

PORTUGAL APRIL 2016

By Mark Rigby, Andy Platt and Barry Stanley

After my first foreign birding holiday to Mallorca in 2015 with Barry Stanley and Andy Platt, we decided to make the event an annual occurrence. Andy has friends who lived in Tavira, so with the prospect of accommodation along with cheap flights we decided to head for Portugal in 2016.

The date was set for the end of April to give us the best chance of migrants and any hope of seeing the Little Bustards. If we went any later the height of the grass on the plains would be too high and reduce our chances of connecting with them.

As Andy had visited the region several times previously he had a good idea of the best birding sites and some 'off the beaten track' locations he had chanced upon on other visits. This coupled with hours of trawling the Internet and the very useful guide 'Where to watch birds in Southern Portugal' by Dave Gosney, we had a good idea of target species and where to see them.

Day 1

After an early start on the 19th, 'Team Oldham Birders' were ready for the off at Manchester Airport. All went to plan and we took off on time at 0710hrs with the destination being Faro in the Algarve region of Portugal.

As we approached Faro airport we saw our first birds of the trip. A small group of Greater Flamingo, fly past Yellow-legged Gull's as well as a White Stork strutting about on the grass verge of the runway seemingly oblivious to the passing planes.

As we collected our hire car, 2 Pallid Swift circled the car park and 3 Cattle Egret flew by. We arrived at our apartment and dropped out gear off before walking around some nearby scrubland which Andy had done previously. Common species were abundant as were Azure-winged Magpie with at least 20 seen within a few hundred yards of the digs.

The 'zit-zit' calls of Fan-tailed Warblers overhead made us look skywards and several Red-rumped Swallows were picked up with the more common hirundines.



Azure-winged Magpie were plentiful throughout our visit.

Several Sardinian Warblers skulked in the undergrowth and Andy picked up a flying Hoopoe which quickly disappeared into rough ground. We walked up a track which gave us a good vantage point, 3 Booted Eagle and a single Common Buzzard were seen circling on thermals with at least 12 White Stork.

We made our way back to the apartment to pick up the car before driving down to Tavira Salt Pans. There is a road that passes through the area with good viewing points at each salt pan but we decided to cover as much on foot before driving down to the coast and checking out the remaining pools. As soon as we got out of the car, 20 Bee-eaters flew overhead and 2 landed on the

mud. A good selection of waders were seen including Black-winged Stilt, Avocet, Sanderling, Little Stint, Grey Plover and 4 Stone Curlew which were flushed from an area of vegetation near to the track.



2 Bee-eater which did the decent thing and posed for a photo

We saw a total of 110 Greater Flamingo in 3 flocks, Yellow Wagtail, White Wagtail, Thekla Lark, Crested Lark and Stonechat that all showed well. As we drove down the track to the beach we added Gadwall, Mallard, 7 Curlew Sandpiper, Whimbrel and Spotless Starling to the growing list. At the beach, a Spoonbill flew past as did several Gannet fighting against the strengthening wind. With the darkening sky out to sea we decided to make our way back to the digs and have something to eat before getting some well earned sleep.



Andy and Barry at Tavira salt pans.

Day 2

We set off from Tavira with the intention of spending the day in the Castro Verde region. Having been told of a very scenic 'short cut' through the mountains on our way north we decided to give it a try. Andy had also stopped at another location on the way so we could 'kill two birds' so to speak.

At our first stop of many, we saw 4 Woodchat Shrike, more White Storks and plenty of Azure-winged Magpie as well as good views of Spotless Starling and Cattle Egrets.



Woodchat Shrike.

As we started to climb in the foothills of Alcaria do Cume along the N397 road we stopped at a promising vantage point and saw woodpecker clinging to the side of a wooden telegraph post. On closer inspection, it turned out to be an Iberian Green Woodpecker, one of our target species.

As we got about half way up the mountain, the scenery changed from lush vegetation to sparsely vegetated scree slopes and rocky outcrops. At one place we stopped to scan we heard a song we weren't familiar with, then it struck me-it was a shrike! Scanning the tops of the shrubs I found an Iberian Grey Shrike showing very well if a little distant. The pink flush was clearly visible on the breast as was the 'white curved eyebrow'.

