

Autumn Birding in Southern Portugal

Naturetrek Tour Report

16 - 22 September 2012



Cory's Shearwater



Dotterel



Great Bustards



Short-toed Snake Eagle

Report compiled by Philip Thompson
Images courtesy of Peter Tyler



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Day 1

Sunday 16th September

Once everyone had assembled from the various flights and we had collected our minibuses we drove directly to our hotel based in Tavira set among salt pans and coastal estuary. We had our lunch in the hotel and then met in the foyer to take a walk in the hotel's general surroundings. The lagoon next to the hotel, which is surrounded by scrub and small trees, contained a diverse selection of waders most notably numerous Black-winged Stilts and small numbers of Curlew Sandpiper. The highlight was a couple of roosting Audouin's Gulls on the wooden barriers between the lagoons.

Moving our attentions to the saltmarsh we spotted a Southern Grey Shrike perched prominently on the surrounding vegetation. In the water-filled creeks a couple of Western Reef Egrets showed at close range as well as a single Spotted Redshank. The estuary held several species of wader but again the highlight was of a 4 Slender-billed Gulls drifting on the current. A quick walk towards the salt pans found a single Greater Flamingo.

On the return to the hotel our greatest stroke of luck was spotting a Black-winged Kite hunting over the marsh which flew towards us and directly overhead giving 'as good as it gets' views.

Day 2

Monday 17th September

A pre-breakfast walk was taken around the same areas as yesterday with a similar complement of birds present, although in lovely bright sunny calm conditions. The highlight was the large numbers of Red-rumped Swallows passing.

The main day was spent exploring the various nearby coastal reserves of the Algarve. We began with the Castro Marim reserve at the eastern edge of Portugal at the border with Spain. We began with a walk around a couple of pans alongside the large commercial saltpans. Soon after setting off on this first walk we were very fortunate in the arrival of a pair of late migrant Pallid Swifts which fed and swept passed us at no more than head height, allowing us to clearly pick out the paler buff brown colouration of this species, something that is usually very difficult to confidently discern when viewing high flying birds against a bright sky. The track led around the pan alongside a deep tidal creek from which a couple of Green and Common Sandpipers, Greenshank and Little Stint were seen and flushed.

We next moved on to the visitor centre that sits alongside the River Guadiana that forms the border with Spain. The tall poplars here held a couple of Pied Flycatchers and warblers that drew our attention before we set off on a short walk to view the lagoons and marshes. Birds were quite distant and required scopes for confident ID's. The large wading birds included good numbers of Flamingos, Spoonbills and Little Egrets. A single Great Egret was seen by a couple of the group. Once more several species of waders were present. Whilst scanning the marshes from a low hillock our attention was drawn to a small warbler flitting through the Olives below us which after careful consideration was ID'd as a Melodious Warbler. We then returned to the centre for lunch before we then relocated to the Rio Formosa reserve to the west of Faro.

Our destination was the premier golf course of Quinta do Lago, which has at its heart a reed-fringed freshwater lagoon. Wildfowl on the lake included Pochard, Shoveler, Teal, Gadwall and Mallard. One of the main attractions here are the breeding population of, generally very tame, Purple Swamphens of which 4 were seen. Also present here, as a breeding population, are the introduced African exotic Black-headed Weavers, a couple of which obliged by sitting prominently in the reed stems. The golf course fairways in their green and verdant glory proved irresistible to the feeding flocks of Iberian Magpies and several Hoopoes. The Pine and Pistachio scrub bordering the course held numerous Pied Flycatchers and Willow Warblers. On our return to the car park we came upon another species of introduced exotic with the sighting of a small flock of Common Waxbill to complete the day before the journey back to the hotel.

Day 3

Tuesday 18th September

An earlier start was needed today to allow us to make the most of our time in the Alentejo region to the north with its rolling open grassy country. Upon our arrival a quick visit to the attractive town of Mertola was taken to buy water before we set out into open country at a slower pace. Our first stop was taken in an area of grassland backed by a low range of hills. Whilst scanning the area we fortunately picked up a small flying flock of Black-bellied Sandgrouse, which although quite distant clearly showed the lovely golden backs contrasting with the black and white of the underparts as they turned. A couple of high soaring Griffon Vultures were found with an additional bird sighted sitting on a prominent rock on the hillside. The grasslands held numerous Northern Wheatears, Little Owl and a couple of Tawny Pipits.

