low tree on the marsh edge.

Continuing on we arrived in Sagres in good time for our check-in before meeting up once more before dinner.

Day 5

Monday 26th September

An early morning walk was taken to the clifftop headland opposite the hotel to, once more, admire the sunrise and seek out any resting migrants.

Our main day itinerary began with a visit to the Vale Santo area of agricultural grazing farmland. A few early raptors had begun to lift from their roosts to drift in a circuit around the area to reorientate themselves for their southerly migration. These comprised mainly Booted Eagles with a few Honey Buzzards and Short-toed Snake Eagles also involved. The grassland failed to produce any hoped for larks or Dotterel, so we curtailed our walk somewhat and drove on for a walk through the pine shelter-beds. A small number of typical passerines were seen that included Common Redstart, Subalpine Warbler and Pied Flycatcher. Of more interest, overhead was the steady stream of raptors passing in their circuits that included a fine juvenile Bonelli's Eagle, giving a good flight identification comparison with the smaller but similar juvenile dark-phase Booted Eagles. Honey Buzzards in a range of different plumage patterns were constantly passing, keeping us on our toes and sometimes requiring a little careful scrutiny.

With our morning over we drove to the Cabranosa hummock viewpoint where we had our lunch before spending some time scanning for more passing raptors. The small artificial water pool created nearby had attracted a couple of wintering Ortolan Buntings that allowed for a close approach and observation. Having had a successful morning of passing raptors already the groups attention was rather short-lived before the idea of coffee and ice-cream drew us to a local café!

Our final stop was at the nearby iconic Cape St. Vincent where we spent a little time admiring the scenic cliffs and lighthouse before returning to the hotel at the day's end.

Day 6

Tuesday 27th September

The morning today was spent at sea on our exciting pelagic trip in search of seabirds. After taking the short walk from the hotel down to the harbour we had a short briefing before donning our life-jackets and continuing walking down to the harbour to board the rib craft we were using. There was a light swell, but fortunately the previous days wind had eased, so going was good as we headed out. With the rough water conditions there were no rafts of

resting shearwaters to see and picking out dolphins breaking the surface was a little harder than usual. We were ultimately successful in finding a good sized pod of Common Dolphins that we were able to approach and spend some time with before our attentions were concentrated on finding seabirds. With a quiet start and apparently empty seas to scan it was not looking too hopeful. Amazingly we eventually began to connect with a number of shearwaters and with some judicious chumming they were attracted ever closer to the boat. It was not long before we were enjoying close fly-pasts of numerous Great and Cory's Shearwaters followed by several European Storm Petrels among which we found a single Wilson's Storm Petrel that approached close enough to confirm the salient identification features. All too soon our morning drew to a close and we headed back to harbour.

Back on shore we had a short spell to relax back in the hotel before heading out once more and a return to the Cabranosa viewpoint for lunch and a spell of raptor watching. The Ortolan Buntings of yesterday were still present allowing the whole group a good viewing. Joining the various raptors passing was a single Black Stork and a trio of juvenile Egyptian Vultures that made a number of passes overhead. We then took a further walk among the pines during which several Booted and Short-toed Snake Eagles, Honey Buzzards and the Black Stork seen earlier made close overhead passes, making up for the paucity of passerines in the usually reliable woodland.

To complete our day we headed back to Sagres to savour the delights of the local gelateria and their range of artisanal ice-creams!

Day 7

Monday 28th September

With our scheduled early-afternoon return flights, time allowed for a final visit to the Vale Santo area in a quest for a few species not seen yet. We failed to turn up anything new of significance but were recompensed by a number of Hen Harriers and eagles working the area to admire. The local population of Red-billed Choughs put in an appearance joined by the small isolated population of Skylarks before we headed back to complete the loading of the vehicle and our trouble-free transfer to the airport.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, LO = Leader only)

Common name	Scientific name	September 2022						
		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓				
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>				✓			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓		✓			
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓		✓			
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		4		1			
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				✓			
Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>			LO				
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓		✓		
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Swamphe	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		1					
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		✓		✓			
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓					
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		1					
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Eurasian Stone-curlew	<i>Burhinus oedicnemus</i>		10					
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓					
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>				✓			
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	✓	✓		✓			
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					1		
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		✓		✓			
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>				✓			
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>		✓					
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>		✓		✓			
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		✓		✓			
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Red (Grey) Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>						1	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			✓				
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		1					
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1		✓			
Slender-billed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus genei</i>		4		50			
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓		✓			
Audouin's Gull	<i>Ichthyophaga audouinii</i>	1	200					
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyophaga melanocephalus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

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		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>				1			
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	✓	10		1			
Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>	✓	✓					
Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		✓		1			
Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>						1	
European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>						✓	
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>						✓	
Great Shearwater	<i>Ardenna gravis</i>						50	
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>						1	
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>		1		✓			
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				✓		✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		1		✓			
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Little Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus minutus</i>		4					
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Great Egret	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>	1						
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>		1					
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		1					
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>			1				
Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>						3	
European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>					✓	✓	
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			✓				
Cinereous Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>			2				
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>			2		✓	✓	✓
Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>					✓	✓	✓
Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Aquila fasciata</i>			1		1		
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					✓	✓	✓
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>					1		
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>				1			1
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>			1		1	1	5
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>					✓	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>						1	
Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>			2				
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓					
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓	✓				
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>					✓		
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1		1	
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	1		✓				
Iberian Magpie - N	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Red-billed Cough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>				✓	✓	2	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>			✓	✓			
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					✓		✓
Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>					✓	✓	✓

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		22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>						✓	✓
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		1		H			
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>				✓			
Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>		1		1			
Western Olivaceous Warbler	<i>Iduna opaca</i>		1					
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>		1		1			
Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>			H	1			
Subalpine Warbler	<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>				1	✓		
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>						✓	
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		✓					
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>				1			
Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>	4	✓		✓			
European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>					✓		
Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>					✓		
Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>					✓		
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-headed Weaver - I	<i>Ploceus melanocephalus</i>		✓					
Common Waxbill - I	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	✓						
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			✓	✓			
Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>				3			
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					1		
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>					✓	✓	✓
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>					✓		✓
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			✓		✓		
Ortolan Bunting	<i>Emberiza hortulana</i>					2	2	

Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name
	Papilionidae
Old World Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>
	Pieridae
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>

Common name	Scientific name
	Lycaenidae
Geranium Bronze - I	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>
Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>
Common Blue	<i>Polyommatus icarus</i>
	Nymphalidae
Two-tailed Pasha	<i>Charaxes jasius</i>
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
	Satyrinae
Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>
	Hesperiidae
False Mallow Skipper	<i>Carcharodus tripolinus</i>
Sage Skipper	<i>Muschampia proto</i>

Others

Common name	Scientific name
Mammals	
Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>
Reptile & Amphibians	
Iberian Water Frog	<i>Rana perezi</i>
European Pond Terrapin	<i>Emys orbicularis</i>
Red-eared Terrapin	<i>Trachemys scripta</i>
Spanish Terrapin	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>
Moorish Gecko	<i>Tarentola mauritanica</i>
Large Psammmodromus	<i>Psammmodromus algirus</i>
Dragonflies & Damselflies	
	Aeshnidae
Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>
	Libellulidae
Long Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum trinacria</i>
Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>
Broad Scarlet	<i>Crocothemis erythraea</i>
Violet Dropwing	<i>Trithemis annulata</i>
Black Percher	<i>Diplacodes lefebvrii</i>