

Portugal – Birding & Stargazing in Rural Alentejo

Naturetrek Tour Report

3rd – 9th March 2024



Iberian Grey Shrike



Great Bustard



Sawfly Orchid



Woodchat Shrike

Tour report and photos by Barrie Cooper



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Barrie Cooper (leader), Lara Broom (local guide) with six Naturetrek clients.

Summary

This Naturetrek birdwatching and stargazing tour to Portugal had mixed fortunes with the weather but great success in terms of the birds we saw. Cloud and rain restricted us to two evening sessions when we were able to see some interesting objects in the scopes including nebulae, star clusters and double stars. The birdwatching was excellent with good views of Great and Little Bustards, Woodchat and Iberian Grey Shrikes, Water Pipits, Greater Flamingos, Spoonbills, Glossy Ibises and a very obliging Short-eared Owl. We had many raptor sightings including Ospreys, Black, Red and Black-winged Kites, Short-toed, Spanish Imperial and Booted Eagles, Cinereous and Griffon Vultures. A splendid spread of Sawfly Orchids was most certainly a floral highlight. Another highlight of this tour is always the food, particularly at the Herdade D Pedro where we had some excellent meals.

Day 1

Sunday 3rd March

Ribeira des Enguias

The mid-afternoon flights from Heathrow and Manchester arrived and after collecting bags, we negotiated our exit from Lisbon Airport. We soon crossed the Vasco de Gama bridge where we saw our first Greater Flamingos in salinas below the bridge. After a few kilometres we arrived at the disused salt pans of Ribeira des Enguias. An Osprey perched on a wire was the first notable bird and a few Spoonbills on the salinas and in flight were another good start to proceedings. A couple of Sandwich Terns were diving to catch fish and Turnstones and Common Redshanks searched for food. An Egyptian Goose was almost hidden in some vegetation, but groups of flying Avocets were easier to see. A couple of Common Sandpipers flew up and down a stretch of river near the bridge where we stood and Barn Swallows flew overhead. Three Black-winged Stilts were on another salina and a few Spotless Starlings were posing on wires in the distance. Time was pressing so we continued our journey to the lodge where we would stay for two nights. Every electricity pylon seemed to have at least one stork nest on it and most were occupied by White Storks who were already preparing for the breeding season. The lodge is set in Cork Oak woodland and Serin was one of the birds flitting around when we arrived. After a short break we had a fine evening meal in a local restaurant.

Day 2

Monday 4th March

Lezirias, Sitio des Hortas, Salinas do Brito

The day began overcast with some light rain but by mid-morning it started to brighten up and we then had sunny, but windy, conditions. A couple of patches of Sawfly Orchids near to one of the bungalows sandwiched our day, with these marvellous *Ophrys* being in excellent condition. We drove to Lezirias which is a flat area composed of paddyfields, channels and ditches. Zitting Cisticolas seemed to be a constant presence, frequently calling, displaying and sometimes posing on top of bushes. Green and Common Sandpipers were also a regular sighting, presenting good opportunities to compare the species. There were plenty of Ruff and Black-tailed Godwits with some of the latter going into breeding plumage. The introduced Yellow-crowned Bishops in non-breeding plumage created a bit of confusion before we clarified their identification. Marsh Harriers and Common Buzzards put in regular

appearances, and we eventually had good views of Glossy Ibises feeding in a field near the track, with their appearance changing as they moved in the sunlight. A single Gull-billed Tern gave a fly past but was only seen by the occupants of one vehicle. Pintail, Teal, Avocet and Snipe were other species seen. A dashing Merlin in the distance was only seen by one of the leaders, but three very obliging Water Pipits feeding on the mud in one of the channels were enjoyed by everyone. We drove to Sitia des Hortas for a picnic lunch where a Hoopoe appeared soon after we arrived.

After lunch we had a look at the intertidal mudflats and found Kentish and Ringed Plovers, Little Stint and Dunlin. Near the carpark, butterflies included Clouded Yellow and Speckled Wood. A Violet Carpenter Bee on some yellow flowers revealed its violet-coloured wings and the sheen to its body. The bulky body of the bee was clearly weighing down some of the flowers it was using. A short drive took us to a café where some of the group took the opportunity to grab a coffee while the remainder went for a stroll along the beach, with Sanderling being a new species for the trip.