We then drove on through this thinly populated agricultural landscape. Passing through a plantation of Stone Pines one vehicle had a sighting of a Wryneck and a day-roosting small flock of Stone Curlew. Our next stop was with a walk to a low hill for scan of the general area.

One vehicle was again lucky with the flushing from the ground of an Iberian Imperial Eagle with a couple of Ravens. The same bird was also picked up by the other members as they disembarked at the start of the walk as it rose into the air. This and another bird were seen distantly soaring and cruising in the general area a couple of times after.

With lunchtime approaching we headed west towards Castro Verde and a visit to the LPN Visitor Centre where a splendid feast was laid out for us by the local ladies. With hunger pangs sated, our next area of exploration was to the west of the town of Entradas. This area has beautiful rolling grassland with numerous *Quercus rotundifolia* trees dotted among it forming open woodland. Our first roadside stop struck gold immediately with the sighting of two groups of Great Bustards shading themselves under the trees. After a prolonged period of admiration we drove a little further on to take a dirt farm track from the main road. Whilst slowly driving along this route a large flock of Bustards flew up from beneath the nearby Oaks. At this point it was decided to turn around and return to minimise any further disturbance, only to then notice that one vehicle had developed a puncture. This required much scratching of heads as several of the male group members attempted to figure out how to free the spare wheel, but with problem quickly solved we were able to eventually move off. During this time the group were at least able to watch several more Great Bustards in the general area.

A final stop was then taken at the highest point of the area at the Chapel of Aracelis to admire the view and enjoy the cooling breeze.

Day 4

Wednesday 19th September

Today we transferred to the town of Sagres on the farthest southwesterly point of mainland Europe where we would be based for the remainder of the trip. We broke the journey half way with a visit to the coastal lagoon of Pera Marsh, otherwise known as Salgados. This is an outstanding area of birding on the Portuguese coast, which is currently under threat by developers (I hope that all participants on this trip have signed the online petition to try and save the area). Even though the area has declined in recent years due to mismanagement and abuse there was still plenty of excellent bird activity at the time of our visit. The most obvious initial presence was the large flock of over 300 White Storks resting in the reeds and marshes. These were joined by large numbers of Greater Flamingo and a rich selection of waders. Terns included Black, Caspian, Sandwich, Little and Gull-billed. Picked out at the golf course edge was a single Purple Swamphen. A juvenile Red-backed Shrike perched prominently for a period atop a car park sign. After having spent some time watching this array of species we took a short walk along the dune/lake boardwalk.

We next took a quick coffee break at the local café before taking a rather rough sandy track to an area overlooking another quieter area of marsh and creeks where we had lunch. At least half a dozen Glossy Ibis were busy feeding in this area while the bushes and trees held both Spotted and Pied Flycatchers.

With lunch completed we continued on our journey to Sagres and checked in at our very comfortable hotel. We then had time to have a short walk onto the rocky headland near the hotel that overlooked the harbour during which we saw the trips first Blue Rock Thrushes on the buildings. Several Cory's Shearwater could be seen passing at sea as a taster of tomorrow's trip...

Day 5

Thursday 20th September

The morning today was spent at sea. After a briefing on the harbour edge we boarded the boats and headed out into the Atlantic. It was not long before we encountered the first of many Cory's Shearwaters as they cruised effortlessly past the boats. After some time we spotted one of the local fishing trawlers that was our target, as around it swirled a mass of various seabirds. As we approached we were met with a large pod of Bottle-nose Dolphins whose aim was the same as ours, as the trawling activities bring a lot of disturbance and fish to the surface, upon which they feed. We were then able to enjoy very close encounters with these dolphins as they swam alongside the boats for some time.

