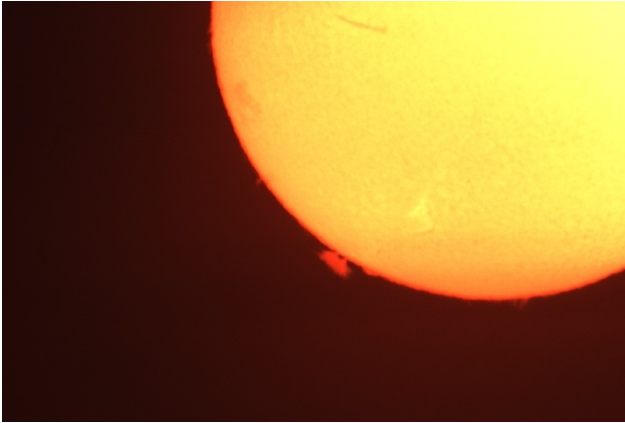


Portugal – Birding & Stargazing in Rural Alentejo

Naturetrek Tour Report

21st – 27th November 2022



Sun in H-alpha



Almendres Cromlech



Great Bustards



Glossy Ibis

Report by David Phillips
Photos courtesy of Val Perrin and the Observatório Darksky Alqueva



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

Day 1

Monday 21st November

The morning flight from London with British Airways brought us to Portugal's capital Lisbon. The former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was on the same flight, and we later learnt he was attending a conference in the city. After collecting our luggage, we met with local leader Lara Broom and a client who had arrived a few days earlier. Once our vehicles had been collected, we set off north along the main road parallel to the Tagus before crossing the river and entering the Tagus Estuary Nature Reserve.

It had rained that morning and the road through the reserve had lots of puddles, but we found a suitable place to pull over for lunch. Lara had purchased bread, cheeses, peppers and hams for us to have a picnic and, whilst we ate, we surveyed the surrounding rice fields for birds. In one field there were great numbers of Glossy Ibis forming immense flocks and, in another field, there were Greater Flamingos and a few Spoonbills. Marsh Harriers quartered the fields and White Storks and Lapwings searched for food. A flock of Yellow-crowned Bishops took us by surprise. It is an introduced species and not one we had expected to see in any number.

Continuing, we stopped by the Hermitage of Nossa Senhora de Alcamé (Our Lady of Alcamé) but the light was starting to fade and dark clouds looked rather ominous, so we started the drive to the town of Benavente and our accommodation for the first two nights. Once we had settled in the hotel we walked across the town to a small local restaurant for dinner.

Day 2

Tuesday 22nd November

Birding around the Tagus Estuary

After breakfast at the hotel, we drove south towards the town of Alcochete where we put in a brief stop at a supermarket to purchase some provisions, before driving on to our first birdwatching location of the day, the salt pans of Salinas do Samouco. The tide in the nearby estuary was rising and waders were beginning to fly in to the islands in the salt pans. Sanderling, Kentish Plover and several elegant long-legged species were present, including Avocet and Black-winged Stilt. A pair of adult and one juvenile Kittiwake were on one of the side pools. Along the beach were groups of Sanderling running up and down the shore ahead of the incoming waves.

After a picnic lunch we entered an area of salt marsh with saline pools surrounded by walkways. Almost immediately we heard Dartford Warbler. The bird was rather elusive and only a few of us managed a view, but other highlights were to come. To one side a Caspian Tern flew over and around one of the pools and on the other side of us a Black-winged Kite hovered and settled on a bush giving excellent views of this striking raptor. Other treats included a Water Rail, Black-tailed Godwit, Greenshank and a dozen Avocet flying in formation.

Walking back along the seafront to a bar for coffee we had excellent views of Zitting Cisticola, Black Redstart and Sardinian Warbler.

From the salt pans we drove back through Alcochete, passing some of the introduced Crested Mynas on the grass of a roundabout before leaving the town. Skirting the estuary on a minor road we stopped at a point that

overlooked a grassy area with pools. Here we had an opportunity to compare the sizes of Great Egret, Grey Heron and Spoonbill, as examples of all three birds stood in a line. Here too were many White Wagtails and flocks of Meadow Pipits. A pair of Egyptian Geese flew in.

