

# PORTUGAL, FEBRUARY 2009

by John Rayner

This whistle-stop visit to Portugal trip came together for a number of reasons.

1. The avid Western Palearctic listers in the party wanted try for the various countable 'Category C' introductions that occur near Lisbon.
2. There was the intriguing possibility of locating a long staying Ruppell's Vulture, which was first found some 6 years ago at Portas do Rodaos.
3. The airfare was ridiculously cheap, only £10 return, including fees and taxes, from East Midlands Airport to Faro with RyanAir, although to take advantage of this only 2 days birding were possible.
4. The weather was bound to be an improvement on some fairly dismal English weather.
5. Add to this the prospect of excellent birding, good company, sampling the local food, a few beers and a little vino. Where do I sign?

## 24<sup>th</sup> February.

A party of 5, Tony Armstrong, Neil Marshall, John Rayner, Doug Smith and Fred Wake, gathered at East Midlands Airport and, after a short flight, arrived in Faro at 19.00. The pre-arranged 9-seater VW Caravelle (£21 each from Eurocar) was quickly sorted and we were on the motorway for the short 19k journey to Loule, staying at the excellent Loule Jardim Hotel. The equally excellent Restaurant Angolana was just around the corner serving pork kebabs, Superbok lagers, litres of house red plus some complimentary local fire water - this was good already and I hadn't seen any birds yet.

## 25<sup>th</sup> February.

On the road for 06.15 and the temperature was a chilly 3 deg. We had decided travel first to the farthest point on our itinerary and faced a 4 hour drive north of some 440k. As dawn broke we were already well north on the A2 motorway and a fine sunny day was in prospect.

Birds typical of the area were noted en route: Red and Black Kites, many parties of roadside Cattle Egrets, Southern Grey Shrikes hunting from fence posts, a couple of Azure-winged Magpies over and a Montagu's Harrier. During a brief leg stretch we found 2 Little-ringed Plovers and Crested Larks holding territory on a service station car park. Rapid travel was possible as our route was on a continuously linked motorway system (A2, A13, A10, A23) straight to our destination of Vila Vilha Rodao, and the temperature had climbed to a pleasant 23 degrees.

We reached Vila Vilha at 10.15 and stopped at an ancient olive grove on the outskirts of the village to get our bearings and also seeing Hoopoe, Crag Martins, Black Redstart, Serins, 3 Redwings plus commoner birds. Soon we found our way to Portas do Rodao, a magnificent setting viewed from a wooden platform, adjacent to a hilltop hermitage, which afforded full 360 degree views. Here we could overlook the vulture colony at Portas do Rodao, a huge rock portal on the opposite bank of the River Tagus.



Portas Do Rodao

Griffon Vultures flew by at eye level and a single Black Vulture passed low overhead but the main target remained elusive. A long wait ensued but birding continued with Sardinian Warbler, Subalpine Warbler in the surrounding scrub, Woodlarks in song flight, a Rock Bunting on the approach road and a Black Stork on the river. A Portuguese birder arrived briefly to monitor vulture nesting and confirmed that the Ruppell's Vulture had been seen a couple of days earlier. It is over-wintering at the colony and was even seen nest building in 2008 but can occasionally go missing for a few days. He thought late afternoon was our best chance when more birds would come in to roost. Sure enough, at 15.15, we picked out the Ruppell's Vulture, first in flight, then perched on a ledge where it preened (arrow).



Above: Left, Ruppells Vulture preening and right, Griffon Vulture

Some distant photographs were taken but we were now behind schedule so we departed at 15.45 for the journey back southwest to our second site, Carcavelos, just west of Lisbon.

On arrival at Carcavelos 2 Crested Mynas immediately flew across the road past our vehicle and landed in a ditch. Unfortunately some of the party didn't get good views of this well established introduction and, although we searched the area till dusk, there were no further sightings. After some difficulty negotiating road works we eventually found Hotel Geres in the Baixa district of Lisbon. Not quite as nice as Loule but not a bad price for a capital city. After sampling local fish dishes we found a lively street bar and, caught up in the atmosphere, stayed out a little too late and didn't get to bed till midnight.

