

# Honeyguide

## WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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### Central Portugal reccy 15 – 17 February 2009

These are some notes from a reccy 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](http://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 reccy. 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](http://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 simorrhinum* (*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](http://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](http://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

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



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



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