We next switched our attentions to the seabirds milling around the trawler. Apart from the numerous Yellow-legged Gulls, the most abundant species were both Cory's and Great Shearwaters. We were able to watch these at very close quarters with some being tempted close to our boats by throwing 'chum' overboard. Among the mass of birds about half a dozen Sooty Shearwaters were also present. As the trawler moved off and we gently bobbed among the resting birds a couple of Great Skuas passed looking for targets to harass. As the throng departed the tiny European Storm Petrels began to appear flitting rapidly past, among them at least one Wilson's Storm Petrel was picked out which unfortunately did not linger. After an enthralling morning we returned towards land during which a Balearic Shearwater was 'pursued' at high speed by one of the boats demonstrating the speed at which these birds can travel!

Back on land we returned to the hotel to freshen up before setting out in the late morning for lunch and a visit to the Raptor Migration Viewpoint. With passage very quiet we then switched to a few gentle walks of exploration of the heathland. Almost everywhere Pied Flycatchers were seen flitting and feeding joined by similar numbers of Willow Warblers. A large flock of Black Kites spent the afternoon swirling around the area attempting to regain their bearings. A good find was a juvenile Montagu's Harrier quartering the ground. This was matched by a brief fly past of a European Roller.

Day 6

Friday 21st September

Further explorations of the Sagres headland were taken this morning and this time we turned our attention to an area of scarce grassy grazing land. We were immediately lucky with the sighting of a small flock of Tawny Pipits as we drove to our first stop off. The juvenile Montagu's Harrier seen yesterday was still present and came very close giving some excellent views. As we pulled up our luck was in once more with the presence of a Dotterel 5 metres from the buses. This tame and confiding bird allowed the group to disembark and admire and photograph at very close range. We then switched our attentions in the opposite direction and picked up a small flock of Little Bustards feeding nearby. The walk along a track through this area of grassland had to be diverted around the confiding Dotterel so as not to disturb it. Abundant Northern Wheatears were seen as we passed but little else. We next drove on to walk through the sandy heath and pines to experience some different habitat. Skulking among the vegetation were numerous Sardinian Warblers to which were added Common Whitethroat, Dartford Warbler, Redstart, Nightingale and many more flycatchers.

Another picnic was taken before we then spent the rest of our time at the Raptor Viewpoint. The large flock of Black Kites seen yesterday were still in the area having roosted overnight on the telephone wires.

During our time at the viewpoint both Short-toed and Booted Eagles, Honey Buzzard and Sparrowhawk were also seen by the group. A couple of the group were lucky in spotting a Goshawk flashing through the woods. A few migrant Turtle Doves were also added to the group trip list before the day came to an end and we returned to the hotel.

Day 7

Saturday 22nd September

An early start was needed in order to arrive at the airport in Faro to catch the respective flights home after a very successful trip!

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Sooty Shearwater

Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = Heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			16	17	18	19	20	21
1	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			✓	1		6
2	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		30		6		
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	4	6		2		
4	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		30		20		
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		2				
6	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		6				
7	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>					100+	
8	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>				30	100+	6
9	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>					1	
10	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>					2	
11	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>					6	
12	European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>					6	
13	Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>					2	
14	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	1	6		20		
15	Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	1	50		100		
16	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	10	25		300	1	
17	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>		1		6		
18	Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>		15	6	20		
19	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>		30	100	20	6	8
20	Great Egret	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>		1				
21	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		4	2	6		
22	Western Reef Egret	<i>Egretta gularis</i>	2					
23	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	4	15	4	15		
24	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	6			12	50	
25	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				10		1
26	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		3		5		
27	European Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>					1	2
28	Black-winged Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	1	1				
29	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	4				30	40
30	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>						4
31	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>			12			
32	Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>		1	1			1
33	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		2	1			
34	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>					1	1
35	Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>						1
36	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				1		4
37	Spanish Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila adalberti</i>			2			
38	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			12	H		
39	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>					1	3
40	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			30	2	10	6
41	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>						3
42	Great Bustard	<i>Otis tarda</i>			42			
43	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>						11
44	Purple Swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>		4		1		
45	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>		2		2		
46	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		4		✓		
47	Eurasian Stone-Curlew	<i>Burhinus oedichnemus</i>			6			

