

# Portugal: Birding, Nature & Culture | Trip Report

## April 2 – 13, 2025 | with Naturalist Journeys



**With Guide António Cotão, NJ Host Julie Fannon and clients Brad, Stephanie, Mary, Bill, Gayle, Kate, Elizabeth, Jane, and Paul**



### **Wed., Apr. 2 Arrivals | Quinta da Atalaya Farm | Salinas do Brito**

Our group officially assembled today for lunch at a tiny little cafe in Alcochete right around the corner from our hotel. It had beautiful displays of pastries and sweets. Most of us enjoyed a turnip and chickpea soup and sandwiches before heading out for some birding at a private farm just a few minutes from town. The farm was a beautiful, pastoral location, replete with cows, horses, and birds! First bird of the trip, fittingly, was a Hoopoe, and while we all got a quick look, we hoped to have more time with this special bird in the days to come.

The farm had a large wetland area and birds were numerous! We promptly saw Greater Flamingos up to their bellies in high water, some Shelducks, a White Stork flying far, far off, and had our first sighting of a Black Kite, who stayed with us for much of our time at the farm. Once we got our fill of water birds, we turned into the cork oak trees looking for Short-toed Treecreeper, a number of tits, Blackcap, and Eurasian Jays. Iberian Magpies put on a show in the distance, and a Grey and Purple Heron were both visitors to the pond.



Then, it was back to the hotel with a short stop at the old salt ponds right next door. Shorebirds were aplenty, with Dunlins, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, and Common Ringed Plovers being the most in numbers. We had Black-winged Stilts, Common Shelducks, Gulls, and Crows, too. Every few minutes a large flock of little shorebirds would fly up from the beach behind us and over our heads to take their places in the salt ponds.

João joined us for dinner at the hotel tonight, where more than half of us enjoyed mushroom risotto. It was a productive and fun first day!

### **Thurs., Apr. 3    Salinas do Brito | Rice Fields to Estuario do Tejo**

This morning started with a delicious breakfast at the hotel, then back out to the salt ponds just behind the hotel. It was a productive stop, even though high tide was at 7:30am. Right off the bat we had Ruddy Turnstone, Common Sandpiper, Dunlin, and even Kentish Plover and Little Stint. We got a quick fly-by of a Eurasian Jay, and enjoyed searching for and successfully finding Cetti's and Sardinian Warblers. Judy and Dan enjoyed watching the behaviors of the numerous Barn Swallows that were feeding their first set of fledged young.

Then, it was off to the Estuario do Tejo with a highly successful bathroom stop where we saw Booted Eagle, our first of hundreds of Glossy Ibises, and an obliging European Serin, and even a male Black Redstart on the ground.

We saw plentiful White Storks on power-line nests, and eventually made our way to the rice fields, which we slowly cruised through enroute to the Estuario do Tejo. Rice field highlights included a





gorgeous herd of horses, many Little Egrets and Glossy Ibises, and even a Eurasian Linnet that gave us good looks. We also had long, good looks at a few different Western Marsh Harriers.

We arrived at the Estuario visitor's center where we had a lunch of soup, salad, and sandwiches, most interesting of which was our driver Pedro's - a salad with tuna, mushrooms, tomatoes, and bananas! Then, off in the golf cart to get us into the lagoons, where we dodged rain perfectly, and spent time in three different blinds. We saw dozens of stilts and Pied Avocets, Ruffs, Black-tailed Godwits, and ducks including Northern Shoveler, Red-crested Pochard, Northern Pintail, and the very exciting Marbled Duck. As we walked back to the visitor center and then the van, we got our first good views of a fly-by Purple Heron, four Eurasian Spoonbills, and then a Corn Bunting and a favorite Stonechat.

Dinner tonight was at the fish house across the street, and the fish was so fresh, we picked our fish when we walked in. Grouper, Sea Bass, Salmon, fish eggs, squid, and more were enjoyed all around.

