

## Introduction

This is a Trip report for southern Portugal from 12<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> August 2017. Areas covered include the Castro Verde region, Mertola and surrounding area, and the Algarve. This is primarily a family holiday, but with some early morning birding squeezed in, which accounts for the vast majority of the sightings listed. These early morning visits are typically from 07:00 to around 10:30, allowing some scope for travel.

## Resources

I used the following main resources...

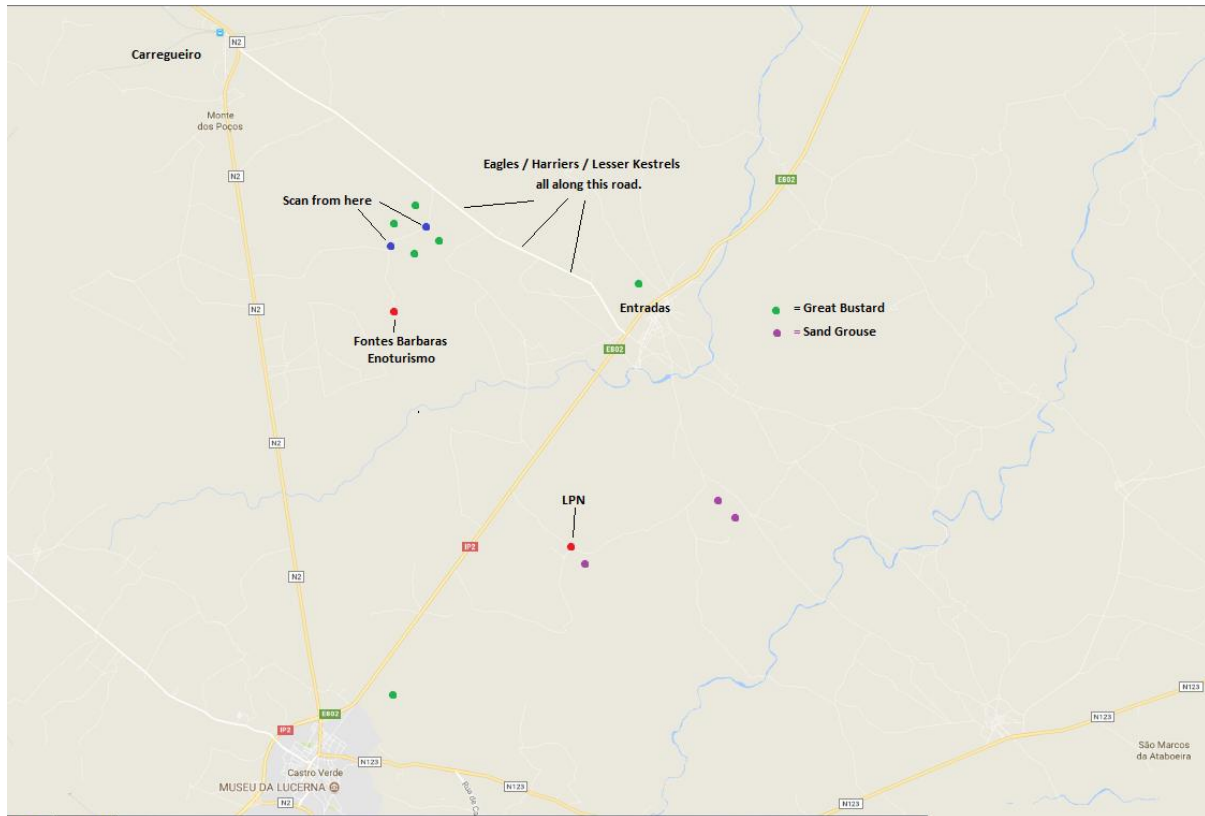
- Finding Birds in South Portugal by Dave Gosney
- Summer Birding in the Algarve and Baixo Alentejo by Jon Hardacre
- Various trip reports found on the web

## Diary & Site Information

### Day 1

Arrived in Faro at 19:00 and headed for our first destination, Fontes Barbaras Enoturismo (the Fontes) near Castro Verde. This was to be our base for the first four days. As it was late, only Owls were on display. After turning off the IP2 at Entradas towards Carregueiro, that road produced 2 Little & 2 Barn Owls, perched on road-side posts. It would become obvious that Owls are much more common here than any other country I've visited.

