

WILDLIFE TRAVEL

PORTUGAL

28th September to 5th October 2011



Trip Report



Leaders: Mike Russell, Georg Schrier (Sagres)

Well I managed to get this unruly band of travellers to Portugal and back without too much mishap and pleased I was not to have to show the content of my luggage on arrival back at Gatwick; there might have been a bit of explaining to do! My overall impression was that everyone enjoyed it, I certainly did. The mixture of great accommodation, a great group, great birds mixed in with a great deal of fun led to trip which is fair to say was unlike any other that I have led for Wildlife Travel before! Once you actually get down to writing the report it becomes a really nice reminder of the week, remembering what we saw, what we didn't see and some moments that will remain with you forever, especially as I'm going to recall all your memorable moments here. Anyway, I hope this brings back the fond memories for you as it did for me.

Wednesday 28th

Everyone managed to get Gatwick on time which gave a chance for everyone to meet and try and sort the many and varied 'Jans' that had signed up; thank you Jane for having the foresight to put an 'e' on the end of your name! We took off on time despite two of our group having suspect looking luggage, and the Easyjet flight was smooth and punctual, arriving at Faro a few minutes early. As a leader, there are certain stages that you hope are reached without incident, two of the being that everyone's luggage arrives with them and there is someone at the airport waving a 'Wildlife Travel' placard, and thankfully both happened.

So, we arrived at the Hotel Vila Gale Albacora in time for lunch and I think to everyone's great approval, despite the pungent aroma that occasionally filled the air. It was a lovely hotel, good rooms, food, pool and in an excellent location with abundant wildlife all around. It was also nice to have time to settle in after a pretty early start and enjoy and relax in the lovely surroundings.

After a while I thought you had enough of relaxing and took you off to explore the saltpans and tracks near the hotel. Even from the front steps of the hotel new birds were lining up to be ticked off, one of them being **Sardinian warbler** of which we saw and heard many, but for Margaret W, it turned out to be the bird of the holiday. The first of a few **Adouin's gulls** was seen on this walk, along with an **Iberian grey shrike**, **zitting cisticolas** and **crested larks**, which were very common around the hotel but it was just a couple of hundred yards further on that we got the first of many 'wows!' of the week. Being your ever alert leader, I manage to walk straight past it, but luckily Stephen was much more eagle-eyed and found a beautiful **Mediterranean chameleon** doing a tight-rope walk along a barbed wire fence; absolutely stunning. I had hoped upon hope that we would come across this, the only chameleon to be found in Europe, but they are usually hard to locate, but this was as bold as brass out in the open. A great find, and not surprisingly two people voted this as their most memorable moment, Margaret N and Jan B.

Having been enthralled by the chameleon we then hit the saltpans and a whole range of waders disported before our eyes. There were the easy ones, **avocet**, **black-winged stilt**, while we soon sorted out the **Kentish plover** from the **little ringed plovers** and the **ringed plover** but then we had to get onto the smaller ones, although I think we got the difference between **dunlin** and **curlew sandpiper** nailed on this first day, only to be undone later in the week. At least we were sure about the **sanderling** here. In fact we recorded 24 species of wader in the week, all totally negated by the fact we couldn't find a stone curlew (except that is for Shirley who had a brief glimpse of one the next day)!

An excellent first day for the holiday, the late afternoon sun really picking out the birds at their best as we drifted back to the hotel and looking forward to the beckoning beer and dinner. However before dinner you have to go through the nightly sacred ritual of the daily list; that and relaying the programme for the following day, by far the most stressful part of a tour leader's job. We managed to get through this without too much difficulty which end was embellished by a **little owl** entertaining guests on the hotel roof.

Thursday 29th

An early(ish) start and off to Castro Marim Natural Reserve for the day, but not before we treated to the wonderful sight of the **greater flamingoes** flying in front of us from the hotel steps, their vivid pink glowing in the early morning sun. This spectacle was viewed a few times in the week and the beauty of it never dimmed, so it was not surprising that 3 people chose it as their favourite bird of the holiday, Jane, Erica and Shirley all unanimously citing the impact of the light as influencing their choice.

After a short journey we duly met Barbara Abelho from Natura-Algarve at the Information Centre for the Castro Marim Reserve an area of some 2000 hectares of saltmarsh, salt pans, farmland and scrubland alongside the Rio Guadiana, the national border with Spain, and dominated by the bridge spanning the two countries. Here we encountered more waders, **wheatears**, the commonest bird we saw during the week, and **whinchats**, a visible sign of the migration in full swing, while then starting to get our eyes accustomed to more unfamiliar species. One of the most easily viewable was the line of **Caspian terns** with their big carrot beaks glistening in the sun, intermingling with **Mediterranean gulls**.

