

# Portugal – Birding & Stargazing in Rural Alentejo

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 7th November 2021



Griffon Vulture



Orion Nebula



Above: Mediterranean Tree Frog  
Left: Autumn Snowflake

Report by David Phillips  
Photos by Bill Smith & David Phillips



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)



Tour participants: David Phillips (Tour leader) & Lara Broom (local guide) with seven Naturetrek clients.

## Day 1

**Monday 1st November**

A morning flight from London brought us to Portugal's capital Lisbon, where we joined our two clients who had arrived from Manchester. After meeting our local leader, Lara Broom, we collected the vehicles and set off north along the Tagus. During the journey we passed fields with Cattle and Little Egrets and saw White Storks on nests on electricity pylons.

Lara had bought food for us to have a picnic at a site close to estuary and while we laid out a spread of food on a picnic table, the group looked for birds across the estuary. Near the shore a small group of Turnstone were joined by a single Kentish Plover and further out many Avocets, Black-tailed Godwit and Spoonbills could be seen feeding. A single Greater Flamingo was spotted further out across the mudflats.

Following lunch we turned our attention to an area of scrub behind our picnic area. Here we saw our first Iberian Magpies, a hovering Black-shouldered Kite and a pair of Hoopoe came in to land on a telegraph wire. It was lovely to see 'exotic' species.

Our accommodation for the first two nights was south of the town of Porto Alto in a series of bungalows set in a woodland of Cork Oak and Stone Pines. We settled in and wandered around the property before driving into the town of Porto Alto where dinner was arranged at a local restaurant. The restaurant was busy with local families as it was a feast day. A selection of local meats and vegetarian dishes were enjoyed by our party, washed down with wine from the estate where we were staying.

## Day 2

**Tuesday 2nd November**

### Birding around the Tagus Estuary

Our first pre-breakfast walk was pretty quiet. As we walked past lichen-encrusted Cork Oak trees that had been stripped of their lower bark to use in wine bottles, we heard Nuthatches and a distant drumming woodpecker.

Breakfast was taken in a typical Portuguese café in the small town of Porto Alto, after which we stocked up on provisions at a local supermarket and headed south to our first birdwatching location of the day, the salt pans of Salinas do Samouco. Since the tide in the nearby estuary was high, many waders were on the islands in the salt pans including hundreds of Dunlin, Kentish Plover and a few Little Stint. In the pools several elegant long-legged species were present: Greater Flamingo, Avocet and Black-winged Stilt.

In the reedbed close to the side of the saltpan we heard the explosive call of Cetti's Warbler and saw a small flock of Common Waxbills. Waxbills are a Sub-Saharan species that have been introduced to Portugal where there is now a sizable population.

From the salt pans we skirted the estuary on a minor road, stopping at a point that overlooked a grassy area with pools. Here we added Great Egret to our list and also saw many White Wagtails and flocks of Goldfinches and Meadow Pipits. A pair of Marsh Harriers quartered low over the reedbeds.

Further upstream we entered a very flat area of arable land where crops including rice are cultivated. The rice fields were particularly attractive to Glossy Ibis and in neighbouring fields we saw dozens of White Stork and Lapwing and a few Black-winged Stilt along the field margins. Our lunch stop was by the Hermitage of Nossa Senhora de Alcamé (Our Lady of Alcamé) where, over our picnic lunch of hams and cheese, we enjoyed a view of thousands of Glossy Ibis. They flew into the field beside us in great waves and as those waves descended, the outline of the huge flock rippled and undulated in one immense murmuration. This was an extraordinary sight for a British birdwatcher, for whom the sight of a single Glossy Ibis is reason to celebrate.

We returned to our bungalows in the cork forest and readied ourselves for dinner at the same local restaurant in Porto Alto where we enjoyed another excellent meal.

On the return to our base and, following the track to our bungalows by torchlight, a Fire Salamander crossed the path. We watched as it moved slowly into the leaf litter. Its bright yellow and red markings on a black body signal its toxicity to potential predators.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 3rd November

### Drive to Terena

Our pre-breakfast walk started with close view of a Cirl Bunting at the top of an oak tree, and then as we walked, we had good views of Sardinian Warbler and a Greenfinch. As we proceeded to breakfast a Pied Flycatcher showed well for us.

Breakfast was taken in the main building next to paddocks where two horses and their riders were practising dressage. Equestrian pursuits are a feature of the area in which we stayed and it was interesting to see the Portuguese horses being ridden so skilfully.

