

SOUTHERN PORTUGAL (ALGARVE & ALENTEJO), Ian Kinley and Dave Thexton

27th April to 4th May 2000

A relatively late change of plan saw us revisiting an area where we had spent two weeks birding in July 1998. We stayed in a self-catering apartment at Vilamoura, which proved a suitable enough base. The weather was, to say the least, mixed, often cool, almost always windy and with lots of rain but we were able to bird all day (the high temperatures in July 1998 had made this impossible on our previous visit). Some of the tracks, especially round Castro Marim, proved tricky or occasionally impassable after heavy rain.

We found a number of differences between spring and mid-summer visits. The likes of Cattle Egret, Roller, Bee-eater and Azure-winged Magpie, though all seen easily enough, were less numerous and widespread in spring. Collared Pratincoles seemed to be just arriving, with none on the Alentejo, and there were no large flocks of Cattle Egrets at Ludo or Sao Laurenco. On the other hand, larks were much easier (we did very well for Calandra and Lesser Short-toed) and Serins were really common and obvious. On neither visit did we do particularly well for warblers, perhaps this time partly due to the weather and partly because we didn't visit some of the inland sites such as Foia, though we did manage to find Spectacleds (thanks to some local info).

We looked in vain for White-rumped Swifts at Mertola and Minos de San Domingues, though without detailed directions it was something of a needle in a haystack job; perhaps it was also too early, though our visit was in line with arrival dates in Spain (Steve Whitehouse *pers comm*)

Sites visited included

Alentejo (Castro Verde-Mertola area)

We specifically visited the following areas: -

Track running southwest from Entradas/Pocos road

East side of Castro Verde/Entradas road, from shepherd's lookout on hill, formerly marked by disused yellow van.

Track leading south from N123 Castro Verde/Mertola road opposite Sao Marcos de Ataboeira and marked by a *Reserva Biologica* sign featuring a Little Bustard. (This track is actually situated where the road signposted Santa Barbara de Padroes is incorrectly shown on the map on p27 of the Gosney guide.) On all our visits to the Alentejo, we have found this the most rewarding track - it produced Black-bellied sandgrouse in July '98.

Road leading south from N123 Castro Verde/Mertola, c4km west of Sao Marcos de Ataboeira, signposted Santa Barbara de Padroes. (This is site 6 on p28 of the Gosney guide but wrongly shown on the map as leading south directly opposite Sao Marcos de Ataboeira.)

N123 Castro Verde/Mertola (We found the section between Sao Marcos de Ataboeira and the rubbish tip the most productive.)

Mertola itself

**Faro Airport Waterworks Pools
Alvor Estuary
Cape St. Vincent**

Castro Marim

We drove along all the accessible tracks here without hindrance and without asking permission at the saltworks entrance (though beware of gates being locked behind you when work ceases for the day!) An excellent and underwatched area; despite it being a nature reserve, we never saw another birder here on any of our visits.

Central Valley

Ludo Farm Area

Seemingly dismissed by many birders since the collapse of the tower hide, we found it an excellent area and had no access problems.

Quinta do Lago

A new "No Entry" sign had appeared on the final approach to the hide at Sao Laurengo since our last visit. As locals seemed to be ignoring it, so did we and continued to drive right to the hide overlooking the Sao Laurengo pool. Early mornings and evenings were obviously best. We found everything, including gallinules, easily visible from the hide, with no need to walk around the pool or across the golf-course.

Vilamoura Golf Course

As in 1998, this proved an even better site for Purple Gallinules than Sao Laurengo. Birds come out onto the fairways to feed. We visited only in the evenings, when even a few passing golfers did not deter the birds for long, but presumably early mornings are just as good. Other observers have suggested parking and walking to the 6th tee. Security guards prevented us from doing this in 1998 (we didn't bother trying this time) but the area is easily viewable from a few hundred metres further along the road, without the need to leave the car unattended.

Directions to all the sites can be found in either the Gosney Guide to Southern Portugal, the Algarve Compilation supplied by Steve Whitehouse, or other trip reports on the birdtours website

We recorded a total of 147 species in a week, compared with 142 in a fortnight in 1998. A full list is given below, including details of the more interesting records.

Species List

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea* - c12 at Cape St. Vincent on 1/5

Gannet *Morus bassanus*- c10 at Cape St. Vincent on 1/5

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus* - up to 3 at Ludo, Vilamoura Golf Course and Sao Laurengo.

Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* - Widespread in moderate numbers at sites such as Castro Marim and the Alentejo, with one flock of 50 at Vilamoura Golf Course. No large roosts at Ludo or Sao Laurenco

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea* - Up to 3 regularly seen at Vilamoura Golf Course. Nesting birds?