We barely glanced at the **spotless starlings** and a few of us got a fleeting view of a **pallid swift** flying over our heads but the flypast of a flock of **spoonbills** was admired by all, especially Jan B who nominated it as her favourite bird. At last a few raptors started to appear, firstly a familiar **marsh harrier** then a distant **common buzzard**, but then the going got tougher as a larger bird of prey drifted into view which provided a real puzzler which Barbara and I finally came down in favour of a **Bonelli's eagle** and as no-one else had ever seen one before they weren't going to argue.....well at least I didn't think they would! These are not common birds anywhere but a few are seen annually in Southern Portugal on migration and the few we saw later on the week made me feel sure that we made the right choice. A smaller eagle going overhead was slightly easier to identify as a dark-phased **booted eagle**.

All this excitement required a caffeine fix with which we eventually succeeded at the Information Centre even if it was nearly in solid form, so suitably refreshed we set off around the salt pans that put us amongst the waders again along with a **brown hare**, while we also saw our first **swallowtail butterfly** of the week and Jan J found the beautiful **speckled crimson moth**, which, unbeknown to us, was causing a flurry of excitement back home.

Barbara had arranged lunch in the town of Castro Marim and very good it was too, after which some people opted for a doze on the coach while the rest went to the Castle where Alan looked very at home in the stocks. The view from the top over the saltmarsh into Spain was glorious but that was enough of not looking at birds, there was still work to be done! As the heat of the day began to fade we made our way to the southern end of the reserve and walked a track alongside a tributary of the river and again some excellent birding. Three species of tern were enjoyed here, the already seen Caspian and the plentiful **Sandwich tern**, while a few **little terns** entertained us by diving close to the bank. The river was full of **coot**, with a couple of **great crested grebes**, some **little grebes** and

here we managed also to locate a couple of **black-necked grebes**.

Tired but hopefully satisfied with the day we went back to the hotel, for a relaxing drink, meal and review of the day. After the list I thought everyone was a bit quiet so I employed that old trick used by many leaders at such times by falling off my chair which lightened the mood no end and even managed to wake Bryan up!

Friday 30th

Such an early start that we had to get up in the dark this morning! The 90 minute journey took us to Castro Verde where we met up with Esmeralda Luis from the League for the Protection of Nature for a day in the steppes, known as the Alentejo, and hopefully to see some special birds of this habitat. Transferring to another bus, we embarked on a tour through this wonderful but threatened habitat. After only a few minutes we had to pile out the bus as 4 **great bustards** flew in front of us and landed in a field and we were all able to get really good views of them. Wheatears, whinchats and **corn buntings** abounded here but we soon had to move to a different part of the reserve.

The next stop was bit of a raptor feast. A large eagle was spotted in the distance which turned out to be a **Spanish Imperial eagle** giving reasonable views, better than the even further away **short-toed eagle**. No sooner had we sorted out these eagles out when a **red kite** glided into view giving wonderful views in the full sunlight. Meanwhile, many **kestrels** were seen and try as we might we couldn't turn any into lesser kestrels while **common buzzards** also put on a show. If that wasn't enough, 15 large birds were then noticed thermaling over the trees where we first saw the imperial eagle, but the broad wings and lack of tail quickly marked them out as **griffon vultures**. This feast stuck in the mind of Jannet who nominated it as her most memorable moment. Unfortunately only Ivor and I got onto the quickly disappearing **black-bellied sandgrouse** here as we never caught up with any after this.... but the rule is if two people see it down on the list it goes!

Continuing our journey, a flock of about 20 birds caught the eye so out we got again and the birds turned out to be **calandra larks**, notable for their larger than the average lark size and dark underwings, somewhat overshadowing the nearby **tawny pipit**. Our last stop before lunch was Sra de Aracelis, the highest point of the region where the birds were fairly quiet but spirits of some members of the party were lifted as we met Georg for the first time and learned that we were going to spend 3 days with him later on! I did manage to get some of them to look at a **pied flycatcher**, though did feel I was losing the battle here to get people's attention.

Arriving at the Vale Goncalinho Environment Centre a lovely spread was laid before us, a typical Alentejo meal we were told which certainly didn't lack in quantity and variety. Sixteen of us hardly seemed to make an impact on the amount even after having eaten and drunk to our fill and that, the heat and having left so early, a soporific blanket fell over the party, but at least everyone stayed awake through the presentation of the work of the LPN. It was great to see and hear about the work that they were doing, particularly the way they worked with the farmers and local communities, quite inspiring. I was also very pleased that this resonated with Stephen to the degree that he recalled it as his most memorable moment.