After a little over an hour's drive we reached the historic UNESCO heritage city of Evora. Walking up into the town the group were given time to look around the old square, cathedral and well-preserved Roman temple. Many were fascinated by the shops selling products made from cork including bags, shoes, wallets and even postcards. Lunch was taken at a café in the old centre before returning to our vans for the drive east.

Under blue skies, the rolling hills of the Alentejo, decked with autumnal colours of trees and vines, presented an attractive scene and soon we reached the Herdade D Pedro which was to be our base for the next four nights. We settled in to our very spacious rooms and living area before sitting down to the first of many sumptuous meals created by our host Freddy.

For this first evening at the Herdade, an introductory astronomy session had been arranged by the team from Dark Sky Alqueva who had brought a portable telescope with which we viewed Jupiter, Saturn, the Ring Nebula, the Andromeda Galaxy and the double star Albireo.

## Day 4

Thursday 4th November

### Eastern Alentejo

Meeting for a pre-breakfast walk we immediately had a view of an Iberian Grey Shrike in the top of a Cork Oak tree. We enjoyed telescope views of this endemic bird before continuing along the ridge above the house. Further along the track we heard the rattling call of a Corn Bunting and picked it up in one of the trees. A Sardinian Warbler was also seen.

After breakfast we loaded up our vans and set off towards the town of Borba. The area is internationally known for producing fine marble and we saw several marble quarries as we approached the town. In town, whilst David and Lara stocked up at a supermarket, the clients watched butterflies flitting around a flowerbed. Southern Brown Argus, a Large White and Red Admirals were seen.

Turning off the main road we entered the Vila Fernando Protected area and stepping out of the vehicles we immediately heard and saw a Zitting Cisticola at the top of a tall grass stem. Moments later, a Griffon Vulture flew low over us followed by a second and third and then we could see a large group of raptors including Griffon Vultures and Red Kites catching thermals off towards the west. Nearer us a mating pair of Clouded Yellow butterflies caught our attention.

Driving east we approached the border with Spain and could see the Spanish city of Badajoz, but just before the border, we took a minor road south past a small fishing lake (Lago Alfarofia). Here we looked across the reeds and could see Little Grebe and a flock of sparrows that contained at least two Yellow-crowned Bishop, an introduced species that now breed in several parts of Portugal. The species we were most keen to see was the Western Swamphen. This species can be very secretive, but luck was on our side as a bird flew up from and over the reeds twice.

Lunch was at a particularly scenic location by a small, white-washed church overlooking the river Guadiana and the ruins of an old bridge (Ponte da Ajuda) that crosses between Portugal and Spain. Despite the season, there were several small but attractive flowers on the grassy banks near the bridge. The drooping white flowers of Autumn Snowflake (*Acis autumnalis*) and two species of narcissus – the white *Narcissus serotinus* and the yellow-flowered *Narcissus cavanillesii*, a regional endemic.

We then returned slowly back towards our base at the Herdade, and after dinner, we had our first evening visit to the Observatory where astronomer Nuno Pereira Santos showed us the telescopes and explained how the composition of stars is determined. Nuno demonstrated this by taking a spectrum of the red star Aldebaran. The lines in the spectrum indicated the presence of particular elements.

## Day 5

Friday 5th November

### Eastern Alentejo

The usual early morning walk in the sunshine gave us views of a flock of Iberian Magpies moving through the oak trees. These beautiful birds are always mobile.

After another substantial breakfast we set off to the Esporão Winery, a large estate with vineyards and olive groves grown using organic methods. A guide took us around the vines before showing us the various types of vats and barrels and telling us about the processing of the wines. The tour concluded with the tasting of four wines, two red and two white, and there was an opportunity to purchase some of the produce.

For our picnic lunch we drove to the eastern side of the Alqueva lake and stopped along a quiet road. In the middle of the day the birds were quiet but a lone Crag Martin flew overhead. We took a short walk and saw several butterfly species and a particularly beautiful dragonfly called a Violet Dropwing. As we drove away down the small road a pair of Red-legged Partridge were very close to the vehicles.

Another site by a small pond had Egyptian Geese, Shovelers, a Common Sandpiper, a pair of terrapins and small flocks of Spotless Starlings.

A session of solar viewing had been arranged with the observatory and so we drove back across the bridge spanning the reservoir. At the observatory two telescopes were set up, one cut out the light of the sun so the ‘white light’ view could be seen, and the second telescope was a Hydrogen alpha filter so that only a very specific wavelength of the sun’s light could be seen. This wavelength allows the viewer to see details on the surface of the Sun and on this day there was a particularly large prominence erupting from the Sun’s limb and reaching well above the Sun’s chromosphere.

