

## Portugal – The Algarve March 2024

We flew with Ryanair from Edinburgh to Faro. Accommodation was a self catering apartment (Edifice Iberico) in Albufeira, within walking distance of the old town for restaurants and supermarkets, yet close enough to the edge to allow quick access to main roads as we headed off birding. Car hire was with Dr1ve, who were very efficient and provided the car at a very reasonable price. The website <https://www.walkalgarve.com/algarve-birdwatching-bird-hotspots> gave details of how to access many of the coastal birding sites. My old trip reports provided information regarding the Castro Verde and Monchique areas.

**18<sup>th</sup> March.** Plane arrived on time at 0930. Efficient pick up by mini bus for short drive to Dr1ve car hire plot, where we were dealt with very efficiently. We opted to pay the small daily charge for the device to record toll charges, so we were soon on the A22 heading for Albufeira. Managed to check into our apartment early and spent afternoon strolling about the old town checking out restaurants etc.

**19<sup>th</sup> March.** A bit of a late start, so we opted for the wetlands on the west side of Vilamoura. Parked on south edge of Dom Pedro Millennium golf course at 37.092,-8.1312. The pools north of the road were mostly out of bounds, but south of the road we followed a cycle track to access other pools. On these “Creek” pools a flock of 60 **Common Pochard**, some **Red-crested Pochard**, **Little Grebe**, **Common Coot** and **Moorhen**. In the reedy channel closest to the cycle track a **Little Bittern** and lots of displaying **Black-headed Weaver**. Overhead good numbers **Barn Swallow**, **House Martin** and a **Sand Martin**. In the scrubby areas **Sardinian Warbler**, **Common Chiffchaff**, **Blackbird**, **Greenfinch** and **Serin**.

Then headed a bit further east to the bird hides at Parque Ambiental (37.0911,-8.1427). Similar species of waterfowl present, plus **Grey Heron**, a **Purple Heron**, a **Purple Swamphen**, **Cetti’s Warbler** and **Reed Warbler**. Walked down a track to a second hide. In the surrounding fields at least three calling **Common Quail**, **Wood Pigeon**, **Hoopoe**, **Crested Lark**, **Stonechat**, **Zitting Cisticola** and **Corn Bunting**. In trees and scrub bounding the fields our first **Iberian** (formerly Azure-winged) **Magpies**, a **Short-toed Treecreeper**, **Blackcap**, a nice male **Common Waxbill**, **Goldfinch** and more surprising four **Siskin**. Raptors comprised a pair of **Marsh Harrier**, two **Booted Eagle** and **Common Kestrel**. Quite pleasant, laid back birding reacquainting ourselves with many southern European species.

**20<sup>th</sup> March.** Headed back west to the Ria Formosa Nature Park. We drove to the parking area on Av. Andre Jordan, Quinta do Lago (37.0288, -8.0207) where prior to 1<sup>st</sup> June there is free parking. We then followed the board walk west along the edge of the estuary to the old saltpans. The tide was rising so we could easily pick out small groups of waders, particularly **Grey Plover**, **Common Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Sanderling**, **Turnstone**, **Common Redshank**, **Greenshank**, **Whimbrel** and a single **Bar-tailed Godwit**. Small roosts of gulls comprised **Yellow-legged Gulls**, **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** and **Audouin’s Gulls**. Small numbers **Little Egret** and **Great Cormorant**, plus an **Osprey** perched on edge of estuary. On saltmarsh **Crested Lark**, **Meadow Pipit**, **Stonechat** and many showy singing **Sardinian Warbler**.

Retraced our steps back towards carpark then followed boardwalk east. The lagoons held **Black-winged Stilts**, **Avocet**, **Kentish Plover**, **Common Snipe**, **Common Sandpiper** and a **Spotted Redshank**. Wildfowl comprised a few **Mallard**, **Gadwall**, **Teal** and **Shoveler**. On the largest lagoon a **Great-crested Grebe** and 22 roosting **Spoonbill**. Headed back towards the hide before following the

footpath towards the lake at the south edge of the golf course. Good variety of wildfowl, another **Purple Swamphen** and lots of **Black-headed Weaver**.

