

ALGARVE, JANUARY 2009

THE CREDIT CRUNCH OPTION

by Allan Rimmer



Great Spotted Cuckoo by Ian Mc Kerchar

It was our first full day on the Algarve, in late January this year (2009). A short car-drive from our hotel near the Spanish border took us into countryside which was part-wetland, part-vineyard and part lightly farmed fields; and immediately we began to realise why this was our seventh winter visit to an area where you rarely see another birder.

Small flocks of AZURE-WINGED MAGPIES, one of the region's special birds, glided noisily from one cork oak to another; SOUTHERN GREY SHRIKES, now split from the northern counterparts we see each winter, hunted from telegraph poles and wires; pairs of WHITE STORKS brought twigs to their nests in low, roadside trees, and STONECHATS, probably the most common bird of this habitat, perched on virtually every shrub.

It was at this point, along a quiet farm road, that Jean and I had one of those priceless 'husband and wife' moments. We had been watching two LITTLE OWLS playing hide and seek in a pile of logs when Jean said: 'Two birds have just flown into this tree. Are they the Little Owls?' Me: 'No, I think they're two HOOPES.' Jean: 'These are definitely not Hoopoes.' Me: 'Of course they are.'

Just then two Hoopoes flew out of the tree, followed by two GREAT SPOTTED CUCKOOS (a winter rarity), pursued by two COMMON MAPGIES!

Argument over, we drove on for another 100 yards, passing a pool with two feeding BLACK-WINGED STILTS and a GREEN SANDPIPER and then stopped to watch a MARSH HARRIER quarter a drier field ahead of us, putting up as it did so a flock of SPOTLESS STARLINGS, then 20-30 GOLDEN PLOVER, and finally about the same number of STONE CURLEW.

Actually, we had already had a taste of Algarve birding the previous afternoon. Flying into Faro from Manchester we reached our hotel by lunchtime. An hour's stroll through the scrubby sand-dunes to a freshwater pool and back along the beach produced SERIN (lots), CHIFFCHAFF (almost as many and possibly some Iberian, which are indistinguishable without the song), SARDINIAN WARBLER, ZITTING CISTICOLA, CRESTED LARK, BLACK REDSTART, SANDERLING, KENTISH PLOVER, and YELLOW-LEGGED GULL, with SANDWICH TERN and GANNET fishing offshore. Evening brought the usual CRAG MARTINS, SWALLOWS and HOUSE MARTINS to roost on the hotel.

Our car trip the following morning took us on to nearby Castro Marim, a sprawling reserve of salt-pans, marshland and farmland. In past years it has produced some good birds – LITTLE BUSTARD, SLENDER-BILLED GULL, GLOSSY IBIS, RED-RUMPED SWALLOW and BLUETHROAT to name a few – but this year brought no surprises. Our best bird there was a TEMMINCK'S STINT (unfazed by our close approach in the car), with a supporting cast of 'regulars': GREATER FLAMINGO, AVOCET, SPOONBILL (up to 30), WOOD

SANDPIPER, CURLEW SANDPIPER, LITTLE STINT, GREY PLOVER, BLACK-TAILED GODWIT, GREENSHANK, CASPIAN AND LITTLE TERN, RED CRESTED POCHARD AND OSPREY.

Wetland plays a big part in winter birding on the Algarve. The 90-mile long coast line is protected at its centre by the Ria Formosa, a series of barrier islands around which the tide laps twice a day to provide the ideal hinterland for wildfowl, waders and reed-bed dwellers.

These species can include rarities – we found a RED (GREY) PHALAROPE, an extremely uncommon visitor in winter – among 13 species of wader that day, later adding HAWFINCH, PURPLE GALLINULE and LITTLE GULL, and by a short detour on the way back a flock of about 40 WAXBILLS, with a stunning male PENDULINE TIT at the same site.

With a little more effort we could have added one of the world's most endangered birds to our list as five NORTHERN BALD IBISES, wanderers from a Spanish reintroduction scheme, were just down the coast, but having seen them in Morocco (yawn), we didn't bother.

That evening a hint of the seawatching potential of the Algarve came in the sightings of MANX and MEDITERRANEAN SHEARWATERS, and numerous GREAT SKUAS, as an offshore wind strengthened.

At this time of the year, the 30-mile deep interior of the Algarve can be pretty boring, apart from DARTFORD WARBLERS in the cistus shrubs, ROCK BUNTINGS on barer ground, numerous

CORN BUNTINGS in the fields and CRESTED TITS and SHORT-TOED TREECREEPERS in the pines, but beyond that northern boundary, the terrain becomes interesting again.

The Alentejo is a high, windswept plateau farmed sympathetically for two birds: GREAT and LITTLE BUSTARDS. We usually make at least one trip north, through the delightful hilltop town of Mertola on the Rio Guadiana, to see these charismatic birds.

The easiest way is to turn off the main road 10 miles to the north of Mertola and head towards Castro Verde. Care is needed about where you stop to scan but this year we had six flocks of Great Bustards, the largest 36, with the males just beginning their 'bubble bath' mating displays. No Little Bustards were around but as compensation we had excellent views of RED KITE (everywhere), three tern-like BLACK-SHOULDERED KITES, male and female HEN HARRIER, CALANDRA, THEKLA and WOODLARK, and what may have been my first SPANISH IMPERIAL EAGLE, a juvenile that ticked all the right plumage boxes but which behaved in a most un-eagle-like way.

BLUE ROCK THRUSH posed on the castle walls at Mertola on our return but we were a few weeks too early for LESSER KESTREL, which also nests in the town.

Illness cut down our birding trips to just seven days of a two week holiday and I have no doubt we could have added to our total of 125 birds.

The idea of this trip report is not to give a detailed account of where and when we saw every bird, or even list them, but to point out the possibilities of a birding venue which, while it isn't Goa or The Gambia, is a short-haul credit crunch alternative. It won't suit everyone. The weather let us down this year with cool unsettled spells but it can be glorious, and our choice of a modest hotel overrun by long-staying pensioners from Britain and Holland can be replaced by a cheap flight to Faro, and a more flexible self-drive, self-catering option.

We will certainly be back – the free cup of tea and a piece of cake on the terrace at 4 o'clock is too good to miss!!

If anyone would like further details about birding the Algarve in winter, they can contact me at allanandjean@talktalk.net

Allan Rimmer, February 2009

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