

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Central Portugal recce 15 – 17 February 2009

These are some notes from a recce visit to Central Portugal by Rob Macklin and Chris Durdin. We were taken round by Domingos Leitão, who works for SPEA (the Portuguese BirdLife partner) and as an occasional guide for wildlife groups. Domingos was one of the organisers of a conference last November to promote nature tourism in Portugal – see the write-up on the news pages of Honeyguide’s website www.honeyguide.co.uk/news.html – and the idea for a Honeyguide holiday here in spring 2010 came out of discussions then.

This isn’t the usual full holiday report, rather a summary of where we went and some wildlife lists, as much as anything for our own interest to record what we saw, well before the proposed spring holiday season for this area.

Our conclusion: it will make a very good Honeyguide holiday, with a very good mix of birds, flowers and other wildlife in two slightly separate areas of Central Portugal, each with their own character.

Pictures by Chris Durdin, all taken during the recce. Above: cork oak.

Sunday 15 February

Leaving behind snow at Luton Airport we arrived at Lisbon airport at lunchtime into warm, sunny weather, about 19°C. Having collected our VW Polo hire car, Domingos drove us away from the airport, past roadsides colourful with the soft orange of field marigold or the brash yellow of

Bermuda buttercup, and across the bridge over the Tejo (Tagus) estuary. This took us to the small town of Alcochete where Domingos grew up, which was busy with people walking in the warm sunshine or lunching in cafés overlooking the southern side of the estuary. We admired the large numbers of house martins already building or repairing nests on the church, had a sandwich, then looked over the wall at the avocets and other birds on the Tejo.



The afternoon was spent working our way steadily north along small roads and tracks east of the Tejo estuary, an extensive natural reserve, often overlooking estuary or open land or in and out of open woodland. The dominant tree here is the emblematic cork oak, often with umbrella pines or mixed with the deciduous Lusitanian (or Portuguese) oak *Quercus faginea*. The Portuguese *montado* – wood pasture, *dehesa* in Spain – is open, attractive and it’s a good mix for birdwatching as the list below shows: 88 species in a day and a half and before many spring migrants are in. A highlight was two black-shouldered kites on a tree near a farmhouse (*above*), then joined in the same tree by a great spotted cuckoo. There weren’t many flowers but we found one-leaved squill *Scilla monophyllos* and sand crocus (*pictures in plant list below*).

Farther north there were open flat areas dominated by paddy fields, now rice stubble. Though intensively farmed these attract a good variety of birds, today including large flocks of black-tailed godwits on fields under water, an osprey and many white storks looking for crayfish. Domingos lives in Santarém and we were booked to stay at the Hotel Rural de Santarém which “was born in Quinta dos Xendros, 10 kms North Santarém” as it says on www.hotelruralesantarem.com. There was a little owl calling outside the hotel as we arrived. We had an excellent evening meal, and Domingos went home for the night.

Monday 16 February

I had explained how we like the first morning of a holiday to be on foot, so we potted for a few hundred metres through the local countryside (*below*).



Domingos rattled off an impressive list of the orchids that grow here, in increasing numbers as olive orchards are tended less. Many orchid leaves were just emerging – what species one could only guess – but just one early giant orchid was in flower (*above*). We found an Iberian species of friar’s cowl *Arisarum simorhinum* (*picture in plant list below*). A nice area in February, and great potential for early April.

Nearby is the ‘Parque Natural das Serras de Aire e Candeeiros’. The natural park is a range of limestone hills with sparse vegetation, rocky fields and even limestone pavement. There are choughs here and we heard woodlark and curlew. On exposed, windy hillsides there were windmills, one of which was dated 1909. Donkeys used to bring corn up here for milling.



We then drove east along the motorway, parallel to the river Tejo and past extensive eucalyptus forests. It’s grown for pulp but so damaging for native vegetation; happily the total area under eucalyptus is no longer increasing. The route here goes more or less across the width of Portugal, at one of its narrower points, taking about an hour and half. This part of the Alentejo countryside has granite outcrops where the drier climate favours holm oak rather than cork oak, rather like much of the adjacent Extremadura in Spain, here mixed with Pyrenean oak *Quercus pyrenaica*. We turned off the motorway towards Portalegre and off that main road to Alpalhão, where we stopped for a sandwich.



Then to Castelo de Vide (castle of life), pausing at a popular spot to fill water bottles to save buying bottled water. It’s an attractive town and nesting crag martins immediately caught the eye. But the hotels looked a bit big for Honeyguide so we went on to nearby Marvão www.cm-marvao.pt. This is an extraordinary fortified hilltop village: Domingos says they are applying for World Heritage status. The wintering alpine accentors he’d seen on December had gone, but there were blue rock thrushes and more crag martins. The tourism office confirmed that the small hotel – the Albergaria el Rei Dom Manuel www.turismarvao.pt – on the way in was big enough for a Honeyguide group, so we called in, talked to them and looked at the rooms and menu. Lovely hotel, amazing setting – sorted! (*Picture of Marvão in bird list below.*)

There was still time to explore the area alongside the river Sever, a tributary of the Tejo, which makes the border with Spain. Here we found Thekla larks, southern grey shrikes and a rock

bunting. The first few flowers on the Spanish white broom were showing here and there. Just east of Marvão we stopped to look at 10 griffon vultures on their nesting cliffs before driving a few metres over the unmanned frontier with Spain, into and out of Cáceres province in Extremadura.

Then back to Castelo de Vide for an evening meal before driving back to Santarém for the night.

