

Portugal: Birding & Culture

Field Report

OCTOBER 10 – 21, 2024



Group photo at the Roman Temple of Diana in Évora.

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By António Cotão

October 10th – Meet at the Lisbon Airport. Transfer to Alcochete, in the heart of the Tagus Estuary Nature Reserve. During the afternoon, we had an optional birding around the hotel, starting by exploring its garden, where we managed your first passerines like the European Robin or the migratory species of Pied and Spotted Flycatcher. We also did a stretching walk along the Tagus River exploring the mudflats for the first shorebird species, which included Kentish and Common Ringed Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, as well as Mediterranean Gull and Eurasian Spoonbill. After the group introductions and briefing of the tour in the hotel’s lobby, we had our welcoming dinner in a local restaurant famous for its fresh grilled fish. Overnight stay at Hotel Quinta da Praia das Fontes in Alcochete.



Map of the Tagus Estuary Nature Reserve, near Lisbon.



A Eurasian Spoonbill flying over Tagus River, photo by Linda Vaughn.

October 11th – On the second day, we woke up with a rainy and windy day that didn't dissuade us of exploring the Tagus Estuary Nature Reserve. During the rainy morning, we made shorter stops and bird mostly by the car. Despite the weather conditions, we managed to see a Little Owl and had good views on Willow Warbler and European Robin first thing in the morning. Then, visiting the Barroca d'Alva rice fields and the saltpans of Birto, we had several good sights of bird species, including Black-winged Stilts, Pied Avocets, Spotted Redshank, Greater Flamingo, Green Sandpiper, White Stork, Glossy Ibis, Yellow-crowned Bishop, and Common Waxbills.

During the afternoon, the weather significantly improved and we continued you day around Tagus Estuary, visiting the saltpans of Samouco and the Quinta da Atalaya. This afternoon was very fruitful in both locations, being some of the highlights, Black-winged Kite, Booted Eagle, Eurasian Hoopoe, Eurasian Nuthatch, Short-toed Treecreeper, and Eurasian Tree Sparrow. The afternoon finished with a visit to the winery of Companhia das Lezírias with a wine tasting. We enjoyed another delicious meal in the center of Alcochete. Overnight stay at Hotel Quinta da Praia das Fontes.



A Spotted Redshank at samouco Saltpans, photo by Linda Vaughn.



A Black-winged Kite at Quinta da Atalaya, photo by Linda Vaughn.



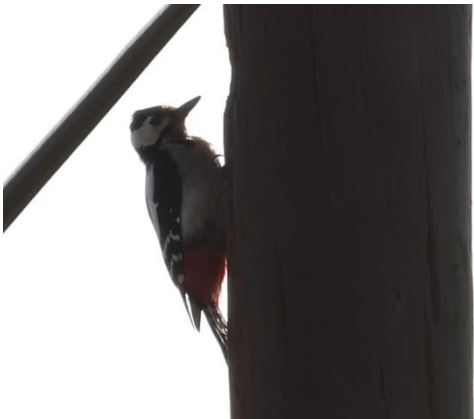
A Eurasian Nuthatch visiting a hole in a Cork Oak, photo by Linda Vaughn.

October 12th – Another day of birding in the Tagus Estuary Nature Reserve, visiting the northern sites of this reserve, namely the Ponta da Erva rice fields, the Birdwatching Center of EVOA, and Pancas woods. In EVOA, the high level of water in the lagoons due to the heavy rain of the previous night influenced the birding resulting in lesser diversity of waterfowl species. Nonetheless, we managed good sights of several species including Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Northern Lapwing, Western Marsh Harrier, Eurasian Skylark, Crested Lark, Sardinian Warbler, Cetti's Warbler, Zitting Cisticola, and Northern Wheatear.

During the afternoon, we drove through the mixed forest of Cork Oaks and Stone Pines of Pancas, where birding was rather challenging as the birds were hard to spot. Despite that, we got sights of a couple of Sparrowhawks, a Great Spotted Woodpecker, Corn Buntings, Spotless and European Starlings, and four different species of finch species, European Goldfinch, European Greenfinch, Eurasian Linnet, and European Serin. Our last night at Alcochete ended with a traditional Group Soup as dinner and overnight stay at Hotel Quinta da Praia das Fontes.



Participants birding in EVOA, photo by António Cotão.