**21<sup>st</sup> March.** Decided to head inland today to the Castro Verde area, using the rather expensive A2 toll road. Although it was bright and sunny when we left it soon began to cloud over. From Castro Verde we drove up the old IP2 north to the Centro de Educacao Ambiental Vale a Life funded project to boost the number of iconic steppe species. We tried to follow a 3km walk from the centre but it was very poorly signed, so we eventually gave up and returned to the car park just before the rain started. In the fields lots of **Calandra Larks**, a pair of **Greater Short-toed Lark**, **Stonechat** and many **Corn Bunting**, but no sign of bustards. By the centre lots of **Jackdaws** eyeing up kestrel nest boxes and a **Little Owl**.

We drove back to Castro Verde and then followed the N123 east to Sao Marcos de Ataboeira. On edge of village good views of a pair of **Great Spotted Cuckoo**. Continued east stopping to scan fields from time to time at the few spots where you could get the car off the road. Raptors seen included **Red Kite**, **Black Kite**, **Common Buzzard**, a **Booted Eagle** and a male **Hen Harrier**. Also had three flyover **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**, but still no bustards. Good flocks of **Spotless Starling**, **Spanish Sparrow** plus road side **Eurasian Magpie** and **Carion Crow**. A strong wind was making birding difficult so we eventually gave up and began the return journey back to Albufeira opting for the non-toll IC1 which was a perfectly good road.

**22<sup>nd</sup> March.** Decided to visit the small lagoon known as Foz do Rio Almargem, east of Quarteira. Drove to 37.0664, -8.0811 where we parked on the street, then followed the track down to the lagoon. A flock of **Common Swift** overhead. Walked down east side, then up west side. Lots of waterfowl including a nice male **Garganey**, 45 **Shoveler**, 20 **Gadwall** and 10 **Red-crested Pochard**, plus the usual suspects, with two **Glossy Ibis** and a few **Black-winged Stilts** feeding in shallows. Returned to beach where we had a **Great Skua** close offshore. Walked back to car via the pine wood, on east side of lagoon, where we found a few **Hoopoe**, a **Woodchat Shrike**, a **Mistle Thrush**, **Short-toed Treecreeper**, lots of **Iberian Magpie** and our first **Jays**. Returned to Albufeira for lunch and spent the afternoon in town doing Dora things.

**23<sup>rd</sup> March.** Went west today to the Alvor area. Drove through the town to the fishing port where we parked at 37.1268, -8.5954 and then followed the boardwalk along the south edge of the estuary. Surprisingly few waders, mainly **Sanderling**, though three **Oystercatcher** were the only ones we saw. Gulls included 60 **Audouin's Gull**, along with five **Sandwich Tern** and our first **Caspian Tern**. At least two **Osprey** feeding over the estuary. In the scrub bounding the boardwalk four **Woodchat Shrike**, a **Northern Wheatear** and **Linnets**.

Followed the boardwalk in a circle back to the carpark and then drove round to the Estuario Ribeira de Odiaxere a tributary of the Alvor. Following the Caminho da Espargoeira we parked at 37.140, -8.6137 and walked along the road to view the abandoned saltpans. The most northerly ones held good numbers of waders, mainly **Black-winged Stilt**, **Avocet**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Common Redshank**, **Common Snipe** along with a few **Ruff**, **Kentish Plover** and **Common Sandpiper**. Also present along the edges at least eight **Yellow Wagtail** and a couple of **White Wagtail**. In the adjacent fields and scrub three **Woodchat Shrike**, a **Common Redstart**, another **Siskin**, and on a ruined building a **Little Owl**.

Drove down to the car park at the end of the road and walked round the most southerly lagoon. As it was high tide small groups of waders especially **Common Ringed Plover**, **Grey Plover**, **Dunlin**, **Turnstone** and **Whimbrel** were roosting in the lagoon. An adjacent lagoon held 17 **Common**

**Shelduck**, along with a few **Caspian** and **Sandwich Terns**. Returned to the car and drove up to the very north edge of the saltpan complex. Here in a muddy roadside pool we found three pairs of **Little Ringed Plover**, a **Green Sandpiper** and a **Water Pipit**.

**24<sup>th</sup> March.** Forecast was for a clear sunny day so we decided to head for the hills and took the N124 north to Monchique, before following the signs up to Foia, where we parked at the Mirador da Foia. Unfortunately the sun never appeared and it was cloudy with a cold wind. I wandered round the various paths between the centre and the masts. Got excellent views of two **Dartford Warbler**, a pair of **Woodlark** and three pairs of **Rock Bunting**. Found a female **Ring Ouzel** feeding in a fenced grassy area by one of the masts, then in a small bush near the centre a **Wryneck**. Also two pairs of **Red-rumped Swallow** flying round the buildings. With the strong wind it was not particularly pleasant birding conditions so we decided to retreat back down to lower and warmer grounds.