Tuesday 17 February

Salome from the hotel kindly organised our seven o'clock breakfast before Domingos drove us back to Lisbon for the return flight to Luton.

Species lists

BIRDS

Cormorant	Tejo estuary
Cattle egret	Several places, usually with livestock
Little egret	Tejo estuary
Grey heron	Tejo estuary
White stork	In most areas. They increasingly over-winter; a steady population growth is fuelled by escaped American crayfish now abundant in paddy fields.
Spoonbill	Several small groups flying around the Tejo estuary
Greater flamingo	Tejo estuary
Mallard	Tejo estuary
Wigeon	distant flocks on the Tejo estuary
Teal	Tejo estuary
Black-shouldered kite	Two by a <i>quinta</i> in the cork oak areas adjacent to the Tejo estuary
Griffon vulture	10 on the cliffs between Marvão and the Spanish frontier
Marsh harrier	quite common around the Tejo estuary
Common buzzard	common
Booted eagle	one pale phase bird
Osprey	one at the paddy fields
Common kestrel	
Red-legged partridge	
Quail	heard on rice fields
Moorhen	
Black-winged stilt	a few around Tejo estuary and elsewhere
Avocet	Tejo estuary, especially from Alcochete
Ringed plover	a few on Tejo estuary
Golden plover	a flock at the paddy fields
Grey plover	the odd one on the Tejo estuary
Ringed plover	the odd one on the Tejo estuary
Lapwing	a flock at the paddy fields; small groups in several areas
Turnstone	small groups sitting on boats on the Tejo estuary
Snipe	paddy fields
Black-tailed godwit	several hundred both at the paddy fields (<i>below</i>) and on the Tejo estuary



Bar-tailed godwit	a few on the Tejo estuary
Redshank	lots on Tejo estuary
Greenshank	two or three on the Tejo estuary, one at the paddyfields
Green sandpiper	at the paddy fields
Common sandpiper	one heard on the Tejo estuary
Black-headed gull	Tejo estuary
Yellow-legged gull	
Lesser black-backed gull	seemed to be the estuary gull
Sandwich tern	by the bridge over the Tejo estuary
Feral pigeon	
Woodpigeon	small flocks in the cork oak woods
Stock dove	the odd bird in the cork oak woods
Collared dove	mostly in villages
Great spotted cuckoo	one with the black-shouldered kites
Little owl	calling outside our rural hotel; also one seen in the east
Hoopoe	one seen in the east; in recent years, a few over-winter
Crested lark	quite common
Thekla lark	several in rocky <i>montado</i> areas in the east.
Skylark	common in the west especially
Woodlark	singing in the west
Crag martin	lots especially in Castejo de Vide
Swallow	a sprinkling in most areas, though not yet common
House martin	nesting in large numbers in Alcochete
Meadow pipit	
White wagtail	
Wren	heard at Marvão
Robin	mostly wintering birds, many singing
Black redstart	singing at the hotel, and many others
Stonechat	common



Blue rock thrush	best ones were on the castle in Marvão (<i>above</i>)
Blackbird	
Song thrush	lots of wintering birds
Cetti's warbler	heard (surprise, surprise!)

Fan-tailed warbler (or zitting cisticola) heard near the Tejo estuary
Sardinian warbler common
Chiffchaff several
Long-tailed tit in the east
Blue tit
Great tit
Penduline tit? thought we heard one in a reedy ditch at the paddy fields
Nuthatch several calling in cork oak areas
Short-toed treecreeper singing
Southern grey shrike several in the east, also near Lisbon
Jay
Magpie
Raven in the east
Carrion crow
Spotless starling common
House sparrow very common, how nice!
Spanish sparrow one big flock at a livestock farm
Rock sparrow Domingos heard one on an old cork oak
Common waxbill a small flock on the rice fields
Red avadavat a small flock on the rice fields
Chaffinch
Serin several winter flocks of a few dozen, also singing in several places
Greenfinch much scarcer than serins
Goldfinch small numbers, sometimes with serins
Linnet
Cirl bunting one singing in the west
Rock bunting one in the east
Corn bunting in song in several areas

Butterflies

Small white butterfly
 Southern speckled wood
 Small copper

PLANTS

Those listed below were in flower. Common UK flowers, eg chickweed, are mostly left out.

Annual daisy
 Southern daisy
 Field marigold
 An abundant white mayweed *Anthemis arvensis*?
 Mediterranean catchfly *Silene colorata*
 Dwarf pansy *Viola (arvensis) kitaibeliana*
 Wild radish
 Purple viper's bugloss
 Rosemary
 Ramping fumitory
 Bermuda buttercup
 Water crowfoot
 Stinking hellebore (*right*)
 Spanish white broom



A friar's cowl *Arisarum (vulgare) simorrhinum* – picture, top left
 One-flowered squill *Scilla monophyllos* – picture, top right
 Sand crocus *Romulea* sp, probably *bulbocodium* – picture, bottom
 Giant orchid *Barlia robertiana*
 autumn squill (leaves & bulbs)



Ferns

Rustyback
 Common polypody
 Wall rue
 Bracken

Selected interesting (or abundant) trees and shrubs

Umbrella pine
 Cork oak
 Holm oak
 Lusitanian oak *Quercus faginea*
 Pyrenean oak *Quercus pyrenaica*
 Kermes (or prickly) oak
 Strawberry tree

Cistuses: *Cistus clusii* in flower; leaves of Grey-leaved cistus *Cistus albidus*, Sage-leaved cistus *Cistus salviifolius*, Gum cistus *Cistus ladanifer* and *Cistus crispus*.