

# Portugal – Birding & Stargazing in Rural Alentejo

Naturetrek Tour Report

4th – 10th February 2024

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Herdade D Pedro



White Storks



*Narcissus bulbocodium*



Western Swamphen

Tour report and photos by David Phillips

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Tour participants: David Phillips and Lara Broom (leaders) and seven Naturetrek clients.

## Day 1

## Sunday 4th February

Our group caught the 09.15 British Airways flight from London Heathrow to Lisbon, arriving shortly after midday. Once through security and after we collected our luggage, we met Lara, our Portuguese guide. We then collected the two minibuses which had been hired for the tour.

We were soon out of the city and driving north parallel to the river Tagus, which we crossed at a bridge 25km upriver. On the east bank we turned off the main road and into wetlands that are an excellent habitat for birds, comprising rice fields, salt marsh, mudflats and water channels. The location of the Tagus Estuary Nature Reserve and its mix of habitats makes this one of the most important sites in Europe for wintering and passage birds.

Driving slowly along the gravel road and stopping as frequently as we wanted, we were immediately in a birding paradise. Flocks of Glossy Ibis, Black-tailed Godwit and Lapwing were feeding in the first few fields, and further on we also saw good numbers of Avocet and Black-winged Stilt, while an Osprey flew by and Marsh Harriers quartered the marshes.

We stopped to have our first picnic lunch, for which Lara had bought provisions before meeting us. A selection of breads, cheeses, peppers, tomatoes, hams and fruit was enjoyed, while we watched a flock of Common Waxbill flitting around in the reeds close by. These birds, with a red bill and red stripe through their eye, were originally from sub-Saharan Africa but have now established a population in Portugal. On this warm afternoon we also saw a number of Red Admiral and Painted Lady butterflies.

Our accommodation for the first two nights of the tour was a series of cabins set in a cork oak forest, south of the town of Porto Alto. We drove there and settled in before driving into Porto Alto for dinner.

## Day 2

## Monday 5th February

The morning dawned with a mist in the air and the sound of birdsong in the trees. Our pre-breakfast walk gave us views of Serin, Chaffinch, Nuthatch and Great Tit. Breakfast was taken in typical Portuguese style at a patisserie in town. Here, workers and retired people, old and young meet and start their day with a coffee and savoury or sweet snack.

Heading south along the N118 to Alcochete, we reached the Salinas do Samouco, a series of pools that are still used to collect salt. Immediately we could see good numbers of the star bird of this part of the estuary: the Greater Flamingo. Scanning the salt pans we saw a large flock of Avocet and some Black-winged Stilts. Barn Swallows flew overhead and a Zitting Cisticola was singing from a nearby patch of grass.

At one point the flamingoes started to perform part of their courtship dance including 'head flagging', in which members of the group hold their heads high, stretching their necks, and move their heads one way then another. Leaving the minibuses at the reserve entrance, we walked along a network of paths between the pools encountering Spoonbill, Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit and Black-winged Stilt. The paths were covered in the flower *Oxalis pes-caprae*. Although the yellow flower brought a great deal of colour, it is an invasive species that has taken over large areas of coastal Portugal as well as some sites inland. Further into the reserve, as we walked to a hut for lunch, we saw Hoopoe and Black Redstart.

Following coffee at a beachside café, we drove a little further around the estuary to Sitio das Hortas. By now the tide was well out, and many birds were feeding on the exposed mudflats, including Dunlin, Ringed Plover and Kentish Plover. A pair of Caspian Terns flew around and eventually one was seen on the mud amongst gulls and a Spoonbill. A good view was had of an Osprey eating fish on a post.

The evening meal was enjoyed at a local restaurant in town of Porto Alto.

## Day 3

Tuesday 6th February

Once again early morning mist surrounded our cabins as we ventured out for a pre-breakfast walk. Sardinian Warbler and Serin were the notable birds seen before we took breakfast at the main building, next to the stables and horse paddocks. There we saw Barn Swallows and Goldfinches, but the most common birds by far were the House Sparrows.

Our journey took us on the motorway towards Evora, but before reaching the historic city we made a visit to the village of Guadalupe where we walked a track through the classic 'montado' landscape of cork oak and meadows. Here we saw Short-toed Treecreeper, Nuthatch, Serin and Sardinian Warbler.

Continuing our journey, we soon reached Evora where we took lunch on the outdoor terrace of a restaurant. Our group then had a little time to explore the Roman temple, the cathedral, and the narrow lanes and open spaces of this fine city.