Although the landscape was becoming rockier there was still some vegetation in the bottom of the steeply sided valleys and this was where we saw most of the passerines. A stonking male Black-eared Wheatear was spotted by Andy perched on top of a roadside bush. We stopped the car and I walked down the road to get a photo. As I was taking some photos, Andy and Barry started shouting and frantically gesticulated to get my attention. I ran (yes you read it correctly) up the road to find Andy and Barry watching a male Rock Bunting at about 15ft range.



Rock Bunting-a new bird for me and what a cracking looking bird too!

At other stop offs we found Corn Bunting, Stonechat, Red-legged Partridge, Sardinian Warbler, Red-rumped Swallow, Woodlark, Thekla Lark, linnet, Nightingale, Subalpine Warbler, a male Golden Oriole, Dartford Warbler and Quail. We heard a Great Spotted Cuckoo but it was deep in the vegetation and wouldn't show itself. Quality birding!

Time was getting on, we had spent 4 hours birding and only travelled 8 miles from our accommodation. We decided we needed to spend more time in the car to get to Castro Verde but it was impossible. At every turn it looked well worth a scan and we weren't disappointed.

We stopped again on a bridge over Riba da Odeleite just after the village of Fernandilho and saw more Bee-eater, Spanish Sparrow, Melodious Warbler and Grey Wagtail.

Arriving at our first intended stop in the picturesque town of Mertola after 6 hours of birding, it looked like our luck may have run out. The road bridge over the river which is famed for its Lesser Kestrel colony was shrouded in scaffolding and plastic sheeting. No need to worry though as a scan of the valley produced several Lesser Kestrel as well as Common Kestrel for comparison. A Black Vulture flew overhead but a large distant raptor couldn't be identified due to a combination of the distance and heat haze. A Blue Rock Thrush showed on a rocky outcrop.

We had a spot of lunch which consisted of 6 coffees, 6 cheese and ham ciabattas and 3 lumps of cake between the three of us for the princely sum of €10.

Time was definitely getting on now so we decided we wouldn't stop until we got to Castro Verde-wrong again! A couple of miles outside Mertola we spotted a large raptor over a hillside. A magnificent Golden Eagle drifted over us giving excellent views.

We continued on and as we entered the Castro Verde plains we saw small flocks of Great Bustard. A couple of Black-eared Wheatear and a lone Northern Wheatear were seen in a roadside field as we scoped the Great Bustards. A couple of Red Kites with a single Black Kite drifted over a distant ridge and as we were getting back into the car, Andy spotted a small flock of Collared Pratincole flying away from us but Barry and Myself couldn't get on them.

Along the road, it seemed like every tree had an active White Stork nest in it and under each nest was a colony of Spanish Sparrow.



Spanish Sparrow nesting under a White Stork nest.

We pulled over to watch a male Montague's Harrier and heard the distinctive wet "prrt" call of Little Bustard but despite a good search we couldn't see it in the long grass. Maybe we were too late after all?

We eventually arrived at the visitors' centre at Castro Verde at 5pm and luckily it was still open. We got some up to date information and where to walk for the best views of Bustards and the Rollers which breed on the reserve. No need to bother though as no sooner as we left the visitors centre, a Roller flew in front of us and perched on a nearby fence joining a Woodchat Shrike. A fly over Red Kite, 2 Raven and another 30+ Lesser Kestrel flying around the stone tower where they breed.

The journey back to our accommodation was slightly quicker and allowed time to check out a roadside marsh on the outskirts of Castro Marim but nothing of note was added to the day's sightings.

Day 3

We arrived at Castro Marim at the extreme east end of the Algarve. Here a road bridge crosses the estuary into Spain. On the access road to the reserve we saw Little Ringed Plover, Greenshank, Black-winged Stilt, Little Egret, Blue-headed Wagtail, Corn Bunting and yet another flyover Fan-tailed Warbler (we must have seen hundreds over the six days we were in Portugal unless the same one was following us around!) We stopped at a small tidal pool and found 2 Spotted Redshank in full breeding plumage and a Lesser Short-toed Lark perched up on top of a bush. As we were setting the scope up, Andy shouted "Cuckoo" and we all got on a Great Spotted Cuckoo as it flew past and disappeared over a hill never to be seen again. This turned out to be our only sighting on this trip.