The Fontes is a superb base for exploring the plains, and has some great birds on its doorstep. I've marked its location on the below map, along with some of my sightings in the area.



## Day 2

07:15 start. I decided to check out the general area around the Fontes. Standing outside the Fontes, the sound of Red-Legged Partridge could be heard from all around. They were everywhere. I wasted some time chasing larks around, which were a mix of Skylark, Crested & probably Thekla (too flighty to id). I then checked out a small reservoir about 150 yards in front of the Fontes. There I found Avocet, 3 Black-Winged Stilt, Coot and 6 Flamingos. It seemed odd to be viewing these birds in such a dry region.

I then headed towards the Carregueiro to Entradas road (main road). On the way, I stopped to look at a Roller perched on a wire. While there, I scanned the surrounding fields, and with no effort had my first **Great Bustards**. A flock of 6 birds were wandering about in the vegetation. After scanning the remaining area, I increased the total to 25 birds (see the scanning points in the above map).



While scanning the fields, I also found 2 **Southern Grey Shrikes**, several **Lesser Kestrels** and a number of majestic Monty's Harriers, which are unbelievably common. Little Owls were also perched out in the open. At the junction to the main road there is a small enclosed piece of farmland. This held yet more Partridge and I had my first glimpse of an **Azure Winged Magpie**. Bee-eaters were calling from all directions, occasionally resting on the wires.

Along the main road, towards Entradas I noticed a number of BOP's. I stopped for a look and had several more Monty's. At that point a larger bird glided over a ridge into view. As it came closer it

began to be mobbed by the harriers, which it clearly dwarfed. I was watching a juvenile **Spanish Imperial Eagle!**

Headed back to the Fontes where Red-Rumped Swallows hawked over the vineyard.

Family outing to Castro Verde produced a couple of Sardinian Warblers in the town.

### **Day 3**

07:00 Planned to visit the LPN site (see map). Before getting into the car, I had my first clear views of **Spotless Starlings**. These, along with Spanish Sparrows were on the roof of the Fontes (as they would be every morning). On the way to the main road I had another Roller, 2 Little Owls and a few more Monty's. Access to the LNP is not easy – there is no direct access from the IP2. I eventually figured out that I could take a small road parallel to the IP2 from Entradas. \*Note\* this road might not appeal to those who might be worried about your hired car insurance excess. I would probably recommend looking for a similar road from the Castro Verde end, which I'm certain must be there.

I arrived at the visitor centre at 08:00, which was closed. I began walking down a track towards what appears to be a nesting structure with a hide opposite, probably for Lesser Kestrels. None were there, but I did hear a **Black Bellied Sandgrouse**. I couldn't locate the bird so moved on. 5 mins later I heard the call again. I raised my bins in the direction of the call and caught it before it disappeared over a ridge. I walked around the LPN for a further hour or so and added Hoopoe, Tawny Pipit, several Southern Grey Shrikes, Crested / Thekla larks, and Woodchat shrike to the total.





On the way out of the LPN, I flushed a large flock of Larks. I hopped out of the car to see 100+ **Calandra Larks**. A further minute along the road, I had to get out of the car again to check a large raptor hunting above the road. This was the first Short Toed Eagle of the trip, a nice adult bird.

Headed for home and had a further S.T Eagle, Monty's, Roller & Lesser Kestrels.



Family outing to Serpa produced a large flock of 60+ White Storks circling beside the road en route. This would prove to be a regular sight, i.e. a large gatherings of circling Storks periodically along main roads.