A further hour and a half's drive brought us to our base for the next four nights, the Herdade D Pedro, a wonderful farmhouse surrounded by rolling hills, where the owner's herd of Charolais cows roam among cork and olive trees. On the approach road we saw Iberian Shrike and a flock of Spanish Sparrows.

In the evening, the team from Dark Sky Alqueva came to the property with a portable reflector telescope. Award-winning astrophotographer Miguel Claro talked about the stars, and we viewed a number of objects through the telescope, including the Great Nebula in Orion (M42), the open cluster of M37, the double cluster in Perseus, the double star Almach (gamma Andromedae), and the planet Jupiter.

## Day 4

## Wednesday 7th February

The Great Bustard is the heaviest flying bird in Europe, and the Alentejo steppe is home to a resident population. After breakfast we set off north to the town of Campo Maior and, after a short rest stop, we drove into the countryside in search of this magnificent bird. Initially we picked up a dozen Great Bustards some distance away on a ridge. Through the telescopes we could see them well and one of the males was puffing out his white tail feathers as a precursor to the ‘foam bath display’. Further along the road we found another group of 25 birds, and while we watched them a male Hen Harrier flew along the hill behind us.

Shortly before stopping for our lunch we saw a small flock of Iberian Magpies from our vehicles, whilst passing an area of cork oak. Our picnic was taken at a favourite spot for this trip: the viewpoint overlooking Ponte da Ajuda, a partially collapsed sixteenth-century bridge which spanned the Guadiana River between Portugal and Spain. After the picnic at the viewpoint, we walked down to the river, where there we saw Shoveler and Egyptian Geese. The bank was colourful with many wild flowers, including the purple of a delicate species of *Romulea*.

A little distance up the Guadiana River lies a series of ponds surrounded by reeds. We made a stop here, as this is a known site for Western Swamphen and, on a previous visit, Lara had spoken with the owner of the land and he said he would let us in if we were visiting. True to his word, we went in and had super views of three Western Swamphens. In the strong sunlight the red of the bird’s frontal shield and the blue sheen of its back made a spectacular sight.

In the evening, after dinner, we visited the Observatory, and astronomer João led a session in which the group observed some of the same objects as the previous night, but with the larger telescopes. Additionally, we observed the Crab Nebula (M1) and Bode’s Galaxy (M81). Observing Jupiter, we noted how the positions of the Galilean satellites had changed since the previous evening. The satellite Io had been in front of Jupiter, but now it had only just emerged from behind the planet, having made a half orbit in just under one Earth day.

## Day 5

## Thursday 8th February

The pre-breakfast walk took us up the hill and down towards the lake. The nesting White Storks in the valley were clacking their beaks and throwing their heads back as part of their courtship ritual. In the Olive plantation we came across a patch of Hoop-petticoat Daffodils (*Narcissus bulbocodium*) with golden-yellow flowers.

After breakfast we set off in the minibuses along the track and, just before reaching the main road, we had a super view of a Granada Hare. Smaller than our Brown Hare, with more pronounced black tips to its ears, the Granada species is endemic to the Iberian Peninsula.

We had a tour of the Esporão winery where wine tasting was arranged and, while waiting for the tour to begin, we spotted some ducks on a lake that is part of the estate. Lara went to get the telescope out of the minibus, and we

observed a flock of Red-crested Pochard, some Mallard, Teal and Greylag Geese. The winery tour guide showed us where the grapes are pressed and various vessels used for storage before allowing the group to sample four wines – two red, two white.

Due to the weather it was decided that we should eat at a restaurant in the hilltop village of Monsaraz. The restaurant, called “Gaspacho”, served a delicious range of breads, cheeses, hams and vegetables followed by an ‘egg custard’ dessert and coffee.

From Monsaraz we took the road across Alqueva to an area where Common Cranes are frequently seen. Common Cranes spend the winter months in Spain and Portugal before migrating to Northern Europe to breed. From the vehicles we saw a total of eight Cranes. We got them in the telescopes, but it started to rain, so we didn’t linger for long.

A solar viewing session had been arranged at the observatory, but the cloudcover made this activity impossible, so we returned to the herdade in the late afternoon. After dinner, David gave an illustrated talk about solar eclipses.

## Day 6

## Friday 9th February

Our excursion today took us, once again, south of Terena. We had seen many White Storks on nests, but in order to photograph one from close range, we pulled off the road a little way beyond the town of Reguengos. The storks were very obliging, and while we observed them a Quail could be heard calling from nearby. These secretive birds are heard much more often than they are seen.