We arrived at the visitors' centre and were lucky to find it open as Gosney's guide said it was "more often than not closed". We checked the map and decided on a route to take around the reserve. You basically decide to walk clockwise or anti-clockwise around a large mound. From here we got great views over the salt marsh and pools. We saw 64 Greater Flamingo, 16 Spoonbill, a small flock of Spotless Starling, Little Tern, Shelduck, Grey Plover, 2 Whimbrel, 2 Common Sandpiper, Ringed Plover, Kentish Plover and the star bird of the day-a Caspian Tern loafing on a sandbank.

Next stop was a drive into the hills, a place that Andy had visited before but on the way we decided to call at the roadside marsh we stopped at yesterday evening. This time was much more productive with a hawking Collared Pratincole, 6 Curlew Sandpiper and a Marsh Harrier.

Our planned visit into the hills didn't go quite to plan as most of the farm tracks looked the same and we had difficulty finding the place Andy had visited previously. We drove around and found a bridge over a stream and just a couple of hundred yards up the track was a good high vantage point giving us a 360 degree vista. Perfect, a great vantage point and water-couldn't go wrong. Sure enough, several Crag Martin zipped around the river valley collecting mud for their nest building, a Short-toed Eagle soared over a ridge then Andy spotted another of the 'wanted' birds, a perched Black-shouldered Kite. A couple more Raven flew over before we decided to walk along the bottom of the river valley.

I found a pair of nest building Crag Martin under the newly constructed road bridge and several woodland species were added to the trip list including our only sighting of Great Spotted Woodpecker.



Nest building Crag Martin

We then travelled the short distance to Cabanas. A pleasant little village with plenty of opportunity for food and drink as well as some good birding along the inland estuary. We saw Greenshank and Whimbrel as well as Little Owl, Golden Oriole and another target bird, Short-toed Treecreeper which was climbing up an old sandstone wall!

We went back to our apartment in Tavira before trying a 'nailed on' site for Red-necked Nightjar which fly around the old church which is illuminated after 9pm. Although we saw plenty of flying insects in floodlights we were a couple of weeks too early for the Nightjars which hadn't yet arrived from Africa. We did add a couple of Tawny Owl leaving their daytime roost.

Day 4

We decided to try the Castro Verde area again today but agreed to drive straight there and give the area a full day. However, best laid plans and all that! We saw a little river valley which looked just too good not stop and have a scan. A 20 minute stop produced Spotless Starling, Blue Rock Thrush, Stonechat, House Martin, Corn Bunting, White Wagtail and Chiffchaff.

We arrived at Castro Verde at around 1030hrs and parked on a roadside verge with plains on either side. As soon as we got out of the car we could hear Little Bustard calling. After a bit of scanning we soon picked up a displaying male throwing its head back and calling. We then saw a couple of birds flying around the fields quite distantly and with a strange flight reminiscent of a small wader. We didn't have very good views because of the heat haze but eventually they came a little closer and the sun went behind a cloud and all was revealed-displaying Calandra Lark, a species none of us had seen before!

Whilst scanning the plains we all picked up a flock of raptors soaring over a distant mound consisting of 2 Red Kite, 2 Booted Eagle, Short-toed Eagle and 5 Griffon Vulture.

We drove a short distance down the road and pulled onto a verge for another scan. A couple of Montague's Harrier drifted past and a Quail called from a near field but didn't show itself. 4 Black Kite feasted on a sheep carcass giving excellent views. Then one of us picked a raptor at some distance but it was huge. It drifted slowly towards us getting bigger and bigger. It was a Spanish Imperial Eagle. The pale head and pale leading edge to the wing and the 'second hand' seen clearly before it started to gain height and soon became a distant spec before being lost to view.

Driving on further down the road we saw a pair of Black-eared Wheatear which showed very well on a ploughed field. An Iberian Grey Shrike was perched on telegraph wires and another Quail called from a cereal field but again would not show itself.

We spent much of the afternoon trawling along the roads and scanning from various points. A small pool looked another good bet and rewarded us with another Little Bustard.



Iberian Grey Shrike

As much as we tried though we couldn't connect with Black-bellied Sandgrouse even though birders in two other cars had seen several fly past them. One for another day!

We had at least 8 Lesser Kestrel hunting the fields, 3 Black Vulture, several Griffon Vulture and another distant view of 'the' or another Spanish Imperial Eagle whilst having lunch.

