

Portugal – Birding and Stargazing in Rural Alentejo

Naturetrek Tour Report

27th February – 5th March 2022



Sawfly Orchid by David Phillips



M81 Galaxy – Observatório Dark Sky Alqueva



Spotless Starling by Sheila Wright



Giant Orchid by David Phillips

Tour report by David Phillips



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Tour participants – David Phillips & Lara Broom (Leaders) with seven Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Sunday 27th February

Fly to Lisbon

A morning flight from London brought us to Portugal's capital Lisbon where we joined four clients who had arrived earlier and spent their time exploring the city of Lisbon. After meeting our local leader Lara Broom, we collected the vehicles and set off north along the Tagus. Crossing the Tagus we took a small, unmade road across the Lizira Floodplain, an area of arable land where crops including rice are cultivated. Here we passed fields with both Little and Cattle Egrets and saw White Storks on nests on electricity pylons.

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 Alcamê) where, over our picnic lunch of hams and cheese, we enjoyed the warmth of the sun and views of Marsh Harriers quartering over the marshes, Zitting Cisticolas on fences and above us circled White Storks catching the thermals and a Peregrine flying past.

We then retraced our steps along the tracks past the rice fields stopping for views of Black-tailed Godwits, Black-winged Stilts and Green Sandpipers before reaching the road from where it was a short drive through the town of Porto Alto and onto our accommodation for the first two nights in bungalows set in the cork forest. Dinner that evening was taken at a restaurant in Porto Alto.

Day 2

Monday 28th February

Birding around the Tagus Estuary

Before breakfast a few of the group met for a walk through the lichen-encrusted Cork Oak trees that had been stripped of their lower bark to use in wine bottles. We saw a Short-toed Treecreeper and heard Nuthatches and a distant drumming Woodpecker. Some of the group also saw a pair of Cirl Bunting low in the branches of one of the Stone Pines.

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. Unfortunately, due to road closure we took a detour along a sandy lane which caused our vehicles to get stuck in soft sand. Lara had contacts at a local reserve who were able to attach a tow rope to our vehicles and pull us out. Whilst we were there we looked at the local flora which included White Asphodel, Purple Viper's-bugloss and Fumitory. A Marsh Harrier was seen, and the distinctive call of a Hoopoe was heard.

Since the tide in the nearby estuary was high, many waders were on the islands in the salt pans including hundreds of Ringed Plover, Dunlin and Kentish Plover. In the pools several elegant long-legged species were present: Greater Flamingo, Avocet and Black-winged Stilt. We laid out a spread of food on a picnic table and

the group looked for birds across the salt pans. Since it was the birthday of one of the clients, we had some of Portugal's famous sweet cakes *pastéis de nata* and sang Happy Birthday!

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 saw flocks of Goldfinches and Meadow Pipits and a good number of distant Golden Plover. In the distance an Osprey sat on a post. Continuing along the road we had our first views of Iberian Azure-winged Magpies as a group of them moved through a woodland of cork oak.

We returned to our bungalows in the cork forest and readied ourselves for dinner at a different local restaurant in Porto Alto where we enjoyed an excellent meal of traditional food.

The sky was clear as we returned to our base and, although Lisbon was not far away, it was possible to see many of the brighter stars of the winter constellations so David gave a short talk pointing out the main constellations with a laser pointer.

Day 3

Tuesday 1st March

Drive East with a stop at Evora

Breakfast was once again taken at a café in the town of Porto Alto, a café where many local people eat before starting work or simply socialise.

Returning to our bungalows, David drove the van down to near his bungalow as a fine stand of a dozen or more spikes of Sawfly Orchid were in flower. These fine-looking flowers are considered by many to be the most beautiful of the *Ophrys* genus.

After a little over an hour's drive we reached the attractive and historic city of Evora. Walking up into the town we saw House Martins whizzing around and entering nests under the eaves of some of the old buildings. Reaching the old square (Praça do Giraldo) the group split up to visit the 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 on the outdoor terrace of a café in the old centre before returning to our vans for the drive east.

Under blue skies the rolling hills of the Alentejo presented an attractive scene and with windows down the sound of Corn Buntings could be heard calling from all around. Soon we reached the Herdade D Pedro which was to be our base for the next four nights. We settled into 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 the Orion Nebula, the Pleiades, Andromeda Galaxy, The Galaxies M81 & M82 and the double star Almach. The sky was very dark and clear.