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* - Widespread and common. Most of nests alongside Castro Verde/Mertola road occupied.

Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* - 3 at Ludo on 27/4; 100 at Castro Marim on 28/4; 150 at Castro Marim on 3/5; 60+ at Ludo on 4/5

Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* - 30 at Ludo on 27/4; c300 at Castro Marim on 28/4 & 3/5

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Teal *Anas crecca* - 1 drake at Sao Laurenco

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Garganey *Anas querquedula*- 1 drake at Castro Marim on 3/5

Shoveler *Anas clypeata*- 1 drake at Sao Laurenco

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* - c20 at Sao Laurenco

Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* - 1 female at Sao Laurenco

Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* - 45 in 2 flocks at Cape St. Vincent on 1/5

Black-shouldered Kite *Elanus caeruleus* - Pair close to road to Picarros (south off the N123 Ourique/Castro Verde) on 29/4 and 2/5

Black Kite *Milvus migrans* - Widespread in small numbers, especially on the Alentejo, and commonest near the rubbish tip .

Short-toed Eagle *Circaetus gallicus* - 1 near rubbish tip alongside the N123 Castro Verde/Mertola on 2/5; 1 at Mertola on 2/5; 2 at Castro Marim on 3/5

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* - 1 at Vilamoura Golf Course and 2 at Castro Marim

Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* - Common on the Alentejo. 2 at Castro Marim. All but 2 were males.

Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus* - 1 dark-phase from road between Mertola and Minos de San Dominguez and 1 light-phase at Mertola itself on 2/5

Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* - 3 from track opposite Sao Marco de Ataboeira off N123 Castro Verde/Mertola on 29/4; 3 alongside N123 Castro Verde/Mertola on 2/5. Excellent views of about half a dozen at Mertola on 2/5. The convent at Mertola has very limited opening hours for viewing the Lesser Kestrels but there are nestboxes under the nearby bridge and on other buildings and these can be easily watched at any time. We had to wait a while before any birds appeared so don't just assume there are no birds present.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Peregrine *Falco peregrinus* - 1 at Cape St. Vincent on 1/5

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Quail *Coturnix coturnix* - Common and very vocal, especially on the Alentejo.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Purple Gallinule *Porphyrio porphyrio* - 1 at Ludo on 27/4 and up to 8 at Sao Laurenco. Vilamoura Golf Course remains the best site and we had up to 23 there in the evenings

Coot *Fulica atra*

Little Bustard *Tetrax tetrax* - No flocks anywhere but small numbers seen plus loads calling all over the place on the Alentejo. Also 3 seen at Cape St. Vincent on 1/5 and 1 heard at Castro Marim on 3/5

Great Bustard *Otis tarda* - 13 from "Yellow Van Site" off N123 Ourique/Castro Verde on 29/4 (the van's no longer there). At least 70 from track opposite Sao Marco de Ataboeira (off N123 Castro Verde/Mertola) inc. one flock of 63 on 29/4.

31 (1+8+22) from N123 Castro Verde/Mertola road on 2/5

Oystercatcher *Haemotopus ostralegus*

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

Stone Curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*

Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola*- 1 at Ludo on 27/4; 10 (inc. 2 pairs displaying in ploughed field) at Castro Marim on 3/5. Apparently just arriving with none seen on the Alentejo.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

Knot *Calidris canutus*

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Little Stint *Calidris minuta* - Numerous passage birds including 100 at Ludo on 27/4

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea* - Plenty on passage including c50 at Castro Marim on 28/4 and 3/5

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* - Sightings included 60 at Ludo on 27/4

Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Common Sandpiper *Actis hypoleucos*

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* - 32 in one flock at Castro Marim on 28/4. These birds flew through calling and seemed to carry on going. We saw others on the salt pans later in the day, including pink-flushed adults, but couldn't say for sure that they weren't part of the original flock. At least 10 at Castro Marim on 3/5. A photo of a Slender-billed Gull in *Birding World* (Vol.13 No.3) was captioned as the 5th for Portugal. We saw at least 3 adults and a juv in July '98 and an absolute minimum of 32 birds this time. Our records, including photos, have been submitted to the Portuguese Rarities Committee. This is surely an overlooked species here and seems likely to nest.