More Great Bustards were seen on the ridge of a hill before taking flight and out of view. 2 Tawny Pipit on roadside excavations were our only views of this species. A Little Grebe was found on a small reservoir. A flock of 5 Montagu's Harrier in the air together suggested these birds had just arrived and were in the process of pairing up. A smart Roller on overhead wires completed our visit to this area.

We decided to take a slow route back to our accommodation and stopped off at several spots on the way. At one location, a Melodious Warbler was having a territorial dispute with a Nightingale.

A Crested Tit was a nice surprise as we checked out a stand of oak trees. We stopped at a small lake and were rewarded with Subalpine Warbler, Dartford Warbler and our only Common Cuckoo of the trip.

Day 5

A visit to Cape St. Vincent, the most westerly point of Europe produced good numbers of Chough with several flocks totalling at least 50. Star bird of the day however was a pair of Spectacled Warbler which showed well after a bit of searching. Also seen were 2 Dartford Warbler, several Sardinian Warbler, Crested Lark, Black-eared Wheatear, Azure-winged Magpie, Woodchat Shrike and Stonechat.



Black-eared Wheatear at Cape St. Vincent

Birds at sea included Shag, Gannet and numerous Yellow-legged Gull while a Peregrine hunted the cliffs. At the lighthouse, 2 Black Redstart were seen but the hoped for colony of Alpine Swift had not arrived back on their breeding grounds, we were a couple of weeks too early.

The next site we visited was Lago-Du-Burdens, an expanse of reed-bed which in recent years has become more overgrown and not as productive according to Dave Gosney. We had no such problems there though with 3 reeling Savi's Warbler, one of which showed well, Kingfisher, Coot, Sedge Warbler, Reed Warbler and Purple Heron. A Marsh Harrier quartered the reed-bed for most of the time we were there. The surrounding mixed woodland produced Siskin, Robin and our only Iberian Chiffchaff of the trip.

On leaving this site, Andy left his binoculars on the roof of the car. As we drove down the road we heard a bump as the bins slid off the car roof and bounced down the road after us. Andy retrieved his bins and fortunately optically they were OK but the neckstrap bracket had broke off!

We then went to San Lorenzo Golf Course which wasn't very easy to find in the vast complex of golf courses. Eventually dumping the car and trying on foot we located a pool and could see a hide in the distance so basically walked along the back gardens of some very impressive houses.

Black-headed Weaver were plentiful as were the more common water birds. Wigeon was a surprise. Other birds seen consisted of Little Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Pochard, Red-crested Pochard, Little Bittern, Little Tern, White Stork, 18 Audouin's Gull and 25 Yellow-legged Gull.

The surrounding golf course held Iberian Green Woodpecker, Hoopoe, Iberian Yellow Wagtail, Spotless Starling and Short-toed Treecreeper. Andy and Barry saw 3 Waxbill fly up from a stream into a conifer but I didn't!



Black-headed Weaver on the golf course at San Lorenzo

Day 6

We spent our final day at Ludo Farm. A vast salt-pan with several pools, some of which had been filled with water and allowed to become vegetated. The area was very popular with lots of joggers, cyclists, walkers, dog walkers and even the local Boy Scouts and girl guides.

The usual woodland species were seen but the pools were alive with birds. The highlights being 23 Greater Flamingo, Spoonbill, 3 Avocet, 2 Kentish Plover and Common Sandpiper. 4 Red-rumped Swallow and several House Martin flew overhead.

As I was recovering from an Achilles injury, all the walking we had done during the holiday had taken its toll on my good leg, probably overcompensating for my injured one. Anyway, as we were walking along a track, I got a shooting pain in my calf and found it difficult to walk any further. I sat on a bench as Andy and Barry continued on along the salt-pans. Andy commented that a large ornamental tree in an adjacent garden looked good for Waxbill as he had seen them in similar trees elsewhere. After a bit of patience 2 Common Waxbill showed briefly along with several Black-headed Weaver.

Time was getting on now and it was time to head off to the airport. The end of another successful and very enjoyable trip. Again great birds, great scenery and great company. Were we heading next year.....watch this space!

Mark Rigby, Andy Platt and Barry Stanley, May 2016

www.manchesterbirding.com