### **Fri., Apr. 4 Road to Barroca d'Alva | Bus Birding | Quinta da Atalaya | Parque de Merendas (Mudflats) | Pastoral Walk amongst the Cork Oaks**

We began the morning with a little road birding amongst some farm fields and a drainage river. What started off slow, with a few coots and Little Egrets, got progressively better, with good fun watching White Storks attempt to land on their power pole nests in a strong wind. As we scanned the fields, we saw a few small flocks of Eurasian Spoonbills, plentiful Glossy Ibises, many Gray Herons, and then, as we turned off the side path and back onto the road, great views of Western Yellow Wagtail, and even a Meadow Pipit. Closer to the estate, Jane finally got great looks at Common Waxbills where four were



playing in the low grasses, and we all got great views of a Stonechat on one of the farm's walls. Then, we met João to do a little birding in the wetlands and saw a just few things before we got rained out. The rain quickly stopped, though, and we made a quick stop at Quinta da Atalaya, where again we saw dozens of Flamingos, Western Marsh Harriers, stilts, egrets, herons, Gadwalls, and more. A last stop at the pond produced three Black-crowned Night Herons, and three Hoopoes that only gave us quick looks.

After lunch, we made our way to the mudflats. The tides weren't super cooperative, but we did see good numbers of Red Knots and Dunlins in the far distance, a good look at a Linnet and White Wagtail, and a good fly-by by a Sandwich Tern. Two male Stonechats moved around their territories behind us. We went on to a lovely local woodland full of cork oaks, olive trees, pines, and tall grasses. The wind was high and while we didn't see a large number of birds, it was a gorgeous place to walk - the sun was out, the sky was clear, and we all commented just how beautiful it was. We had a nice fly-by of storks and our first really good looks at Eurasian Bee-eaters as they buzzed past.

We had one final stop before heading back to the hotel, and that was for a wine tasting at a lovely local winery that works hard not only on their wines but also toward conservation. Their labels had Barn Owls on them, and some of their bottle packaging was even reusable as nesting boxes! Many of us said we enjoyed the sparkling brut the most.

Dinner tonight was at another fish house right on the water and we were certainly well fed!

## **Sat., Apr. 5 Évora | Road to Mértola**

Today was mostly a transfer day, leaving Lisbon to reposition to Mértola and the eastern steppes of Portugal. We were out the door promptly at 8:20am, luggage loaded and enroute to Évora, just an hour and a half southeast of Lisbon. Évora, the capital of the Alentejo region, is a Roman-walled city and a





UNESCO World Heritage Site. We were greeted on arrival by Verónica, our tour guide, who lead us a short way through town, while we enjoyed learning about many layers of local history. First, we walked through the walls and into the city, stopping at the Roman Temple, known as the Temple of Diana. Next, to the Cathedral of Évora, a massive 12<sup>th</sup> century gothic structure with beautiful cloisters and intricate baroque details at the front of the church. After a good look around the cathedral, we wandered down a street full of store fronts with fun gifts to look at. We didn't stop to shop because it was raining pretty hard, but all tucked into a pastry shop for some espresso and local pastry that was kind of like a drier, less sweet cheesecake in a dense pastry shell.

After the rain stopped, we walked more through town and into the main square, learning about the different quarters —Moorish, Christian, and Jewish — and the aqueducts. We made our way to the final church and Chapel of Bones – which is exactly what it sounds like, a chapel made entirely of bones including some 500 human skulls.

After lunch at a local brew pub, we were back on the road to Mértola. At a rest stop, we all got our first looks (though far off) of Great Bustard, a life bird for all of us! A quiet country road just across from the rest stop produced a nice number of birds, and great looks at a tree full of White Storks on their nests. We also got great looks at Spanish Imperial Eagle, many Corn Buntings, and on the way out, two Buzzards - our first of the trip.