#### 26<sup>th</sup> February

Another pre-dawn start and we were on the road at 06.25, drove straight back to Carcavelos and arrived just after dawn. The Crested Mynas, so difficult the night before, now gave themselves up easily as a flock of 14 fed in the car park by San Juliao da Barra Fort. The light was poor so only poor photographs were possible.



Above: Crested Mynas

Wary of rush hour traffic we used the outer motorway ring system and whilst crossing the Vasco da Gama Bridge noted a small party of 8 Greater Flamingos in roadside floods. The site at Barocca d'Alva consists of flooded rice paddies surrounded by ditches (see photo) and a bit of a birding frenzy ensued with an assortment of waders, ducks, Spoonbills, Marsh and Hen Harriers, Spotless Starlings, Greater Short-toed Larks, abundant Cetti's Warblers, Zitting Cisticolas, Blue-headed Wagtail, larger numbers of Greater Flamingos and White Storks, a Lesser Kestrel and a superb light phase Booted Eagle all added to a growing list. Two more category C introductions, Common Waxbill and Black-headed Weaver, were easily found in the ditches but the third remained elusive.



Above: Barocca d'Alva



Above: Black-headed Weavers

Conscious of the time we moved to another site at Rilvas, only 10 minutes away, and searched some overgrown allotments. White Storks were bill-snapping and displaying from every available pylon and 23 were counted in the immediate area. It took nearly an hour but eventually we found 3 Black-headed Munias, another category C species, which were loosely associating with a flock of 25-30 Common Waxbills.



White Stork on pylon

Back to Barocca and luckily we quickly found our fourth and last category C species, a party at least 12 Yellow-crowned Bishops. However, time was slipping by, it was now 13.55 and we had one more site to visit.

Heading south on the A2 we turned east onto the IP2, exited Castro Verde on the N123, parked just beyond San Marcos da Ataboeira and, at 15.45, began to scan the plains. We could not believe our eyes when we immediately scoped what appeared to be a fairly distant flock of 'sheep' near a derelict farm, which proved to be a large winter flock of 76 Great Bustards. They seemed to be everywhere and more appeared behind us giving extraordinarily close flight views. We then drove off the N123 onto a red dirt track into the reserve proper (turning south at a small stand of eucalyptus exactly 1.4k east of a signpost for Salto) and eventually found a water hole where we parked, just before a metal gate at the reserve entrance (see photo).



Above: Bustard Reserve - San Marcos da Ataboeira



Above: Great Bustards

Calandra Larks were singing overhead plus even closer views of Bustards and when two parties of Black-bellied Sandgrouse visited the waterhole the day was rounded off nicely. We reluctantly left the Bustard Reserve at 16.45 for the drive back to Faro and handed the car back at 18.15 with just 15 minutes to spare. Our flight departed Faro at 19.50.

The total mileage driven was 1130 kilometres. 88 species were seen with a further 5 heard. The exchange rate was a miserable 1.09 euros/£. Tolls were more than expected (£17 each) but diesel was reasonably priced (£19 each). We spent £40 each on food/drink and £44 each on accommodation.

Apologies for the poor quality of photographs included here but there just wasn't time for proper photography. Images were all taken handheld with a simple 6 megapixel digital compact Canon IXUS 60. Feel free to contact me for further birding information or refer to the article 'Introduced birds in Portugal' Birding World, 21, (5), pp 203 – 206, which contains GPS co-ordinates for some of the sites mentioned.