On leaving we went through a rather quiet period in terms of birds, the heat and time on the bus was a bit of an ordeal, but ended with a flourish as we were taken to a lake that had numerous birds, some being waders we had already seen but managed to add **snipe**, **greenshank** and both **common** and **green sandpiper**. Here we also had a number of

yellow wagtails of the Iberian race which glinted in the evening sun and enchanted Bryan so much that he voted it as his favourite bird.

We eventually headed back to Castro Verde and said goodbye to the lovely Esmeralda for the return journey to the hotel. After dinner Lesley and I had our own special moment when we watched a **little owl** trying unsuccessfully to perch on an aerial on the chapel, so much enjoyed by Lesley that she decided that it was her favourite bird of the holiday. I'd like to think that I played a part in making this a special moment for Lesley, but really I was peripheral to the whole situation!

October 1st

Now, the idea of having a 'free' day in the itinerary was that the leader might get a lie in, but no, some of you decided you wanted a pre-breakfast walk so, as nothing is too much trouble for Wildlife Travel clients, we set off at 7.15 to just walk around the hotel, and what a good little walk it was too.

One thing that most people remarked on was the quality of the light at sunrise which was stunning, both Ros and Margaret W saying that it was this that will stay in the memory long after the holiday was over. The light on the birds was lovely and it was here that got excellent views of the many **red-rumped swallows** flying low over our heads. We got a fleeting glimpse of a **common waxbill** but later on, Margaret and Stephen had these little gems feeding outside their room and got such lovely views that they won Margaret's vote as the best bird.

On a mud pool we were treated to wonderful views of waders again, totally ignoring the **Mediterranean gull** sitting on the post waiting to be identified until Ivor pointed it out. A **white stork** landed nearby and a **whimbrel** moved in and out of view for a while. Bryan reckoned he saw a bluethroat but it soon disappeared not to be seen again so....well you know the rules Bryan!

After breakfast the pull of the England – Scotland rugby match proved too strong for Bryan and Lesley while Ros planned to escape for the day by hiring a car and going off to visit a friend. The rest of us went back to the saltpans for another look at the waders although it was here that wonderful views of a **kingfisher** stole the show. A **spotted redshank** came a close second as we got excellent views, as we did of a stint that did a great impression of a Tenmink's but in the end revealed itself as a **little stint**.

Heat, hunger and the lure of the pool led us back to the hotel and after lunch everyone went to do their own thing, swim, sleep, walk or took the hotel bus into Tavira with most people making it back for the late afternoon walk notable for the best views of Adouin's gull an overflying **gull-billed tern** and the complete undoing of the identification features of curlew sandpiper and dunlin. Now it needs to go on record here that there was no deliberate attempt by Stephen and myself to get them to fly at any point, it just so happened that Stephen was demonstrating some semaphore moves he had just learned and the small flock just took flight for about 20 metres. Anyway, problem solved; there was both curlew sandpiper with their white rumps and dunlin with white outer tail feathers. I think the challenge of this encouraged Stephen to make the curlew sandpiper his bird of the trip.

As we made our way back a flock of 20 plus **avocets** flew in to roost bathed in a glorious evening light. In fact we had recorded 20 species of wader during the day and it was this great number and diversity of waders that stayed with Ivor who voted it as his most abiding

memory of the holiday.

October 2nd

So sadly we had to say good bye to the Albacora, once again bathed in glorious morning light, offset by the sewerage smell at it's most pungent, but looking forward to a long and varied day before arriving in Sagres early evening.

Our first stop was Quinta do Lago, an unlikely super birding spot surrounded as it is by golf courses and some of the most expensive property in Portugal, and where we met up with Barbara again. It was actually a little quieter than on previous occasions I have been there, but there was still plenty to see. We got our first decent views of **azure-winged magpie** here, though not as good as I would have liked, but the views of **hoopoe** were much better particularly the one probing nearby on the fairways. Always a great bird to see and for Alan it was most definitely his bird of the holiday.

The lake next to the golf course is one of the best places in Europe to see the **purple swamp-hen**, and sure enough we were soon getting excellent close up views, good enough to see them using their ridiculously big feet to delicately strip the reeds to get to the inside. Jannet K and Janet D were entranced enough by this performance to both vote it their favourite bird. On the lake we upped our duck list quite considerably by adding **pochard, tufted duck, teal** and eventually **red-crested pochard**.