The Salinas do Brito was our next destination and species such as Black-winged Stilt, Grey Plover, Shoveler and Shelduck were some of the species in the salinas. Several House Martins and Barn Swallows were taking the opportunity to feast on the mosquitos and a male Black Redstart was a nice way to end our visit here. On return to the estate where our lodge is situated, an Iberian Grey Shrike was near the entrance and remained on top of a patch of bramble to give us all good views. Back at our cottages, Serins were in full song and another patch of Sawfly Orchids were found. Before going to dinner, we had a short astronomy session, with Jupiter and its four main moons plus the Orion Nebula showing well in Barrie's scope. An Argentinian satellite also crossed while we studied the sky. Another fine meal at another local restaurant was an appropriate end to the day.

Day 3

Tuesday 5th March

Cromlech dos Almendres, Evora

A pre-breakfast walk near our cottages began with a Serin and a Greenfinch competing for the “best singer at the top of a tree” competition; both looked very colourful in the early morning sunshine. Short-toed Treecreeper and a few Chiffchaffs were next, along with several Chaffinches. Nuthatches were vocal and a single Rabbit was the first mammal of the trip. Driving along the track away from our complex, a male Cirl Bunting was on a fence but flew off before most people saw it. Further along, everyone did see the Iberian Grey Shrike in its regular territory. Breakfast was taken at the same bakery café as the previous day, but with the bonus of a couple of Iberian Wall Lizards near where our vehicles were parked. We then took the motorway, with the occasional Red Kite seen, before reaching our first stop at Cromlech dos Almendres where there was a gift shop and trail with information boards. Walking up the track we came across a showy Iberian Grey Shrike, a few Corn Buntings, a drumming Great Spotted Woodpecker and a couple of Ravens. A male Goshawk soared for quite some time, but unfortunately didn't display, before drifting off in the distance. Back at the car park, Cetti's Warbler and Blackcap were singing.

A thirty-minute drive took us to the historic UNESCO heritage city of Evora. After finding parking spaces we walked up into the town to a café where we had a late lunch. There was then some free time for the group to look around the old square, cathedral and well-preserved Roman temple. Shops selling bags, hats, caps, shoes and wallets made of cork were of particular interest.

We continued our journey east through the rolling hills of the Alentejo region. We eventually arrived at the Herdade D Pedro with its converted farm buildings. On the track just before we reached the Herdade were a couple of groups of Spanish Sparrows with several males showing very well.

After a fine dinner, we had an evening session of night sky viewing with Joel and Rebecca from the Dark Sky astronomical observatory. They had brought a mirror telescope complete with a computerised system making it simpler to find celestial objects compared to birding telescopes. By a combination of the observatory scope and a birding scope, we looked at the four main moons of Jupiter, the Orion Nebula, a double star called Almach and finished with the Andromeda Galaxy. Despite the cold, it was a very interesting evening.

Day 4

Wednesday 6th March

Campo Maior. Pont da Ajuda. Alfarofia Lake. Dark Sky Alquila Observatory

It was a beautiful, clear morning with good visibility as we began our pre-breakfast walk. At least three Quail were heard and, surprisingly from a British perspective, they were in a pasture with plenty of trees and bushes, not the open fields that they frequently use in Britain. Three Spoonbill flying from the small lake were another surprise, with a pair of Gadwall swimming on it. Egyptian Goose and Moorhen were on the bank of the lake. Corn Buntings were singing everywhere and a few Song Thrushes were around. Thekla Larks and Serins added to the soundtrack for a pleasant early morning walk before a fine breakfast.

When driving down the track away from the Herdade, a couple of Red-Legged Partridges were in a field, with Common Snipe, two Green Sandpipers and a few turtles around a small pond. Driving north east through the rolling countryside, birds included Red Kite, Iberian Magpie and Iberian Grey Shrike. In an area that is usually good for bustards, we were pleasantly surprised to find a confiding Short-eared Owl on a roadside post. It allowed us to get out of the vehicles for photographs which then enabled us to see a Cinereous Vulture soaring relatively low in the distance. Moving further down the road, we had a couple more Cinereous and over fifty Griffon Vultures, soaring in a thermal with Ravens joining them. Perhaps the bigger prize was a Black-winged Kite that was hunting low near some farm buildings. The kite perched in trees a couple of times between forays where it showed its distinctive flying style. A couple of Hoopoes were also seen along this one kilometre stretch of road. Having picked up height by the aid of a thermal, most of the vultures disappeared into the distance, allowing us to resume an unsuccessful hunt for bustards.