Day 4

Wednesday 2nd March

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, David and Lara stocked up at a supermarket, and as they came out a Griffon Vulture flew over.

Turning off the main road we entered the Vila Fernando Protected Area and stepping out of the vehicles we walked in warm sunshine along a lane through classic Montado cork woodland enjoying the sound of Corn Buntings and sight of Swallowtail and Clouded Yellow butterflies with Red Kites catching thermals overhead. A distant Hen Harrier was seen by a few members of the group. We heard the Iberian Green Woodpecker but despite scanning the area we didn't see it.

Moving on we stopped to scan for birds near the village of Vila Fernando before stopping for a coffee at a local café in the village.

We had our picnic lunch 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. Before walking down to the river an Osprey was seen flying along the river with a fish and as we headed down the bank, we saw a group of four Glossy Ibis feeding in a pool on the opposite bank, Common Terns flying along the river and several Spanish Terrapins (*Mauremys leprosa*) on the rocks.

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 double star Almach. The two gravitationally bound stars are different colours due to the different surface temperatures and the lines that we could see in their spectra indicated the presence of particular elements. We also looked at several nebulae including the Orion Nebula, a stellar birthplace, and two planetary nebulae: Ring Nebula (M57) and the Eskimo Nebula (NGC 2392) which provide an insight into the future of our Sun.

On a larger scale we observed and photographed a pair of galaxies in the constellation of Ursa Major, the galaxies M81 and M82. These two galaxies are interacting with one another.

Day 5

Thursday 3rd March

The day dawned misty and a group of us met for a walk up the hill from the Herdade. Serin and Corn Buntings were seen and heard all along the track and near the house we observed Spotless Starlings and a few Spanish Sparrows in with the House Sparrows. As we returned to the house a Brambling was spotted in nearby trees and three Spoonbills flew over.

After breakfast we set off through heavy rain to the Esporão Winery, a large estate with vineyards and olive groves. A local guide took us around the estate 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.

Fortunately, by the time the tour finished, the rain had stopped, and the sun was shining. For our picnic lunch we drove to a spot on the western side of the Alqueva lake and set out our spread on one of the picnic benches, taking in the views across the lake as we ate. At the edge of the lake there was a Great White Egret, a few Egyptian Geese and a White Stork. After lunch we walked a few hundred metres around the lake and saw several Gadwall and heard Corncrake.

In the afternoon a session of solar viewing had been arranged with the observatory, so we drove a short way back and, as we approached the village of Campinho, a superb male Hen Harrier crossed the road ahead of us.

At the observatory two telescopes had been 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 we saw many large prominences erupting from the Sun’s limb and reaching well above the Sun’s chromosphere.

In the evening, after another fine dinner, we completed our passenger locator forms required for the return to the UK.

Day 6

Friday 4th March

Eastern Alentejo

Our regular morning bird walk took us up the hill and down to the small lake on the premises. On the shore of the lake was a Spoonbill, a Grey Heron and a Little Egret and, whilst we watched them, we could hear a Hoopoe calling. Eventually we picked it out at the top of a small tree on the far side of the lake.

During our stay at the Herdade D Pedro the village of Terena and its castle could be seen to the east. After breakfast we visited the village and parking next to the castle we wandered through the narrow streets lined with white-washed houses. Whilst in the castle a Red-rumped Swallow flew past, and a Spotless Starling posed whilst we observed its glossy and iridescent sheen. Some climbed the steps up a church bell tower for a great view across the village and beyond. A Sardinian Warbler gave good views from a small viewpoint.

From Terena we drove north to the town of Borba where we gathered produce for lunch before continuing to Lake Caia to have our picnic in an open plain overlooking a part of the lake. The landscape was dotted with granite outcrops that are reminiscent of the kopjes of East Africa. On the lake and around the shore we saw Egyptian Goose, Snipe and Shoveler. A few hundred metres further on we parked up and saw an Osprey come in to land on a post in the lake and heard a Hoopoe calling from close by.

Crossing the barrage we stopped for coffee and toilets at a strange little café at the eastern end of the lake. A short drive brought us close to the Spanish border and a quiet lane that Lara knew to be a good spot for Great Bustard – the heaviest of all flying birds. We drove slowly, scanning the fields and then stopped by a tremendous stand of Giant Orchid (*Himantoglossum robertianum*). No sooner had we got out to examine the beautiful tall orchid

spikes than Lara spotted a group of Great Bustard on a far field. With great excitement we joined her and with binoculars and scope we could see nine birds stretched out along a ridge. In the late afternoon sun, the rust coloured back and elegant pale necks of these huge birds was tremendous to see.