Perhaps the find of the week was here when detective Jane found another **Mediterranean chameleon**, half the size of the first one, but this time deep inside a bush and, unsurprisingly, this was her most memorable moment of the holiday. On the walk back to the coach we had splendid views of a pale morph **booted eagle** while Ivor noticed some **European terrapins** basking on some baskets in the pond. On the mud we all got extremely close views of a whimbrel and **bar-tailed godwit**.

The next exciting part of the venture took us to Faro Island where we took a boat ride through the Rio Formosa National Park which was brilliant, getting really close to herons, egrets, spoonbills and a multitude of waders, just bank to bank birding for the hour and a half of the trip. It was getting well into the lunch zone by this time and I know some of you were getting concerned that we might have to go all the way back, but no Barbara had organised it perfectly as we went under a bridge into Faro Harbour and moored up by the Restaurante Faro e Benfica. Well, I know the jury's out on the merits of the traditional Algarve dish of seafood cataplana that was served up, but hey, it was traditional and Barbara was so keen that we liked it!

Anyway, we all survived and moved onto Lagado de Selgado for another excellent 90 minutes birdwatching. There were hundreds if not thousands of birds here, an important site along the coast but sadly under constant threat. A pair of marsh harriers unsettled things on a couple of occasions but perhaps the stars of the show here were the **glossy ibis** that flew around the other side of the lake. Away from the water, we had very close views of both **spotted flycatcher** and **pied flycatcher** along with an **Iberian chiffchaff**, which I have to say looked just like our chiffchaffs. Then it was off to Sagres, having thanked and said goodbye to the equally lovely Barbara, arriving at the Hotel Balieira at dusk. I wasn't sure how people would react to the hotel, but I needn't have worried, it seemed to go down really well. Anyway, Georg sitting in the foyer on our arrival took some people's attention away from the interesting architecture! I have to say the food here was excellent, the rooms very comfortable and the views over the harbour stunning.

October 3rd

Well this day certainly produced the most memorable birds and moments for a whole variety of reasons! Shirley, Erica, Jane and Jan B decided that the call of the sea was not for them so we all waved our tearful farewells at the harbour. Georg earned his spurs while we waited to get organised to go in the boats when he pointed out an **osprey, black kite** and three **honey buzzards** drifting overhead. We were one too many for our boat so Bryan gallantly volunteered to join the Swedes in the other boat, along with the chum, so they had all the seabird attractants in one boat!

Eventually we were off, and at first there were very birds to be seen, even less trawlers which usually have thousands of birds trailing them. However a few juvenile gannets drifted by and then we saw our first **Cory's shearwater**, of which there a few more throughout the morning, but only one **Balearic shearwater**. A real treat soon followed when a pod of **common dolphins** were located, feeding at the time so not so interested in bow waving the boats, but they did come incredibly close and we spent some time in their company, enough for Alan to declare his greatest moment.

More birds drifted closer, not in great numbers though, so it was time to release the chum! So we stopped the engines and rolled up and down in the waves and eventually the chum worked as birds materialised from the huge Atlantic landscape. A couple of **great skuas** glided over the boat, good views were seen of a single **great shearwater** and a more tricky **arctic skua**. However, the stars of the show here were definitely the petrels. These tiny house martin sized birds paddled on the surface and it was even possible to see the differences between the **European storm petrel** and **Wilson's storm petrel**. We saw a few of the latter and the fact that you really do have to go about 8 kilometres to sea to see these birds made it the bird of the trip for Ivor, Ros and myself.

Unfortunately all that rolling on the waves was too much for Jan J, but it would be unfair to dwell on this too much.....but there again, life can be unfair at times! All I will say is that the unaccustomed quiet was a memory in itself, but poor Jan suffered to the degree that it will remain long with her as the most memorable moment.

We arrived back in time for lunch but not before cruising along the cliffs and adding **Shag, raven** and a proper **rock dove** to the list. Two people remembered the morning with more positive affection, Janet D saying the whole thing was wonderful and Lesley said it had been the absolutely best ever birthday present, which was lovely to hear.

Georg found as a nice place in the town for a prolonged lunch in the heat of the day and a chance to recover our poise from the morning adventures. Suitably refreshed, Georg then took us a short distance to the raptor watchpoint, an interesting hour's walk through a 'heathland' like habitat with pine woods, a chance for the plant afficiados to explore, though there wasn't too much in flower, apart from **sea squill** and **Autumn squill**. On the bird front, there were a few **thekla larks**, but little visible raptor migration, though we were able to add **Egyptian vulture, sparrowhawk, peregrine** and **hobby** during the walk.

Back to the hotel for a freshen up and another excellent meal embellished by a lovely birthday cake made especially for Lesley by the hotel chef, and so to the end of a very enjoyable and varied day.