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			16	17	18	19	20	21
48	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		12		4		
49	Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	✓	✓		✓		
50	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	2	4		20		
51	Dotterel	<i>Charadrius morinellus</i>						1
52	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		12		4		
53	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	12	✓		✓		3
54	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	2	2		2		
55	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				1		
56	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	7	20		30		
57	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>		1		1		
58	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	3	10		6	3	2
59	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		1				
60	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	1	2				
61	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	15	✓				
62	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1				
63	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1	2		2		
64	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	3	6		2	1	
65	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	2	10		6	3	
66	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	10	3		✓	6	6
67	Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>		1		1		
68	Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	8	10		2		
69	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓		✓	1	
70	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>				1		
71	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓		✓		
72	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Ichthyaeetus melanocephalus</i>	3	10		4		
73	Slender-billed Gull	<i>Larus genei</i>	4	1				
74	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
75	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>	4					
76	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
77	Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>				1		1
78	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>		1		1		
79	Sandwich Tern	<i>Thalasseus sandvicensis</i>		10		14	2	
80	Little Tern	<i>Sternula albifrons</i>		1		2		
81	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>					3	
82	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>				3		
83	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>					2	
84	Black-bellied Sandgrouse	<i>Pterocles orientalis</i>				6		
85	Rock Dove / Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
86	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				2		
87	European Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>						5
88	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
89	Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>				1		
90	Eurasian Scops Owl	<i>Otus scops</i>				H		
91	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>				4	1	1
92	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>		2				
93	European Roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>					1	
94	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		2		1	1	
95	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	1	4	10	4	5	1
96	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>				1		
97	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				1		
98	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>		1	1			

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			16	17	18	19	20	21
99	Southern Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius meridionalis</i>	2	4	✓	12		1
100	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>				1		
101	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>						1
102	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		1		1		
103	Iberian Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cooki</i>		✓	✓			
104	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	3	3	3	2		
105	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>						4
106	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓			
107	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>			✓			
108	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			6			
109	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>						1
110	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		1				
111	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
112	Thekla Lark	<i>Galerida theklae</i>						✓
113	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					H	10
114	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		20		6		
115	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	4	3	4	4		20
116	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		✓				
117	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	2	100+	6	6	2	20
118	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>		2		H		
119	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		10		10	100+	✓
120	Melodious Warbler	<i>Hippolais polyglotta</i>		1			1	
121	Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	1	20		15	5	6
122	Common Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>						1
123	Dartford Warbler	<i>Sylvia undata</i>						1
124	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
125	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>		20	✓	✓	✓	✓
126	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		6	✓	✓	✓	✓
127	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		H				1
128	Common Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>						1
129	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>					4	1
130	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>		1			1	6
131	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>		1		10	12	10
132	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
133	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	1	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
134	Common Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>			1			
135	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			1	3	6	1
136	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		1		4	1	2
137	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		6		2	100	✓
138	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
139	Black-headed Weaver	<i>Ploceus melanocephalus</i>		2				
140	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>		6				
141	Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava iberiae</i>	4	2		1	1	
142	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>				2	3	
143	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>			3			12
144	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>			2			
145	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	6	✓	✓	✓	✓
146	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	H	10			20	
147	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		2	3		1	

Mammals (R = road kill; D = dead)

Western Hedgehog, *Erinaceus europaeus* (R)

Iberian Hare, *Lepus granatensis*

Bottle-nose Dolphin, *Tursiops truncatus*

Brown Rat, *Rattus norvegica* (D)

Rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*

Butterflies

Scarce Swallowtail, *Iphiclides podalirius*

Large White, *Pieris brassicae*

Clouded Yellow, *Colias crocea*

Lang's Short-tailed Blue, *Leptotes pirithous*

Common Blue, *Polyommatus icarus*

Wall Brown, *Lassiommatata megera*

Meadow Brown, *Maniola jurtina*

Swallowtail, *Papilion machaon*

Small White, *Pieris rapae*

Small Copper, *Lycaena phlaeas*

Long-tailed Blue, *Lampides boeticus*

Red Admiral, *Vanessa atalanta*

Large Wall Brown, *Lassiommatata maera*

Reptile & Amphibians

European Pond Terrapin, *Emys orbicularis*

Moorish Gecko, *Tarentola mauritanica*



Bottle-nosed Dolphin