After a quick stop to look for Long-eared Owl was unsuccessful, we were back on the road to the beautiful walled city of Mértola. It was lovely to watch the landscape change from rolling gentle hills to more steep and hilly terrain with much more vegetation and trees. Pedro navigated our bus well through the twisty, tight roads to our family-owned hotel, which was right across the river from town with fantastic views of the castle at the top of the hill.



## **Sun., Apr. 6 Bustards & Rollers & Eagles (and Owls!), Oh My!**

Today was our first full day exploring the area and the natural park around Mértola. We started by walking the entrance road to our hotel, and right off the bat, we saw a Sardinian Warbler in an orange tree, found a very vocal Nightingale in some dead trees along the river, and a few of us even saw a Great Spotted Woodpecker! From there, we met Pedro and were off! A (not so quick) checkpoint stop delayed us a bit, but we were finally able to proceed to the first of two great fields, which we agreed was the “Bustard Field”. We had good looks at Calandra Larks before we spotted a raptor in the distance—Spanish Eagle! And flying the other direction, a Great Bustard! Some watched the eagle, others watched the bustard, and it paid off, because we saw the bustard land and spotted another in the same area, displaying. Then, in short order, we saw two Little Bustards fly, then land, and then saw a male with his big black collar. Success!

Trees full of storks escorted us to our next stop at a series of fields that were carpeted in wildflowers, almost in a super-bloom with the amount of extra rain the region had been having. The purple, yellow, and white blooms were an incredible backdrop to the busy birdlife, including Eurasian Rollers and Lesser Kestrels. The rollers were so spectacular that the bus was full of “ooooh” and “aaah” as we watched them zip from fence post to fence post, line to line, doing mid-air acrobatics with the kestrels. It was incredible! A few of us also saw a Eurasian Thick-knee and after a lot of scope work on Antonio’s part, a Black-bellied Sandgrouse. A Little Owl perched far off, but we all saw it through the scope—cute! Our little lunch town was home to a roosting pair of Long-eared Owls, and right in the trees that lined a side street, there it was, just above us! In small groups, we all got good looks. Our attempt at Eurasian Eagle-Owl was not as successful, but Julie and António did scope the local quarry to see if they were still around the nest. After lunch, we headed back and although we tried for two more owls enroute, only one was successful.





The rain picked up and we decided to head back to the hotel a little earlier, but one last roadside stop produced two more exciting birds—a Golden Eagle that put on quite a show, giving us views of his color variation and curled up wing tips, and a Bonelli’s Eagle that flew right over our heads. A successful last stop!

Dinner tonight was at a wonderful restaurant within the city walls, run by a local conservation group that does local work and research, as well as running an incredible restaurant. Dinner was tapas-style and delicious —our best yet, we decided!



## **Mon., Apr. 7    Walk Above the Guadiana River | Olive Orchard Pond | Vulture Walk in Vale do Guadiana | São Domingos Mine**

We started the day walking out the hotel’s entrance road again and while it wasn’t super productive, we did hear the Nightingale again, and got quick looks at two Waxbills. Then, we met Pedro and drove to the gated entrance of a vineyard above the Guadiana River. Enroute, we had an incredible look at Montagu’s Harrier, young and bright, sitting on the ground, having just returned from its first winter in Africa. We had a nice walk looking down over the river and across to the cliffs on the other side. Bird highlights included a bold and beautiful Great Tit, and our first European Turtle-Doves, on the wires. We got gorgeous looks at bee-eaters perched up on a dead tree - the best look yet to see their striking colors.

We then repositioned to a large irrigation pond in an olive orchard. On the road in, many of us were able to pick out just the eyes of a Little Owl on its regular pile of rocks ... he was well-camouflaged. We got good looks at Great Crested Grebe, stilts, Thekla’s and Crested Larks, and a stunning view of a



Golden Eagle. Then driving out, we saw our first two Little Grebes, even smaller than our Pied, and very pretty.