Another fine meal at the Herdade was followed by a stargazing session out by the swimming pool. The skies from the Herdade are very dark and the arch of the Milky Way was so clear overhead.

## Day 6

Saturday 6th November

### Eastern Alentejo

During our stay at the Herdade D Pedro, the village of Terena and its castle presented a significant view to the east. This morning we decided to visit the village and what a delightful little village it turned out to be. The narrow streets lined with white-washed houses seemed very quiet. Some of us climbed the steps up a church bell-tower for a great view across the village and beyond. Crag Martins and a pair of Barn Swallows were resting on the ledges around the tower. Looking down from a small viewpoint a pair of Black Redstarts were giving good views.

From Terena we drove north to the town of Estremoz where there is a Saturday market in one of the main squares. The group had a chance to browse the market whilst David and Lara gathered produce for lunch.

With provisions purchased we drove on to Lake Caia to have our picnic. Just as we arrived at the lake we spotted a group of seven Little Bustards by the track. The birds flew across the road to a nearby field and we were able to stop and view them through the telescopes. A few hundred metres further on we parked up by the lake to enjoy our late picnic lunch.

Further along the lake we stopped and had good views of three Common Cranes circling overhead, a Hoopoe on a rock and several Great Crested Grebes out on the water.

After another fine dinner cooked by Freddy at the Herdade, the group gathered in the lounge area to complete our online Covid forms as we were to be returning to the UK the following day.

Our final evening was then spent at the Observatory. This time Nuno pointed the telescopes at various nebulae, including the Orion Nebula, which he imaged using a camera attached to the telescope. The live images could be seen on his laptop screen.

## Day 7

Sunday 7th November

Lara had an early start as two of the clients had to be taken to the airport for an early flight. David set off with the remaining clients after a relaxed breakfast.

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## Checklist

### Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	November						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	6	3					
2	Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>					√	√	
3	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		√			√		
4	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>							√
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	√	√		√	√	√	
6	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		1		√	√		
7	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>							7
8	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	
9	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	
10	Western Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>				1			
11	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				√			
12	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				√	√		
13	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>							3
14	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>		√	√	√	√		
15	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>							√
16	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	√	√					
17	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>		√					
18	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	√	√					
19	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		√		√	√	√	
20	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		√		√			
21	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	1	√					
22	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	√						
23	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	√	√					
24	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	√	√					
25	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		√					
26	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		√					
27	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	√	√			√		
28	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	√	√					
29	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	√	√			√	√	
30	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		√					
31	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	√	√					
32	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	2	√					
33	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	√	√	√		√		√
34	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	√	√		√	√	√	
35	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	√	√		√			
36	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	√	√					
37	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
38	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	√	√		√	√	√	
39	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	√	√	√	√			
40	Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		√					
41	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	1			√	√		
42	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>				√			
43	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		√					
44	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		2					
45	Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			√	√	√	√	√
46	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
47	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	2	1		√	√	√	



	Common name	Scientific name	November						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
48	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		H					
49	Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>	H						
50	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	
51	Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>				√	√	√	
52	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	√	√		√			
53	Iberian Magpie - N	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>	√	√		√	√	√	√
54	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
55	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			H				
56	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
57	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		√					
58	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		√	√		√		
59	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					√	√	
60	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		√	√	√	√	√	
61	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>					√	√	
62	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>						√	
63	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H	H					
64	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	1		√	√	√	√	
65	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>				√		√	
66	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>					√		
67	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>			√	√			
68	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1					
69	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	
70	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	√	√		√	√		
71	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		√	√		√	√	
72	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>			√				
73	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>				√		√	
74	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		3		√	√	√	
75	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
76	Yellow-crowned Bishop	<i>Euplectes afer</i>				√			
77	Common Waxbill - I	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	H	√					
78	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		√		√	√	√	
79	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>				√			
80	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		√	√	√	√	√	
81	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				√			
82	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	
83	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				√	√		
84	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>			2				
85	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>				√	√	√	

## Other

Common name	Scientific name	November						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Butterflies</b>								
	<b>Pieridae</b>							
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>			2				
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			√				
	<b>Lycaenidae</b>							
Southern Brown Argus	<i>Aricia cramera</i>			√				
	<b>Nymphalidae</b>							
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>				√			
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			√				
<b>Amphibians</b>								
Fire Salamander	<i>Salamandra salamandra</i>		1					
Mediterranean Tree Frog	<i>Hyla meridionalis</i>				1			