We returned to our hotel and readied ourselves for dinner at another local restaurant in Benavente where we enjoyed another excellent meal.

Day 3

Wednesday 23rd November

Drive to Terena

After breakfast we loaded the vans with our luggage and set off east towards the city of Evora. A couple of clients had expressed interest in Portugal's prehistory, and we decided to make a stop at Cromlech dos Almendres, a stone circle whose construction dates back to the 6th millennium BC. An interpretive centre provided information boards about the stones, the landscape and the wildlife of the area. In the area we had views of Clouded Yellow and Painted Lady butterflies, Iberian Shrike, Blackcap and Cirl Bunting, and Lara saw a Crested Tit although none of the group was with her at the time.

Thirty minutes' drive took us into 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.

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. Unfortunately, the skies were not clear for this first evening at the Herdade, and the usual introductory astronomy session was changed to a talk from David about the Sun and the planets and winter constellations that we hoped to see when the skies cleared. Later it did clear a little and putting warm clothes on, we headed to the garden by the swimming pool and pointed out some of the constellations with a laser pointer. We also saw Jupiter's moons through one of the birding telescopes.

Day 4

Thursday 24th November

Eastern Alentejo

Meeting for a pre-breakfast walk we immediately had a views of 20 Cormorants flying into the lake and a Black Redstart around the house. Further along the track we heard the rattling call of a Corn Bunting and picked it up in one the trees and returning to the house a Hoopoe gave good views as it flew from the ground up into one of the Cork Oak trees.

After a substantial breakfast we set off to the Freixo Winery, an estate with vineyards surrounding and growing on top of a modern building, the spiral interior of which resembles the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Our guide took us around the building, 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 three wines, two white and one red, and there was

an opportunity to purchase some of the produce. A picnic lunch among the vines produced a Snipe for one of the group.

An afternoon session of solar viewing at the observatory had been planned, but the clouds were still with us, so we stopped en route for a coffee in Reguengos. Once at the observatory, astronomer Nuno gave the group a talk about the Sun and its appearance through the specialised H α telescopes they have at the observatory.

We then returned slowly back towards our base at the Herdade for a sumptuous dinner.

Day 5

Friday 25th November

Eastern Alentejo

The day dawned bright and sunny, and on our pre-breakfast walk, we were joined by Salsa the dog and Manjerico the cat. Two groups of Common Cranes flew over and from the path a Brambling, Black Redstart and Crested Lark gave good views.

During our stay at the Herdade D Pedro, the village of Terena and its castle presented a significant view to the west and this morning we visit the delightful village. 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. Spotless Starlings perched on the castle walls and tower and Crag Martins flew around. A single House Martin was seen too.

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. Taking a walk, we heard the bugling calls of Cranes and Lara managed to locate them and find them in the scope. In the same area we had Hoopoe showing well and a late-flowering *Crocus autumnalis* (formerly *C. serotinus*). As we returned to the vehicles, a Griffon Vulture flew low overhead and Red-legged Partridge was close by.

Further along the road, by the side of the pond, we had three Common Cranes: two adults and a brown-headed juvenile. From the same location there were distant Griffon Vultures and a murmuration of Spotless Starlings. At the edge of the pond were a number of Spanish Terrapins.

Since we hadn't been able to view the Sun on the previous day, another 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 return to the observatory for the night session. Thankfully, the skies were at last clear, and Nuno set the scope for us to view the planets Saturn and Jupiter, the double cluster in Perseus, the fine double star Almach, the Andromeda Galaxy and the nebula in Orion.

On the drive back to the Herdade, one vehicle saw a Little Owl on a roundabout and then an Iberian Hare ran across the road in front of our vehicles.

Day 6

Saturday 26th November

Eastern Alentejo

On the property there is a small lake and for our final pre-breakfast walk we dropped down to it and saw a Kingfisher.