#### Day 4

07:00 start. Thought I'd try the Rolao / Viseus / Geurreiro route as discussed in the Gosney guide, and also in other trip reports. The aim was to try for Little Bustard, which had so far eluded me. I scanned for Bustards again from the points near the Fontes and had 6 Great Bustards, Roller & Short Toed Eagle. En route to Rolao, I checked the various bridges along the N123 from Castro Verde for Bush Robin as discussed in the Jon Hardacre guide. These bridges are to be found several km outside Castro Verde along the N123. Just look for streams / small rivers on the map. In any case, these were totally dry, so nothing there.

Arrived at Rolao @ 08:00. I started towards Viseus, checking the fields along the way. Shortly after Rolao I had 2 Great Bustards in flight. Corn Buntings were also very evident, with over 100 in one field. Between Viseus and Guerreiro I stopped many times. Along that stretch I had a single Black Bellied Sandgrouse and a large flock of Azure Winged Magpies. At Geurreiro I took the route to the LPN gates along which I finally had some good views of Larks, good enough to be fairly happy with **Thekla**. I must admit that the id of this species is not easy!. At the LPN gates, scanning the fields produced 2 more Great Bustards.

I headed back to the Fontes via the Sao Marcos da Ataboeira to Entradas road. I would recommend this road for anyone looking for Black-Shouldered Kike – the habitat looks perfect. I however had none. Plenty of Bee-eaters though..



On a family outing to Mirobriga I had only a Iberian Green Woodpecker calling, but not seen. En route back to the Fontes I had 2 further Great Bustards just outside Castro Verde on the Entradas road.

## **Day 5**

07:15 start. Decided to drive the road from Entradas to Sao Marcos da Ataboeira in one final attempt for Little Bustard. On the way to the main road I had a further 6 Great Bustards and a field full of Lesser Kestrels just outside Entradas on the Carregueiro road.

On the Entradas to Sao Marcos da Ataboeira road, just outside Entradas at a small reservoir, I had 3 Spoonbills, Green Sandpiper and at least 50 Cattle Egret. Further along this road, had 6 Black Bellied Sandgrouse and an adult dark phase Booted Eagle, which was perched on a road-side post. This road holds large numbers of Azure Winged Magpies, and Tawny pipits are also plentiful. While scanning for Little Bustards, I picked up a further 6 Great Bustards.

As a final note on this region, Great Bustards are plentiful, you should have no problem finding them anywhere in the region, Personally, I found the area around the Fontes to be more productive than the Rolao region. I had well over 100 birds in total. I failed to find Little Bustard although they are undoubtedly there. It seems also that Black-Shouldered Kites clear out of the area towards the end of the summer favouring more coastal areas at that time of year.

We moved base later that day to Mertola where we would stay for 3 nights. Here, Crag Martin are common. At a swimming spot along the Guadiana recommended by a local on the outskirts of the town, I picked up several Cetti's and 10 **Waxbills**.

## **Day 6**

I decided to try Pulo do Lobo on the northern end of the Guadiana Valley Natural Park, arriving at 08:30. This is a lovely place, but on this occasion, nothing much was happening in terms of birds. I had two Short Toed Eagles over the valley and 1 Monty's. Scanning the sides of the valley produced a couple of Blue Rock Thrush. Crag Martins were all around - I caught one having a nap on a cliff. Golden Oriole, S G Shrike, Bee-eaters & Hoopoe on the return journey to Mertola.