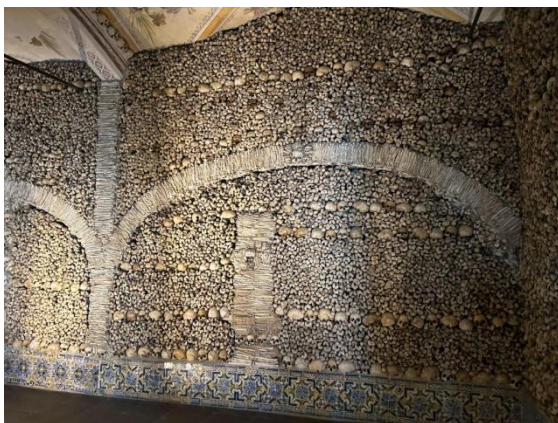
A Great Spotted Woodpecker and a Sardinian Warbler at Pancas woods, photos by Linda Vaughn.

October 13th – We left Alcochete and drove towards the Alentejo Region, where we had a Cultural day in the historical Évora with the local guide Verónica. The group had the opportunity to visit some of the UNESCO Heritage Sites of Évora, including the Chapel of the Bones, the Cathedral, the Giraldos Square, and the Roman Temple of Diana. We enjoyed a nice late lunch break in a historic and emblematic cafe in the square of Geraldos in Évora. Even during the cultural tour, we managed a little birding getting species like Eurasian Jackdaw, Eurasian Crag-Martin, and European Red-rumped Swallows.

After lunch, we drove south across the rolling plans of southern Alentejo, making a short comfort break in the town of Castro Verde where we saw a Long-eared Owl. We resumed our journey to the charming and historical town of Mértola, our base for the next days. Overnight stay at Hotel Museu.



Participants contemplating the UNESCO Heritage Sites of Évora, photos by António Cotão.



The Chapel of Bones and group photo at the Roman Temple in Évora with the local guide, photos by António Cotão.



A Long-eared Owl in Castro Verde town, photo by Linda Vaughn.

October 14th – Visit the great Castro Verde Plains and the Guadiana Valley Natural Park. The birding started right from the balcony of the hotel, which offers incredible views over the Guadiana River, where we managed to observe Common Kingfisher, Iberian Grey Shrike, and Eurasian Blue Tit, among others. During the morning we explored the steppe-like habitat of the Castro Verde, where we had a very productive morning with several target species, including Eurasian Thick-knee, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Hen Harrier, and Calandra Larks, but just a brief sight of Great Bustards. We made a few shorter stops and added some more species namely Red Kite, Common Buzzard, Carrion Crow, Common Raven, Thekla's Lark, and Meadow Pipit.

In the afternoon, the target was raptors, but the weather worsened with cloudy skies and mild temperatures. So we continued to roam the fields looking for new species of birds and keeping an eye out for bustards in the fields and eagles and vultures in the skies. It wasn't until the end of the day that we managed to spot a group of five Great Bustards. The day ended with a traditional Alentejo tomato soup. Overnight stay at Hotel Museu.



Participants looking for the Great Bustards showed on the image on the right. Photos by Wayne and Linda Vaughn.

October 15th – Visit to the Guadiana Valley Natural Park. This second day in the Region was dedicated to the bluffs and hills of the Guadiana valley. Unfortunately, we had a rainy morning that allowed us only a few moments of birdwatching. Even so, we visited a beautiful scenic spot by the river in Canais, and then an old quarry in Minas de São Domingos. Between the two sites, we saw some new species, including Red-legged Partridge, Common Wood Pigeon, Wood Lark, Eurasian Jay, Long-tailed Tit, and Common Chaffinch.

In the afternoon, we explored the southwestern part of the Guadiana Valley in search of birds of prey, but unfortunately the rain didn't let up. Nonetheless, we managed sights of Western Subalpine Warbler, Pallid Swift, and Little Ringed Plover, among others.

Our day ended with a tasting of other traditional dishes from the region. Overnight stay at Hotel Museu.



A Red-legged Partridge and a Wood Lark. Photos by Linda Vaughn.



Map of the Guadiana Valley Natural Park.

October 16th – Morning dedicated to visiting the historical Mértola (the Roman and Moorish archaeological remains, the Mosque/Church, and the Islamic Art Museum) with the local guide Fernando. Before the cultural tour, we did an optional birding around the hotel, which offered better sights on species we have had the previous mornings. During the cultural tour, we managed to record European Red-rumped Swallow, Eurasian Crag-Martin, Black Redstart and two Blue Rock-Thrushes singing from the walls of the Castle. The group enjoyed lunch by the Guadiana River and some hours of rest after the courageous walk on the cobbled streets of Mértola.

We dedicated the afternoon to birding in the territory of the big eagles and to visiting the Lince Observation Station, to try our chances of seeing an Iberian Lynx. On the first stop, within 15 minutes we got one Bonelli's eagle and a flock of Griffon Vultures. However, while driving to our next stops, rain started again and made the birding harder.