We decided on Lagoa dos Salgades where we parked at the end of the track at Praia Grande de Pera and had lunch before we walked up the path on west side of the lagoon. It was very full of water so held a scattering of wildfowl of the usual species, but not many waders. Did see two **Purple Swamphen**, both **Grey** and a **Purple Heron** and heard a calling **Water Rail**. Along damper edges a flock of nine **Yellow Wagtail**. We then walked along the boardwalk on south edge of lagoon hearing singing **Reed Warblers** and getting good views of **Zitting Cisticolas** and yet another **Woodchat Shrike**. Walked to the beach where we had **Gannet** offshore. It is a very pleasant walk round this lagoon.

**25<sup>th</sup> March.** Continuing our visitations to small lagoons it was the turn of Lagoon Das Dunas today near Vale do Lobo. We parked near the edge of the lagoon at 37.044, -8.053. This is a very small lagoon holding a small number of waterfowl. Good views of a **Purple Swamphen** and lots of **Black-headed Weaver**. Walked down to the beach and then east along the shore finding another four **Woodchat Shrike** in the scrub. Just beyond the restaurants is another boardwalk along the southern edge of the overgrown Lagoa do Garrao and then a track along the south edge of a pine wood leading towards the west end of Ria Formosa. From the boardwalk we counted another nine **Woodchat Shrikes**. In one of the scrubbiest areas a singing **Common Nightingale** showed briefly. The pines held the usual woodland species, including a pair of **Crested Tit**, but we saw no woodpeckers.

**26<sup>th</sup> March.** Decided to complete our tour of coastal sites by visiting the wetlands close to Faro airport. Drove first to the entrance of Ludo Farm, where a sign advised no vehicle access so we parked in the pine wood at 37.0338, -7.9847, then walked out to and through the salt pans. Not really a lot to see, many completely devoid of birds others holding small numbers of species like **Common Shelduck**, a few **Greater Flamingo**, four **Spoonbill** and three **Caspian Tern**. Lots of **White Stork** gathering nest material for their nests in a line of dead trees.

Returned to the car just before the rain started. In between showers I had a walk through the pines finding **Iberian Magpie**, **Jay**, **Great Tit** and another **Crested Tit**, but still no woodpeckers. More showers so we moved on to check the lagoons south of the airport. A couple of **Woodchat Shrikes** along the airport fence line. The lagoons held small numbers of waders the best being three **Little Stint**. Torrential rain started so we abandoned our birding and headed back to Albufeira.

**27<sup>th</sup> March.** Our final day, packed up the car and decided to head back north to the Castro Verde area using the IC1. Followed the N123 east to Sao Marcos de Ataboeira then took first turn off on the right down to 37.7026, -7.9093 to scan the fields. I walked down a couple of the tracks, seeing lots of singing and displaying **Calandra Larks**, a flock of eight **Greater Short-toed Lark** and a distant group of seven flying **Black-bellied Sandgrouse**. Eventually returned to the main road seeing two

**Great Spotted Cuckoo** hunting for caterpillars. In the field just north of the junction a female **Little Bustard** hunkering down as there was a strong cold NW wind plus frequent rain showers. We drove about 3km further east and stopped by a gateway, where I spotted a distant **Great Bustard**. Lots of kestrels hunting over the field but they all appeared to be **Common Kestrel**.

Returned back towards Castro Verde taking the turn off south down to Viseus. Just beyond Rolao excellent views of a pair and a single male **Montagu's Harrier** hunting over a crop field. From Viseus we drove east for a bit, no more bustard sightings but a pair of **Iberian Grey Shrike** on roadside fences was a bonus, as were **Thekla's Lark** in roadside scrub and rocks. The weather was once again deteriorating with more heavy rain so we abandoned our birding and began the journey back to Faro to return the car and check in for our Ryanair flight back to Edinburgh.

Overall it was an enjoyable trip. The weather was a bit mixed with quite a lot of cloud and occasional rain. It was also very windy at times, which made birding difficult. We were a bit disappointed with the Castro Verde area as bird numbers were much lower than on our previous visits 10-20 years ago, though the weather probably did not help. In all we saw 125 different species of bird.

Bob Swann