## Day 7

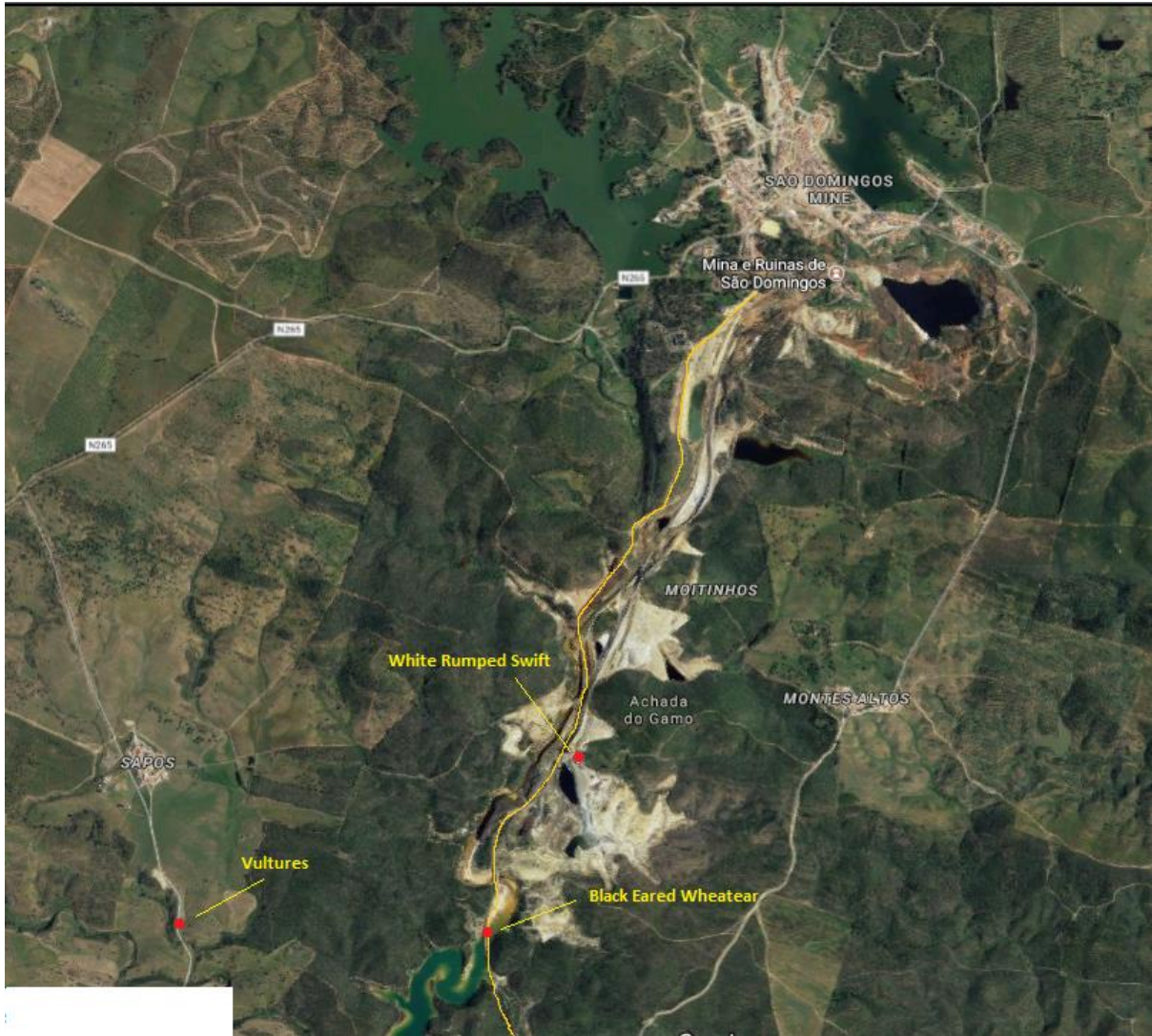
Went to Mina De Sao Domingos to look for White-Rumped Swift. I arrived @ 08:15 at the site where they are known to occur. After spending 40 minutes at the site, I had only Crag Martin & Red-Rumped Swallow to show for it. I decided to walk around the site and had a consolation prize of a **Dartford Warbler** (lifer). On the way back to the car I had two Pallid Swift quickly followed by a Common Swift. Encouraged by this, I decided to stick around for a while longer, checking the Swifts that were now passing through. I eventually picked up a smaller Swift engaging in strange acrobatics, with rapid wing beats and performing odd parachuting behaviour with wings raised in a 'V' shape (reminded me of Meadow Pipit display flight). When it turned, it showed a clean white rump! My first **White-Rumped Swift**.