The night finished with a dinner on the other side of the river with views over the town. Overnight at Hotel Museu.



Cultural visit to Mértola town, photos by António Cotão.



A Griffon Vulture flying low above our heads, photo by Linda Vaughn.

October 17th – Morning birding by the hotel with the observation of two White-rumped Swifts and a Common Tern, among the usual suspects in the morning at that location. After check-out from the hotel, we had our last birding along the Guadiana River, in Bombeira, with great sights of Common and Sandwich Terns, Griffon Vulture, Bonelli's Eagle, Iberian Grey Shrike, Zitting Cisticola, and Eurasian Blue and Great Tits.

We then moved south towards the Algarve where, after lunch time, we visited a freshwater lagoon in the Pinewoods of Monte Gordo and then the saltpans of Castro Marim and Vila Real the Santo António Natural Park. The bird highlights were Red-crested Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Western Swamphen, Audouin's and Slender-billed Gulls, Caspian Tern, Curlew Sandpiper, Little Stint, Black Kite, Mediterranean Short-toed Lark, and Crested Tit.

Overnight at Hotel Vila Galé Albacora, in Tavira.



A Iberian Grey Shrike and a Crested Tit, photos by Linda Vaughn.



A Ferruginous Duck and a couple Red-crested Pochards at the freshwater lagoon in the Monte Gordo's pinewoods. Photos by Linda Vaughn.



Participants waiting for the bittern to appear among the reeds at the freshwater lagoon in the Pinewoods of Monte Gordo.

October 18th – One of the most desired days of this trip - pelagic day. On this long day, very early in the morning, we headed to the most southwestern point of Portugal and all of Europe - Sagres - for a pelagic in the Atlantic Ocean. Despite the swell and some slightly bigger waves, we managed to spot some of the target seabirds, including the Northern Gannet, the Cory's Shearwater and the European and Wilson's Storm Petrels. In addition to these, we managed to spot several common dolphins and a moonfish.

This region is a very good place for migratory birds of prey and the only one in the south of the country with a colony of Red-billed Choughs, so before heading back east, we explored a few areas. In addition to the choughs, we saw Griffon Vultures, Booted Eagles, Black Kites and a Black Stork.

Finally, we visited Cabo de São Vicente, literally the most southwestern point, and returned to Tavira. We split the return trip into two and made a stop to visit the Salgados Lagoon, one of the most important wetland in the region. There, the highlights were the Black Tern, the Glossy Ibis, the Water Rail (although only heard) and the Common Reed Warbler. After a long day outdoors, we arrived safe and sound at the hotel Vila Galé Albacora, in Tavira.



A Wilson's Storm-Petrel and a juvenile Northern Gannet during the boat trip of Sagres, photos by Linda Vaughn.



A Cory's Shearwater and a Moonfish also seen in the pelagic in Sagres, photos by Linda Vaughn.

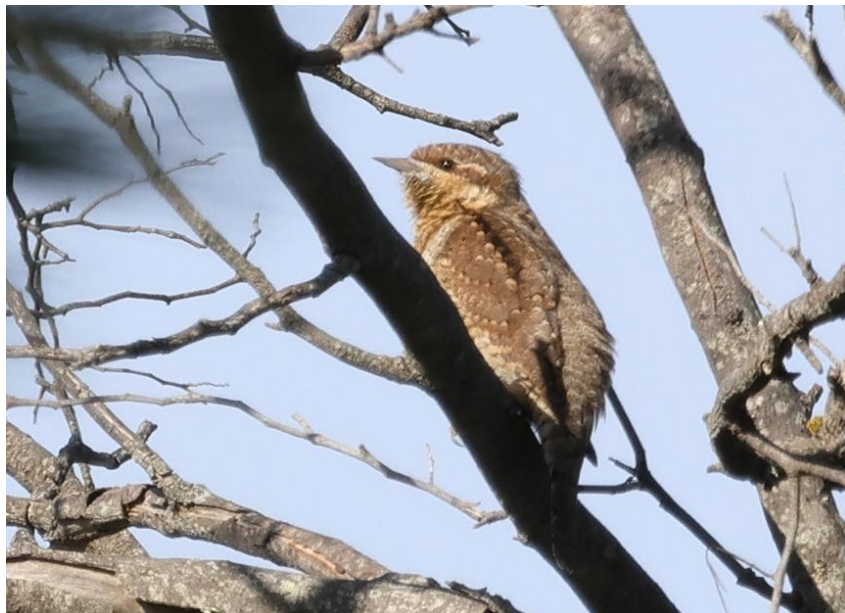


A Red-billed Cough in the Peninsula of Sagres, photo by Linda Vaughn.