October 4th

Our last full day which we were to spend birding around the Sagres area, starting with a trip down to the Cabo Sao Vicente, the limestone cliffs of the Atlantic coastline and where we spent a very pleasant 45 minutes or so, adding **blue rock thrush** and **black redstart** to the burgeoning bird list while also being able to observe passing gannets and shearwaters firmly based on solid ground rather than a rolling boat! Having enjoyed being by the coast for a bit we then moved a little inland to search the farmland behind Sagres. As the bus drove up the track past a farm building a little owl was observing our progress.

Getting out of the bus and up a track some distant largish birds were seen through the shimmering heat haze, the view not quite good enough to confirm what we thought we might be. Identification proved tricky as, in addition to the heat, they would disappear in troughs and the vegetation. However patience paid off and eventually we confirmed that they were **little bustards**, 15 of them in the end as they did a short flight and we were able to see them well, eclipsing the **red-legged partridges** we had seen shortly before.

Our quarry secure, refreshment was called for so we retired to a nearby cafe where, for some reason, something in the attached shop was proving quite amusing for certain members of the group! A little walk around the cafe was not too fruitful so it was back to the bus but just as we were all about to embark we were treated to our own little raptor migration as 10 pale morph **booted eagles** circled low over our head accompanied by 5 **honey buzzards** before drifting slowly off to the coast, the moment that Jan J had been waiting for and consequently voted the booted eagle as her best bird.

By now the temperature was as hot as it had been all week so we sought shade in the town square for our more than adequate packed lunch. The lure of the pool and relaxing in the hotel was too strong for more than half the group, leaving the rest to brave the afternoon sun and walk back up to the raptor point where, it has to be said, we had more success than the previous day. On the way to the point we had reasonable views of **Dartford warbler** and **subalpine warbler** while at the watchpoint people already there informed us that 9 **black storks** would be arriving in about 17 minutes, and sure enough they did! They came down and circled low over our heads and showed well in all lights and angles and it is not surprising that both Erica and Bryan both nominated it as their most memorable. To add to the pleasure, at one time 3 **Bonelli's eagles** joined in the thermal.

The thought of telling the rest of the group sustained the walk back to the coach, but I thought we were actually quite restrained when we got back, i'm sure we didn't make too much of it. Anyway, birding wasn't over for the day as we went on a totally unsuccessful search for owls and nightjars, but it was fascinating to meet up with guy from Strix who was monitoring the night time migration in the area and to hear about his research, and the fact he was being paid for by the Wind Farm Company.

A late dinner was followed by the last night holiday reminisces and as a leader it is always interesting to hear what people had selected the various favourite birds and most memorable moments and why, nearly all of which have been highlighted already in this report. Sometimes though there is an overall impression rather than just one event that people remember, which was the case for Shirley who said that seeing birds so clearly through the telescopes really made the holiday for her. For me also it is the number of 'wows' elicited by the views of birds through the 'scopes which always gives me great pleasure on these trips, and there were a great many of them on this one.

It was a great fun last evening and I was very happy to accept the gift of the sacred ritual object much used by ancient tribes of the Algarve in the spirit that it was given! Also, the contribution to the Russell New Zealand fund was very, very much appreciated.

October 5th

Our final day, but still some birding to do! Georg and I decided to call in on Lagado de Selgado on the way back to Faro and what a good decision it was too. As before there were plenty of birds around and we managed to get 3 new birds for the trip as well, plus a much closer view of glossy ibis. Perhaps the most surprising was a **squacco heron**, which Georg said was unusual here at this time of year, while a couple of viewable **ruff** was also nice to see. The most difficult but in the end most rewarding sight was a **bluethroat** that, although close, frustratingly faded in an out of the vegetation, but in the end I think everyone saw it.

So that was it for birding, although rather prophetically as we drove into the airport perimeter 22 white storks drifted slowly over the bus. Our last meal together at the self-service restaurant at Montenegro and was a great idea by Georg and they did a great line in rice puddings! With tears in our eyes we said goodbye to the lovely Georg who had been excellent over the last 3 days. The flight home was just as smooth, everyone got their luggage and I heaved a sigh of relief!

It was quite frustrating to get home to find that the UK had been experiencing its own heat wave but that didn't diminish the feeling that we had experienced a great week. In the rush to complete this before the re-union you may have to forgive my bad spelling and grammar or if I have forgotten anything that may have stood out in your memory. I hope that much of this does resonate with your own memories, if it doesn't then I will have to look closely again at my diary!



Thanks to Alan, Jannet, Shirley and Stephen for the pictures.