Audouin's Gull *Larus audouinii* - 7 ads at Castro Marim on 28/4; 10 (9 ads + a 1st-summer) at Castro Marim on 3/5. Territorial and apparently nesting. As with Slender-billed, this is surely an overlooked species here: we've seen them on all of our 5 visits to Castro Marim.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus argentatus michahellis*

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia* - 1 over estuary near Praia de Faro on 30/4; 2 on Alvor Estuary on 1/5

Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis* - 6 on estuary at the mouth of the Guadiana on 28/4; small nos at Cape St. Vincent on 1/5

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* - 1 on estuary at the mouth of the Guadiana on 28/4

Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*

Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* - 1 over fish farm near Castro Marim on 28/4

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybridus*- 1 at Castro Marim on 3/5

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* - at least 50 at Castro Marim on 3/5; 3 at Sao Laurenco on 4/5

Feral Pigeon *Columbia livia*

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur*

Great Spotted Cuckoo *Clamator glandarius* - 1 at Castro Marim on 28/4; 1 at Ludo on 30/4; 2 (inc. prolonged views of a juv) from N123 Castro Verde/Mertola on 2/5

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

Barn Owl *Tyto alba* - 1 at Vilamoura Golf Course on 1/5

Scops Owl *Otus scops* - The surprise sighting of the trip - 1 on wires beneath Stork's nest alongside N123 Castro Verde/Mertola in bright sunshine on 2/5

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

Red-necked Nightjar *Caprimulgus ruficollis* - 2 heard at Falesia on 30/4 (the only evening we tried)

Swift *Apus apus*

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* - Widespread. As on our previous trip, Castro Marim in early morning was particularly good, with several hundred flying low and giving excellent views.

Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*

Bee-eater *Merops apiaster* - Widespread in moderate numbers. Perhaps still arriving as we had flocks passing overhead at several sites, most notably Cape St. Vincent on 1/5

Roller *Coracias garrulus* - 3 on wires near Entradas on 29/4; 2 on wires by Castro Verde/Mertola road on 2/5

Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis*

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* - Just a few seen well.

Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens* - Particularly numerous at Castro Marim on east side beyond new Reserve Centre and carpark.

Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* - Very common on the Alentejo away from the main roads. We found the tracks off the N123 Castro Verde/Mertola road particularly good.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

Thekla Lark *Galerida theklae* - Seen at Cape St. Vincent and Castro Marim

Woodlark *Lullula arborea* - Quite common on the Alentejo

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*

Crag Martin *Hirundo rupestris* - About 4 at Mertola on 2/5

Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

Red-rumped Swallow *Hirundo daurica* - Widespread but in fairly small numbers compared to July

House Martin *Delichon urbica*

Tawny Pipit *Anthus campestris* - 1 on the Alentejo on 29/4 and 1 at Cape St. Vincent on 1/5

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* - All the birds we saw were of the race *iberiae*

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* - Common at Cape St. Vincent

Stonechat *Saxicola torquata*

Black-eared Wheatear *Oenanthe hispanica* - Just 3 seen on the Alentejo

Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* - at least 6 seen very well at Cape St. Vincent on 1/5 and 1 at Mertola on 2/5

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*

Cetti's Warbler *Cettia cetti*

Fan-tailed Warbler *Cisticola juncidis*

Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*

Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*

Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata* - A locally-based birder put us on to a site at Cape St. Vincent where we saw several instantly on 1/5. They were in an area of very low scrubby bushes in a triangle formed by the main road to the lighthouse, a wide track leading north (marked on previous maps of the area by other observers) and a narrower track also leading north and beginning by the restaurant. As Spectacled Warblers seem to have disappeared from previously-recommended sites on the Algarve (e.g. Castro Marim), this was a valuable piece of information.

Sardinian Warbler *Sylvia melanocephala*

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Iberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus brehmii* - 1 at Central Valley on 1/5 was our only record

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Crested Tit *Parus cristatus*

Great Tit *Parus major*

Short-toed Treecreeper *Certhia brachydactyla*

Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus* - 2 heard near rubbish tip alongside N123 Castro Verde/Mertola road on 2/5 and at least 4 (inc. superb views of male) at Mertola on 2/5

Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis*

Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

Magpie *Pica pica*

Azure-winged Magpie *Cyanopica cyana* - Widespread but none of the large flocks we'd seen in July

Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* - 2 at Cape St. Vincent on 1/5

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Raven *Corvus corax*

Spotless Starling *Sturnus unicolor*

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* - In addition to the well-known colonies in Storks' nests alongside the N123 between Castro Verde and Mertola, we also found a small colony by one of the roadside bridges and 3 near Rolao on 29/4

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia* - 4 on wires near "Yellow Van Site" on the Alentejo on 29/4

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Serin *Serinus serinus* - Very numerous, widespread and vocal compared to July

Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*- Small numbers at Vilamoura Golf Course and Faro Airport Waterworks Pools