October 19th – Day dedicated to explore the Ria Formosa Natural Park. In the morning, we explored a complex of habitats near the golf resort of Quinta do Lago. Exploring the golf courses, freshwater lagoon, and the mudflats of the lagoon system of Ria Formosa, we got, among others, Eurasian Wryneck, Iberian Magpie, Eurasian Hoopoe, Little Grebe, Osprey, Black-headed Weaver, and Common Waxbill.

In the afternoon, we explored some saltpans in the Eastern part of the natural park between the cities of Olhão and Tavira and got good views on some shorebirds like Black-winged Stilts, Common Greenshank, Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwits, Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrels. We got also the chance of closer sights of Slender-billed and Mediterranean Gulls, Caspian Terns and Flamingos.

This day in the Ria Formosa Natural Park was also the most productive day in terms of other groups of fauna, including dragonflies and reptiles, such as Blue Emperor and Red-veined Dragonflies, and Mediterranean and European Pond Turtles. Buffet dinner and overnight at Hotel Vila Galé Albacora, in Tavira.



A Eurasian Wryneck at Quinta do Lago, photo by Linda Vaughn.



A Black-winged Stilt and a Greater Flamingo at closer sight at Fuseta Saltpans, photos by Linda Vaughn.



A European Pond Turtle and a Red-veined Darter in Quinta do Lago, photos by Linda Vaughn.

October 20th – Return to Lisbon. We broke up the travel day with a birding stop at intertidal mudflats of Carrasqueira, part of the Sado Estuary Nature Reserve. With a beautiful scenery offered by the iconic stilted pier of Carrasqueira, we enjoyed our last truly birding moment with great views of Lesser Black-backed and Yellow-legged Gulls together, important to properly see the differences. Among other species, we also observed a big flock of Ruddy Turnstones, Whimbrel, Common Redshank and Greenshank, Eurasian Spoonbill, and two new species for the tour, Great Black-backed Gull and Eared Grebe. Overnight at Hotel Lisboa Plaza.



A Common Greenshank and a Ruddy Turnstone at Sado Estuary, photos by Linda Vaughn.



Participants birding from the tilted pier in Carrasqueira, in Sado Estuary. Photo by António Cotão.

October 21st – Last day of the trip with a fascinating day in the city of Lisbon. As the weather was rainy, we drove around the main neighborhoods of Lisbon and local guide Rui showed the group the main sights of Lisbon, including the main squares and avenues, the Baixa, the Alfama neighborhood and Lisbon Cathedral. We had lunch in Restauradores square before heading to Belém, the historic maritime area from where the Portuguese caravels set sail to explore the world. After visiting the Belém Tower and the Monument to the Discoveries, two UNESCO World Heritage Sites, we tried the original and unique Pastel de Belém in the public gardens, where we ended up seeing the Crested Myna.

We closed the day and the tour with a final gathering at the hotel lobby to share the memories and best moments and birds of the tour. Then, we finish the night with a great and charming dinner in the Liberty Avenue nearby the hotel to celebrate the incredible days we had together. Overnight at Hotel Lisboa Plaza.



Lisbon Downtown, during the cultural day with the local guide Rui. Photos by Wayne Vaughn.

October 22nd – Departure day.

During this tour we recorded 155 bird species, including the main iconic Iberian/South European specialities and three Iberian Peninsula endemic species. Birds seen included Red-crested Pochard; Ferruginous Duck; Red-legged Partridge; Great bustard; Black-bellied Sandgrouse; White-rumped Swift; Western Swamphen; Slender-billed, Audouin's and Mediterranean gulls; Wilson's Storm-petrel; Greater Flamingo; Eurasian Spoonbill; White Stork; Griffon vultures; Bonelli's and Booted eagles; Black and Red kites; Black-winged kite; Long-eared and Little owls; Eurasian Hoopoe; Eurasian Wryneck; Iberian Gray Shrike; Iberian Magpie; Red-billed chough; Crested tit; Thekla's lark; European Robin; Blue Rock Thrush; Black-headed Weaver; and Yellow-crowned Bishop, among others.

We also enjoyed other interesting wildlife, including 4 species of mammals, 6 species of Reptiles and Amphibians, and 6 species of butterflies and dragonflies. The landscape and sceneries, the weather, the historical sites, the food, and the wine were great additions to the trip.

TOTAL BIRD SPECIES SEEN OR HEARD: 155

Voted favorite Birds of the Trip: 1) White Stork; 2) Eurasian Spoonbill; 3) Eurasian Hoopoe.

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