The following structure marks the place where the Swift was seen.





This structure is located at the location marked White-Rumped Swift on the map below..



After that, I moved further along the track. This track eventually leads to a more car-worthy road that heads towards Sapos, and from there back towards the Mertola road. On the way to that road, I stopped at several points along the track, one of which had 3 Black Eared Wheatears.



Heading towards Sapos I had 5 Griffon Vultures gaining height just outside the village.

### Day 8

Very little birding done as we were moving down to the coast to our final base. Along the way, I did encounter a large eagle just outside Mertola. Based on the views, it was most likely to have been an adult Spanish Imperial Eagle.

### Day 9

For the remaining week, we are based at the Quinta Da Saudade. This is quite close to Lagoa dos Solgados. See following map..



This site is well covered in the Gosney guide, so I won't go into too much detail on location etc.

07:15 start. This site has a good number of birds. I started at the coastal end of the lake, using the observation platform that is in place (see above). From this platform you get a fairly good view over the lake. Note that the light conditions are not great in the morning, coming from the East. So ideally you need to try to view from the eastern end if birding in the morning.

From the platform I had Audouin's Gull on one of the many little islands. A **Purple Heron** was also seen in flight. Despite searching the fringes of the lake, there was no sign of either Swamphen or Little Bittern.



Above: Yellow legged Gull (left), Audouin's Gull (right).

Moving on to the east side of the lake, next to the golf course, I had several **Black Headed Weavers**. Coot and Moorhen were both wandering about the golf course along with Hoopoe, and the more common gull species.

Moving to the north end of the lake, I had the Iberian race of Yellow Wagtail, Little Ringed Plover, Common Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, B W Stilt, Kingfisher, Marsh Harrier, White Stork, Glossy Ibis etc.





The lake is also packed with more common species such as Pochard, Little Grebe, Little Egret, Cattle Egret, Great White Egret, Grey Heron etc, and has Cisticolas and Cettis all along the fringes.

Later that evening had a Short Toed Eagle from the balcony of the Quinta.

## Day 10

I decided to get Purple Gallinule out of the way early, so left for Vilamoura at 07:20, arriving before 08:00. After parking at the location specified in the Gosney guide for site 5 (page 23), I walked down the track towards the two hides. I was met instantly by loads of Black Headed Weavers, Cettis and Cisticolas calling from every tree and bush. At one point I found a hole in the tree-line on the right hand side of the track. Peeking through this, I found that the track actually runs alongside one of the water treatment ponds. From here I had a good view over the pond, where I found 6 Ferruginous Duck (some of questionable parentage), several Red Crested Pochard, and good numbers of the more common gull species. A Juvenile Night Heron flew from one of the trees.

Arriving at the first hide I soon heard odd calls and, soon after that, had two **Purple Swamphens** in front the hide. Another appeared later, but not much else. The hide itself is in poor condition, but is functional, although the reeds are very overgrown and prevent any views over the main body of water.

From there I moved down to the other hide. En route I had an adult Woodchat Shrike, Hoopoe, Linnets, Greenfinches, Goldfinches etc. The pool itself was fairly empty probably due to disturbance from someone managing the reed-bed.

During a family outing to Silves, I had large numbers of White Storks over the town. In the evening, at dusk, from the Quinta balcony I had a Nightjar species. Red-Necked breed in the area, so planned to follow up on that possibility another night.

## Day 11

Lazy day today. Walked around the Lagoa Dos Solgados for an hour or so. The only new birds were 40 Flamingos.

That evening at dusk, I positioned myself on the roof-top terrace of the Quinta where there is a better view of the valley and surrounding area. It wasn't long before a Nightjar appeared. I played Red-Necked Nightjar song on my phone and within a minute I had a Nightjar flying over my head and circling the roof terrace! I am taking that as confirmation of **Red-Necked Nightjar**.