After lunch, we took a nice long walk right under a stork's nest where we saw Spanish Sparrows, and then right up the hill we got quick and far looks at two Iberian Green Woodpeckers. They were noisy! About ten storks lifted off in the field over the next hill, Common Ravens were soaring, and then, success—two Cinereous Vultures! They were massive birds and very cool to see in flight.

Since most restaurants are closed in Mértola on Mondays, we stayed out for dinner, but decided to first enjoy another nice walk at the São Domingos copper mine. These ruins were beautiful to bird among, and we had nice looks at a Stonechat feeding young, a few Hoopoes flew by, and wow, a Wryneck that flew right in and called and called and called! We all had fantastic views.

Our dinner portions were huge, and the food was good, and since we had a longer day today, many of us took ice cream to go!

## **Tues., Apr. 8 Mértola Cultural Tour | Late Afternoon Bird Outing**

After a long day yesterday, we enjoyed a later start today for our cultural tour of Mértola. Our guide, Fernando, showed us the local weaving museum and shop, where they were using original techniques with wools and other fabrics to create intricate blankets and other wool items. Then, it was up to the







church. Originally a mosque, the acoustics were astounding, and the Easter altars were out, preparing for their procession through town. Afterwards, we visited the excavated ruins just beneath the castle. Here, we learned about the Moorish uses of the sites that had been excavated so far, as well as the Roman uses. We had great sightings of a Blue Rock-thrush here, then it was up to the castle for the final stop on the tour.

After lunch and some free time to wander around the local streets, a few of us continued on to do a late afternoon birding loop, stopping at the Iberian Lynx lookout point (no luck, unfortunately), and then walking down to a gorgeous stream that was running high. As we approached, we watched a stork soaring high above us. António suddenly shouted “Black Stork!” It was low enough to get views in the binoculars, and some of us were able to track it with the scope. What a find!

We had a delicious final dinner in town, where the star of the show for many was the chickpea curry.

### **Wed., Apr. 9   Transfer to Tavira in the Algarve | Coastal & Salt Pan Birding**

Today was mostly a transfer day, with an initial stop at the Vascão river. When we arrived, we heard a Golden Oriole calling for quite a while, but couldn’t get eyes on it. We did, however, get eyes on the Green Frogs that we’d been hearing the entirety of the trip. We arrived in the Algarve for a wonderful lunch overlooking the Atlantic. Big, beautiful salads were had by many, and we enjoyed watching a Hoopoe fly back and forth the entire meal.

Our next stop after lunch was at a sandy, pine-shaded set of paths leading past a small pond and to the ocean. The Iberian Green Woodpecker taunted us from afar the entire outing, but was only seen by a few on a very fast fly-by. We got our first looks at Crested Tit, saw Audouin’s Gull for the first time on the trip, and both species of Pochards in the pond. After watching the water from the boardwalk, we headed back, and near the van saw a very large and active family of Great Tits, as well as a large, Large (or Algerian) Psammodromus lizard that gave everyone good looks.



Our final birding location was at the salt pans just near the hotel, where we finally got good, close looks at some really lovely shorebirds including Stilts, Avocets, Dunlins, Redshanks, Greenshanks, and the cutest Kentish Plover.

Hotel cats greeted us in the lobby as we checked in tonight.

### **Thurs., Apr. 10 Castro Marim Salt Pan & River | Santa Maria Salt Pans**

Today we started out with a walk near a local natural park's visitor center. We immediately saw stilts, avocets, and a few other little waders. As we walked further on the trail, the birds became more numerous, including a gorgeous Black-winged Kite on a far telephone pole. We all agreed the best bird of the stop were some Little Terns, a few of which hovered and dove right in front of us - one even catching a fish! We stopped for a few minutes in the nature center and scanned further across the waters, finding an assortment of ducks. Brad, our expert spotter, found a Peregrine Falcon on the bridge that connects Portugal to Spain.