A couple of Black-winged Stilts on a pond on the way to our next destination was a bit of a surprise. Our picnic lunch was taken at Pont da Ajuda with Spain on the other side of the river. A Black Kite was soaring over some forest on the Spanish side, but a Common Sandpiper along the shoreline of the Portuguese side of the river provided us with a closer view. A solar halo made an interesting observation before we moved off to our final destination. At the fishing lake known as Alfarofia a grand total of six Western Swampheens had Moorhens and Coots nearby for comparison and a Common Waxbill put in a brief appearance. We needed to return to the Herdade for an early dinner because we were off stargazing tonight.

Unfortunately, the clouds had come over by the time we arrived at the observatory and viewing was impossible. Instead, we had an interesting presentation by Joel and a tour around the observatory, including some of the memorabilia.

Day 5

Thursday 7th March

Borba Winery. Pont da Ajuda. Alfarofia Lake. Campo Maior.

Thunder and heavy rain during the night was the prelude to a wet morning, causing a change of plan for today. After a later breakfast and start, our first stop was a supermarket for picnic provisions. A brief stop at a lake brought our first Great Crested Grebes of the trip. A mixed flock of over a hundred hirundines included Sand Martins, which were also our first ones for the trip. A Great White Egret and a Spoonbill almost seemed to be working in tandem, as they remained close to each other during our stay. A Hoopoe showed well before we left to make a short journey to a winery in Borda. After an interesting guided tour and wine tasting, we made the thirty-minute drive, with intermittent showers, to Pont da Ajuda where we knew we could have some cover for our picnic lunch.

Fortunately, the rain held off until we left so we were able to enjoy our lunch and see some good birds. Three Caspian Terns flying up and down the river were a bonus and a Black Kite gave us a close fly past. Egyptian Geese and Yellow-legged Gulls were also around the river. Having dodged more heavy rain and seen a pair of Black-winged Stilts in a flooded field, we passed Alfarofia lake where three Western Swamphens were seen well by the occupants of one vehicle. We returned to a road where we would have a second crack at a particular target. It didn't take long before Lara said she could see a Great Bustard. To our delight, we eventually saw twenty-four Great Bustards, including several adult males, one of which was stood on his own with his tail erect in semi-display. A few minutes later, Lara started dancing as she exclaimed "Little Bustard". Further scanning enabled us to see four Little Bustards in the same field and in close proximity to the Greats. Our tactics worked to perfection and it's always satisfying when a plan comes off. To add to our enjoyment, the afternoon sunshine illuminated the Great Bustards perfectly to reveal their beautiful plumage. It was marvellous to enjoy two species of bustards together, particularly after failing to find any yesterday. On the journey back to the Herdade, a group of over twenty Iberian Magpies close to the road brought a fine end to a day that could have been a washout. Despite plenty of rain and temperatures of only ten degrees we had seen some special birds.

Day 6

Friday 8th March

Reguengos De Monsaraz. Alquevara Lake. Ferrarias. Mourao. Granja.

The day started bright and sunny, although the weather forecast wasn't promising. We managed to dodge a couple of heavy showers during the morning and early afternoon, with continuous rain on the journey back to the Herdade. Unfortunately, the sun wasn't visible at the Dark Sky Observatory so our solar astronomy session was cancelled.

A Sardinian Warbler and Iberian Grey Shrike showed well as we made our way down the track from the Herdade. Following a visit to a supermarket for picnic supplies, we made our way to the rolling countryside of Eastern

Alentejo with trees, including Evergreen Oak, scattered among the many fields. Driving along a road towards the Spanish border, a male Hen Harrier in a roadside field forced us to pull off and onto a track. Unfortunately, the harrier had continued its journey and disappeared, but a Black-winged Kite was hovering further along the track, so we slowly moved forward to get a closer look. The kite eventually moved on, but a Woodchat Shrike perched on the fence next to the track continued our good fortune. A Quail was calling in the field of crops close by to add to the mix. The rain came so we moved on to view a small lake which held Teal, Shoveler and Gadwall, with Black-winged Stilt and a Lapwing along the shore.