**John Rayner, March 2009**

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## SPECIES LIST

- 1 Great Cormorant : *Phalacrocorax carbo* 25 Feb 2009
- 2 Grey Heron : *Ardea cinerea* 25 Feb 2009
- 3 Little Egret : *Egretta garzetta* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 4 Cattle Egret : *Bubulcus ibis* 25 Feb 2009. Widespread
- 5 Black Stork : *Ciconia nigra* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao, 1 on island in Tagus
- 6 White Stork : *Ciconia ciconia* 25 Feb 2009. Widespread
- 7 Eurasian Spoonbill : *Platalea leucorodia* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, c15
- 8 Greater Flamingo : *Phoenicopterus roseus* 25 Feb 2009
- 9 Gadwall : *Anas strepera* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 10 Eurasian Teal : *Anas crecca* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 11 Mallard : *Anas platyrhynchos* 25 Feb 2009
- 12 Northern Shoveler : *Anas clypeata* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 13 Black Vulture : *Coragyps atratus* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao, 1 in from North
- 14 Black-shouldered Kite : *Elanus caeruleus* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva and en route, A13
- 15 Red Kite : *Milvus milvus* 25 Feb 2009. Widespread
- 16 Black Kite : *Milvus migrans* 25 Feb 2009. Fewer
- 17 Ruppell's Vulture : *Gyps rueppellii* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao, The bird present for 6+ years flew in from s.w. at 15.15 onto cliff face
- 18 Griffon Vulture : *Gyps fulvus* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao, at least 20 birds present and at least 3 nests occupied
- 19 Marsh Harrier : *Circus aeruginosus* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 20 Hen Harrier : *Circus cyaneus* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 21 Montagu's Harrier : *Circus pygargus* 25 Feb 2009
- 22 Common Buzzard : *Buteo buteo* 25 Feb 2009
- 23 Booted Eagle : *Aquila pennatus* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, 1 pale phase
- 24 Lesser Kestrel : *Falco naumanni* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 25 Eurasian Kestrel : *Falco tinnunculus* 25 Feb 2009
- 26 Sparrowhawk : *Accipiter nissus* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao
- 27 [*Water Rail : Rallus aquaticus* Heard only 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva]
- 28 Moorhen : *Gallinula chloropus* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 29 Great Bustard : *Otis tarda* 25 Feb 2009, San Marcos da Ataboeira, c90 birds seen including an amazing 76 in one feeding flock
- 30 Northern Lapwing : *Vanellus vanellus* 25 Feb 2009. Scattered flocks
- 31 Little Ringed Plover : *Charadrius dubius* 25 Feb 2009, a pair on territory at Motorway services
- 32 Common Snipe : *Gallinago gallinago* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, c20
- 33 Black-tailed Godwit : *Limosa limosa* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, c12
- 34 Eurasian Curlew : *Numenius arquata* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, 2
- 35 Green Sandpiper : *Tringa ochropus* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 36 Common Sandpiper : *Actitis hypoleucos* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 37 Dunlin : *Calidris alpina* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, c30
- 38 Ruff : *Philomachus pugnax* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, 2
- 39 Lesser Black-backed Gull : *Larus fuscus* 25 Feb 2009. Widespread
- 40 Yellow-legged Gull : *Larus michahellis* 25 Feb 2009. Vasco da Gama Bridge
- 41 Black-headed Gull : *Larus ridibundus* 25 Feb 2009.
- 42 Black-bellied Sandgrouse : *Pterocles orientalis* 25 Feb 2009, San Marcos da Ataboeira, parties of 2 and 7.
- 43 Rock Pigeon : *Columba livia* 25 Feb 2009, Feral
- 44 Common Wood-Pigeon : *Columbapalumbus* 25 Feb 2009
- 45 Eurasian Collared-Dove : *Streptopelia decaocto* 25 Feb 2009
- 46 [*Little Owl : Athene noctua* Heard only 25 Feb 2009]
- 47 Common Kingfisher : *Alcedo atthis* 25 Feb 2009, Rilvas
- 48 Hoopoe : *Upupa epops* 25 Feb 2009, Vila Velha
- 49 [*Great Spotted Woodpecker : Dendrocopos major* Heard only 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao]
- 50 Calandra Lark : *Melanocorypha calandra* 25 Feb 2009, San Marcos da Ataboeira, a minimum of 2
- 51 Greater Short-toed Lark : *Calandrella brachydactyla* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 52 Crested Lark : *Galerida cristata* 25 Feb 2009. Widespread
- 53 Woodlark : *Lullula arborea* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao. In song flight
- 54 Sand Martin : *Riparia riparia* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, 5 north
- 55 Crag Martin : *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao
- 56 Barn Swallow : *Hirundo rustica* 25 Feb 2009.
- 57 House Martin : *Delichon urbicum* 25 Feb 2009
- 58 White Wagtail : *Motacilla alba* 25 Feb 2009
- 59 Yellow Wagtail : *Motacilla flava* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, Blue headed ssp.
- 60 Meadow Pipit : *Anthus pratensis* 25 Feb 2009