Our host Freddy surpassed himself with our final dinner back at the Herdade which was consumed with fine local wine and followed with a local firewater!

Day 7

Saturday 5th March

Drive back to Lisbon

An early breakfast and an early departure (8am) for the drive to the airport for flights back to the UK.

The toll motorway was almost empty for most of the journey, but we stopped for a break at a service station where an Iberian Grey Shrike perched on top of a tree gave a great view. Elsewhere along the motorway we saw Red Kites and White Storks and, whilst crossing the 12 kilometre long Vasco da Gama bridge, we could peer down onto the salt pans and see the pink of a flock of Greater Flamingos.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

	N=Near-endemic	Common name	Scientific name	February/March 2022						
				27	28	1	2	3	4	5
1		Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>					2	✓	
2		Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>							
3		Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓				✓	
4		Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	✓				6		
5		Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
6		Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			1	✓		✓	
7		Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>			✓				
8		Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>				H	H		
9		Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>							9
10		Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			1				
11		Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>					✓	✓	
12		Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
13		Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>							
14		Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓			✓			
15		Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>							
16		Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				✓	1		
17		Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>						✓	
18		Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>		✓					✓
19		Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	2	✓				✓	
20		Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>		✓					
21		Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓				✓	
22		Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		✓					
23		Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓					
24		Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>							
25		Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	1	✓					
26		Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	1					
27		Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓					
28		Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓					
29		Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>						✓	
30		Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	
31		Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	✓						
32		Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓					
33		Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		✓					
34		Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓				✓	
35		Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓						
36		Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓						
37		Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓			✓	1		
38		Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>				✓			
39		White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40		Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓			✓		✓	
41		Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓		1	✓		✓	
42		Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		✓		✓	3	✓	
43		Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
44		Great White Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>					1		
45		Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
46		Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	

	N=Near-endemic	Common name	Scientific name	February/March 2022						
				27	28	1	2	3	4	5
47		Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		1		1		1	
48		Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>				1			
49		Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>				1			
50		Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓				✓	
51		Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				✓	✓	✓	
52		Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		1		✓	✓	✓	✓
53		Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
54		Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H	H					
55		Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓		✓	H	✓	
56		Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>				1			
57		Iberian Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus sharpei</i>		H		H			
58		Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
59		Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓						
60		Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			✓	✓		✓	1
61		Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>							
62		Iberian Magpie - N	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		✓		1		✓	
63		Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
64		Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓				
65		Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
66		Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				✓			
67		Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
68		Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
69		Eurasian Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>							
70		Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓			✓	✓		
71		Thekla's Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>							
72		Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
73		Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>					✓		
74		House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			✓				
75		Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
76		Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>						1	
77		Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
78		Eurasian Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>	✓						
79		Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	✓	✓					
80		Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>						✓	
81		Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		1		1			
82		Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓					
83		Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓		✓			
84		Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>		1		✓			
85		Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	1						
86		Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
87		Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	
88		European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓			
89		Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>							
90		European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>							
91		Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	1		✓		✓	
92		Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>							
93		European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
94		Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>	1						
95		Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>				✓	✓	✓	
96		House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
97		White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

N=Near-endemic		February/March 2022							
	Common name	Scientific name	27	28	1	2	3	4	5
98	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>				✓			
99	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>					✓		
100	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
101	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>					1		
102	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓					
103	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		
104	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
105	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
106	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Butterflies

		February/March 2022							
Butterflies									
Common name	Scientific name	27	28	1	2	3	4	5	
Small Heath	<i>Coenonympha pamphilus</i>					✓			
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		✓						
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>		✓	✓	✓				
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	✓			✓				
Old World Swallowtail	<i>Papilio machaon</i>				✓				

Others

		February/March 2022							
Common name	Scientific name	27	28	1	2	3	4	5	
Mammals									
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓						
Reptiles									
Geniez's Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis virescens</i>			✓					
Spansh Terrapin	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>				✓	✓			
Selected Plants									
Sawfly Orchid	<i>Ophrys tenthredinifera</i>		✓						
White Aspodel	<i>Asphodelus albus</i>		✓						
Purple Vipers-bugloss	<i>Echium plantagineum</i>		✓						
Giant Orchid	<i>Himantoglossum robertianum</i>							✓	
Barbery Nut	<i>Moraea sisyrinchium</i>			✓		✓			
Fumitory	<i>Fumaria officinalis</i>		✓						