Just before dusk I had what looked like Iberian ChiffChaff from the balcony. Looked more like Willow Warbler than ChiffChaff, but with lots of tail pumping.

## Day 12

Water park day, so no birding done. Just a Short Toed Eagle from the balcony in the evening.

## Day 13

I wasn't getting the vibe from the Lagoa Dos Solgados that it was going to produce the goods, so headed for Vilamoura again. Went straight to the first hide where 3 Swamphens were in full view. Cetti's, Reed Warbler and B H Weaver were also present. Despite hearing Little Bittern calling from the left & right of the hide, I could not get even the briefest of tickable views. Frustrating, but I decided to go after bigger fish.



Heading back up the track towards the main road, I passed some kind of observation tower just before the main road on the left-hand side of the track (see below). This looked like a good place to get a panoramic view of the marshes so made my way to the top of the tower. A few Marsh Harriers were immediately obvious. Scanning the wires produced nothing so scanned the tree tops. Within minutes, I had a grey looking bird, which took flight. And there it was – a gorgeous **Black-Shouldered Kite!** It circled around the marsh before returning to the same tree top, repeating this behaviour several times. The bird repeatedly tail-pumped downwards while perched. Must be an Iberian thing. The map below shows the location of the tower.



That afternoon, as a family day out we headed for Monchique / Mount Foia to escape the heat of the coast. En route, we stopped at Caldas De Monchique. At the springs, I had a Nuthatch but little else. After lunch, we called into Monchique town itself. We walked around the town a bit and eventually reached the old convent. This looks like a great spot for woodpeckers, and I did see a single Great Spotted. Still no Iberian Green, although I could hear some calling.

At Mount Foia, within minutes of getting out of the car, I had several Blue Rock Thrush, at least 5 Rock Bunting and a Dartford Warbler. These were all at the large fenced-in radio tower. Heading back to the Quinta, I had 150 + White storks circling at one point next to the motorway.







Back at the Quinta I eventually nailed down **Iberian Chiffchaff** with birds flitting around the trees in front of the balcony. This time they were calling and tail pumping the whole time. At dusk a Tawny Owl could be heard near the Quinta, along with Little Owls and Stone Curlews, which were there every evening.

#### **Day 14**

Decided to go early to Mount Picota (near Mount Foia) as this was supposed to be better for woodland birds. Arrived at 08:30. During the hour I spent there I had nothing of note, so decided to try for Iberian Green Woodpecker again. I went to the Site 2 in the Gosney guide (Page 39) near Monchique. This is a good location for woodpeckers, but despite spending 30 mins searching, I saw only Great Spotted. Iberian Green could be heard all around. Birds along that road also included Serin, Pied Flycatcher, Nuthatch, and Jay.

That evening at the Quinta, Tawny Owl was calling again close to the Villa, but again no views.

### **Summary**

Portugal is a fantastic place which I would have no hesitation in recommending. It is still fairly unspoilt when you move away from the tourist zones by the coast. But even there, you can easily find little gems tucked away next to the built up areas.

If you are thinking of a family holiday and want to do some birding, give it a go. Do your birding in the morning when it's cool. You will be pleasantly surprised at what you can find by spending two or three hours in the morning.

I went to Portugal with a list of 20 wanted birds. In the end I got most of those, missing Bonelli's, Little Bustard, Bush Robin, Iberian Green Woodpecker and Red Knobbed Coot. I did however manage 15 lifers. Given that I have birded in Europe many times before that's not a bad total. For anyone who has not done much birding in other European countries, the total could easily double

that. You will however need a car to access many of the more interesting areas. The Portuguese are fairly laid back so driving is not a huge problem. The roads are good, although they are overly fond of roundabouts!

I have a previous trip report for Cyprus on Cloudbirders (also for August) if thinking of Cyprus as a possible destination.

Thanks,

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