The rain had stopped by the time we reached our next destination which was a quiet road through more of the rolling countryside, near Maura. A large raptor flying a couple of hundred metres away forced Barrie to jump out of the minibus for a better look – it was an Immature Spanish Imperial Eagle. We watched this magnificent eagle for around fifteen minutes before it was lost in the distance, having been mobbed by a couple of Ravens during this time. We were ready to get back into the vehicles when Jacqui said “what’s that big bird?” It was a Short-toed Eagle, flying low about eighty metres away before perching on a pole next to the road – two species of eagles from the same spot made this an incredible stop. A few miles further on, we parked near some ruined buildings where Crag Martins and Barn Swallows were flying around. The weather was dry so we went for a walk along a wide track to get a better view of a few Red and Black Kites which were flying around. Good luck continued when a Black Stork was picked out flying low just one hundred metres away before two immature Spanish Imperial Eagles were seen flying together and then perching in trees. Whenever the eagles flew around, they were mobbed by one or two kites, providing good views when they took evasive action. The weather was still dry so we had our picnic lunch when we returned to the vehicles. A few Barbary Nut Irises were in flower near our picnic spot.

After lunch we found another quiet road to explore and found another Black-winged Kite. While watching the kite, a Black Kite flew close to us and then towards the Black-winged. The smaller kite started to harass the larger Black, before the tables were turned and the Black-winged became the one being chased. Another quiet road near Granja resulted in two more Short-toed Eagles with one of them posing quite nicely on a pole to allow photographs. A noticeable theme about the countryside we had visited today was the high number of Corn Buntings and Crested Larks, which was interesting from a nature conservation perspective. On the return journey a Marsh Harrier over a small lake became our final raptor of the day. The rain had set in by now, meaning that our scheduled visit to the Dark Sky Observatory to do some solar viewing wasn’t possible.

Day 7

Saturday 9th March

Ribeira des Enguias. Sitio des Hortas. Lisbon Airport.

The rain had continued overnight and wasn’t abating as we left the Herdade for the final time. Once on the motorway, we had some very heavy rain. Fortunately, we had driven out of the rain by the time we stopped at a service station for a comfort break. As we were coming towards the end of the motorway leg of the journey, a pale phase Booted Eagle flew in front of one of the vehicles, providing close but brief views of this beautiful raptor. We only had time for a couple of brief stops to do some birdwatching and the first one at Ribeira des Enguias was productive. Two Ospreys were flying over the disused salinas as we arrived and one soon caught a fish and took it to a nearby pole to enjoy its meal. The other Osprey made several attempts to catch a fish but was finding it difficult in the windy conditions. There were over twenty Spoonbills and approximately one hundred Glossy Ibis on the pools, plus a couple of Sandwich Terns fishing here. A selection of waders was noted here with Common

Snipe, Common Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit, Common Redshank and Turnstone roosting or feeding. A few Sand Martins mingled with the Barn Swallows before lack of time forced us to leave. Our final stop was at Sitio des Hortas for our picnic lunch, providing us with a brief opportunity to see Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Ringed and Kentish Plovers before we ate. It was raining when we first arrived, but fortunately stopped before we started our lunch. It was then a matter of crossing the Vasco de Gama Bridge to reach the airport for the conclusion of the trip.

A selection of interesting night sky objects seen during the trip:

Jupiter with the moons of Io, Europa, Ganymede and Calisto. An eclipse by Io on Jupiter, showing the moon's shadow.

Andromeda Galaxy

Orion Nebula

Sirius

Pleiades

Almach – a binary star in the Andromeda constellation

The double cluster in Perseus

Capella – a star of similar temperature to our Sun, in the Auriga constellation

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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>Ichthyaetus 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
Mammals								
Granada Hare	<i>Lepus granatensis</i>					✓		
European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>		✓	✓				
Common Genet	<i>Geneta geneta</i>				D			
Reptiles								
Iberian Wall Lizard	<i>Podarcis hispanicus</i>		✓					
Plants (notable)								
Hoop-petticoat Daffodil	<i>Narcissus bulbocodium</i>					✓		✓
	<i>Linaria amethystea</i>							✓