We parked across the road and walked along the river to see larks and terns flying, and seeing our next Woodchat Shrike of the trip. We worked our way closer to the large ponds, where in the far back were flamingos, avocets, stilts, shelducks, and plenty of gulls. António drove himself a bit crazy trying to pick out the different gulls, but most of us were happy just to enjoy the sounds of the honking flamingos and looking at the fly-bys, that even included four very far off Collared Pratincoles.

After lunch, we dropped half the group off back at the hotel for a siesta, while a few of us stayed on for more salt pan birding. This produced some really excellent views of Sanderlings, Kentish Plovers, Spoonbills, Black-tailed Godwits in beautiful breeding plumage, and a large and stunning group of Eurasian Oystercatchers!





A quick stop at the ferry dock gained us a Sandwich Tern and a Whimbrel, and a few gulls and swallows, then it was time to head back for an earlier dinner at the hotel.

### **Fri., Apr. 11    Golf Course Birding | Salgados Lagoon Birding**

This morning, we made our way to what was one of our favorite birding stops of the trip—to a golf course, no less! We worried about dodging the rain, which tried to kick up as we scooted our way across the fairway, but fortunately the clouds burned off and left us with a lovely morning. As we birded the trail that ran parallel to the golf course, we spotted the usual Cetti's Warbler, heard the ever-present Zitting Cisticola, spotted a few fly-by magpies, and even spotted a new bird, a Willow Warbler, working its way through a pine tree. At the end of the first fairway, we found another new bird, two Mistle Thrushes, and we were all surprised at how big they were! Still along the golf course, we came to the small lake, and with that stop, we had two absolutely stunning new birds: Black-headed Weaver and, with a lot of work, Little Bittern, so well spotted by António.

After lunch, we made our way to the Lagoa dos Salgados where we were able to pick out a number of different gull species from the mixed flocks that were far off on the water, including six Mediterranean Gulls. Bee-eaters buzzed past the group at the very end of the stop, and while half of us walked to the bus, the other half enjoyed a walk up and over the massive dune to see the stunning expanse of the Atlantic.

### **Sat., Apr. 12    Morning Hotel Walk | Transfer to Lisbon**

This morning, we enjoyed a gentle stroll through the grounds, and had quite a few interesting birds (and a lot of mosquitos). On the inlet, we saw Black-bellied Plover, Common Ringed Plover, a Whimbrel, a Ruddy Turnstone, and even an Oystercatcher. Two different terns buzzed passed us: a Sandwich Tern and two Littles. As we walked back around to the bus, we got really good looks at beautiful European Goldfinches.



Then, we were on the bus headed to Lisbon. We had a lovely stop for lunch before our lone birding stop-of-the-day at the Estuário do Sado. The tide was in just a little too high, but we still saw some interesting species and it was fascinating to see the little huts that the locals had built along the docks, many decorated with whimsical items. The highlight, however, were the absolutely massive flocks of Ruddy Turnstones, probably in the thousands, and they flew in synchronized groups off shore.

We reached Lisbon and our final celebratory dinner as a group. Many of us had early flights the next morning, so we said our goodbyes tonight.

## Sun., Apr. 13 Departures

Our flock dispersed today, some of us catching flights home, while others stayed on to explore Portugal and beyond.

*Photo Credits: Group, Group at Farm, (Julie Fannon), Hoopoe (Paul Pilch), Group on Shuttle (Julie Fannon), Group at Tagus Estuary (Antonio Cotao), Flamingos (Paul Pilch), Evora Tour (Antonio Cotao), Long-eared Owl in Tree (Antonio Cotao), Dinner in Mertola, Guadiana River Walk (Julie Fannon), Blue Tit (Paul Pilch), Copper Mine (Antonio Cotao), Mertola Cultural Tour x2 (Julie Fannon), Algarve Birding (Antonio Cotao), Black-tailed Godwits, Eurasian Spoonbill (Pat Lueders), Iberian Magpie, Black-headed Weaver (Paul {Pilch), Group with Antonio x2, Oriole Wine (Julie Fannon).*