- 61 [Wren : *Troglodytes troglodytes* Heard only 25 Feb 2009]
- 62 Blackbird : *Turdus merula* 25 Feb 2009
- 63 Redwing : *Turdus iliacus* 25 Feb 2009, 3 in olive groves in Vila Velha. Surprising.
- 64 Song Thrush : *Turdus philomelos* 25 Feb 2009
- 65 Zitting Cisticola : *Cisticola juncidis* 25 Feb 2009, Carcavelos
- 66 Cetti's Warbler : *Cettia cetti* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva
- 67 Chiffchaff : *Phylloscopus collybita* 25 Feb 2009
- 68 Blackcap : *Sylvia atricapilla* 25 Feb 2009
- 69 Subalpine Warbler : *Sylvia cantillans* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao
- 70 Sardinian Warbler : *Sylvia melanocephala* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao
- 71 Robin : *Erithacus rubecula* 25 Feb 2009
- 72 Black Redstart : *Phoenicurus ochrurus* 25 Feb 2009
- 73 European Stonechat : *Saxicola rubicola* 25 Feb 2009
- 74 Long-tailed Tit : *Aegithalos caudatus* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao. Collecting caterpillar-spun cocoon for nest material
- 75 [Great Tit : *Parus major* Heard only 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao]
- 76 Blue Tit : *Cyanistes caeruleus* 25 Feb 2009, Portas do Rodao
- 77 Southern Gray Shrike : *Lanius meridionalis* 25 Feb 2009, San Marcos da Ataboeira, common in this area
- 78 Azure-winged Magpie : *Cyanopica cyanus* 25 Feb 2009. 2 over car
- 79 Magpie : *Pica pica* 25 Feb 2009
- 80 Carrion Crow : *Corvus corone* 25 Feb 2009
- 81 Crested Myna : *Acridotheres cristatellus* 25 Feb 2009, Carcavelos, 2 on 25th then 14 at 0700 on 26th near fort
- 82 Spotless Starling : *Sturnus unicolor* 25 Feb 2009. Widespread
- 83 House Sparrow : *Passer domesticus* 25 Feb 2009. Widespread
- 84 Black-headed Weaver : *Ploceus melanocephalus* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, Cat C. c20 in several groups incl. 2 males almost in full plumage
- 85 Yellow-crowned Bishop : *Euplectes afer* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, a flock of 10-20 seen in reeds alongside channel all in winter plumage. Cat C
- 86 Common Waxbill : *Estrilda astrild* 25 Feb 2009, Barroca d'Alva, Cat C. several 1/2/3s plus a flock of 25-30 Rilvas
- 87 Black-headed Munia : *Lonchura Malacca* 25 Feb 2009, Rilvas, Cat C. 3 seen around bamboo opposite houses
- 88 Chaffinch : *Fringilla coelebs* 25 Feb 2009
- 89 Greenfinch : *Carduelis chloris* 25 Feb 2009
- 90 Goldfinch : *Carduelis carduelis* 25 Feb 2009
- 91 Serin : *Serinus serinus* 25 Feb 2009. Widespread
- 92 Rock Bunting : *Emberiza cia* 25 Feb 2009. 1 Portas do Rodao
- 93 Corn Bunting : *Emberiza calandra* 26 Feb 2009. Barroca d'Alva and San Marcos da Ataboeira