From the Herdade we drove north to the town of Borba where we stopped at a supermarket for provisions before continuing towards the Caia reservoir. On the way we pulled to the side of the road to see Iberian Magpies flitting around on the ground and up into Cork Oaks. The picnic was enjoyed 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 Geese and Shoveler and across the lake we could see Common Cranes and two Osprey – one on a post and another feeding on a fish at the lake shore.

Crossing the barrage, the drive took us passed the fortified town of Campo Maior, close to the Spanish border, and a quiet lane that is known to be a good spot for Great Bustard – the heaviest of all flying birds. We drove slowly, scanning the fields and spotted a group of Great Bustard on a far field. With great excitement we got the scopes on the birds just before they took off (16 birds were counted). We noted where they came down and drove further up the road for more views.

Our final stop 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. On the grassy banks near the bridge, we spotted the white flowers of the small but attractive Autumn Snowflake (*Acis autumnalis*) and a species of narcissus - *Narcissus serotinus*.

As we walked down to the bridge, the Sun was close to setting and hundreds of Common Cranes flew in great skeins, bugling as they passed over. It was a great sight and a wonderful way to end our last full day.

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

Sunday 27th November

An early start and hearty breakfast before the drive back to Lisbon for our flight home. As we approached Lisbon some of the electricity pylons along the motorway had dozens of nests occupied by White Storks.

At the end of the tour the clients were asked to list their five favourite birds in order. The following results are based on giving 5 points for each favourite, 4 points for second favourite etc:

- 1 Great Bustard 28
- 2 Common Crane 17
- 3 Hoopoe 15
- 4 Griffon Vulture 13

5= Black-winged Kite 11
5= Iberian Grey Shrike 11
7 Spoonbill 9
8 Glossy Ibis 6
9 Crested Lark 5
10= Kittiwake 4
10= White Stork 4
10= Stonechat 4
13= Cirl Bunting 3
13= Water Rail 3
13= Lapwing
13= Starling (murmuration)
17= Sanderling
17= Iberian Magpie
17= Marsh Harrier
17= Kentish Plover
21= Zitting Cisticola
21= Black Redstart
21= Dartford Warbler

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Species lists

Birds (N=Near-endemic I=Introduced)

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		21	22	23	24	25	26	27
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>		2				✓	
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓					
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓				✓	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>						✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓				✓	
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>						16	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>					✓	✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		1					
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	2	✓			1	✓	
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>					✓	✓	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>						✓	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>						✓	
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</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>		✓					
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓				✓	
Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>		✓					
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓					
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓					
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓					
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				1			
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	2	✓				✓	
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1				1	✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓					
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1					
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		3					
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus</i>		✓					
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓					
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>		✓					
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓				✓	
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>		1					
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	✓	✓					
Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	✓	✓					
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓					
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		✓			1	2	
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		1			1		

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		21	22	23	24	25	26	27
Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>					✓	✓	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓				✓	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>			1		1		
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>						1	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			1				
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	✓				✓		
Iberian Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>			✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1	✓	1	✓		
Iberian Magpie - N	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>					✓	✓	
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓			✓	
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>			✓		✓	✓	
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>				1			
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>							H
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>					✓	✓	
Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>					1		
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	✓	✓				✓	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			✓		✓		
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Dartford Warbler	<i>Curruca undata</i>		✓					
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H					
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			H				
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>					1		
Crested Myna	<i>Acridotheres cristatellus</i>		✓					
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>					✓		
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Yellow-crowned Bishop - I	<i>Euplectes afer</i>	✓						
Common Waxbill - I	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>		✓					
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓						
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>					1		
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>						✓	
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>						✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>				✓			
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>				1			

Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
		21	22	23	24	25	26	27
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			1		1	✓	
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>			1				
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>			1		✓	✓	
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>			1		1	✓	

Others

Mammals	Common name	Scientific name	November 2022						
			21	22	23	24	25	26	27
	Granada Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>					1		
	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		1					
Reptiles									
	Spanish Terrapin/ Iberian Pond Turtle	<i>Mauremys leprosa</i>					✓		
Amphibians									
	Spiny Toad	<i>Bufo spinosus</i>				1			