Crossing the Alqueva Lake, a reservoir formed by the damming of the river Guadiana, we turned near the town of Mourão onto a road toward the border with Spain, where we stopped by a pond one kilometre from the frontier. Our view of the pond and its birds was accompanied by the jangling sound of cow bells, as all the cows in the surrounding field had bells around their necks. The pond, around 100m in diameter, proved a productive place for birdwatching. On the pond were Teal, Shoveler and Mallard, and around the edge were Spoonbill, Black-winged Stilt and a Greenshank. A Red-legged Partridge was in a small ditch off to one side. At one point a female Hen Harrier flew low over the fields behind us. Common Cranes flew to a point just out of sight over the brow of a hill, but then two Cranes, an adult and a juvenile, flew to a position where we could see them well.

The next stop was the short drive to the previous day’s Crane viewing spot. Here we initially saw two Cranes. We proceeded to where a gravel road track left the road and got out for a walk. We watched three Cranes fly to a point across on hillside. Crested Larks were also giving good views, but then the wind got up and it started to rain heavily, so we hurried back to the vehicles. Once the wind and rain passed over we enjoyed a picnic lunch from out of the back of one of the vehicles.

Our return route passed the town of Reguengos, where we made a stop at a local gin distillery for the group to purchase some of the produce and use the facilities. From here Lara took half of the group for a coffee in the town and David took the other members of the group in his minibus back to the accommodation, stopping in the attractive village of Terena on the way. Visiting Terena's castle and then a clock tower, one of the group, an expert on church bells, told us about their manufacture and tuning.

Each evening at the Herdade, Frederico, the owner and an excellent cook, produced course after delicious course of splendid food, and our last dinner was certainly no exception. To finish this last evening, Frederico brought out a tray of spirits from Portugal and across the border in Spain. We felt that we had been treated like royalty.

## Day 7

Saturday 10th February

Breakfast at 08.30 included a cake and a chorus of "Happy Birthday" for one of the group celebrating a significant milestone. Morning was bright and a final walk was taken up the hill above the property and down to the lake. In addition to the Narcissus which had been observed a few days earlier, we found patches of a small purple flower *Linaria amethystea*.

Departing in the vehicles at 10.30, the usual flock of Spanish Sparrows and calls of Corn Buntings were seen and heard and a pair of Red-legged Partridges were in a field close by as we made our way to the road.

During the two-hour drive we saw a number of Red Kites over the motorway and, as we approached Lisbon, many of the electricity pylons had dozens of White Stork nests. Approaching the 17 km long Vasco da Gama Bridge we looked down on the salt pans that we had visited earlier in the trip and could see Greater Flamingoes in the water. So ended a most enjoyable trip in rural Portugal!

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		February 2024						
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					✓	✓	
Egyptian Goose	<i>Alopochen aegyptiaca</i>				✓		✓	
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓					
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>					✓	✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>					✓		
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			H		✓	✓	✓
Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>						H	
Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>				✓ 25			
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>				✓		✓	
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓		✓			
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				✓			
Western Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>				✓			
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>					✓	✓	
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</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>		✓					
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓					
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓			✓		
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓					
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus</i>	✓						
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓					
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓					
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>		✓					
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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	✓	✓					
Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>		✓					
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		

N=Near-endemic I=Introduced		February 2024						
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>				✓		✓	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>							
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	H						
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓		✓			
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	✓						
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			H				
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>		✓		✓			
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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			H				
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓			
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>				✓		✓	
Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>				✓	✓	✓	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	H				H		H
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>		✓	H	H			
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>				✓			
Sardinian Warbler	<i>Curruca melanocephala</i>	H	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		H	✓				
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>			✓				
Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</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>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Waxbill - I	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	✓						
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			✓			✓	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓			
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	H				
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				✓			
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



## Butterflies

Common name	Scientific name	February 2024						
		4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>	✓	✓	✓				
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>	✓						
Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>			✓				
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>		✓	✓				
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		✓					
Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>			✓				

## Others

D = dead		February 2024						
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Mammals</b>								
Granada Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>					✓		
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓				
Common Genet	<i>Geneta geneta</i>				D			
<b>Reptiles</b>								
Iberian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanicus</i>		✓					
<b>Plants (notable)</b>								
Hoop-petticoat Daffodil	<i>Narcissus bulbocodium</i>					✓		✓
	<i>Linaria amethystea</i>							✓