

***Southern Portugal and Coto Donana, Andalucia, Spain. December 5th-12th 2015.***

The prospect of warm weather and a host of exciting birds tempted me back to this familiar area for a mid-winter escape from a cold, wet British December. This, the latest of many visits, saw me accompanied by J. Todd and L. Robson and proved a very successful trip, with us seeing all but one of the hoped for species, some of which were seen in the thousands! The area holds a huge number of North European birds spending the winter here in the mild climate with an abundance of food available, especially during harvesting time in the many rice fields.

The outbound 2hour 50-minute flight from Newcastle (taking off in a 50mph rain-storm, with suitcases being blown off the conveyor belt to the aircraft), to Faro followed by a very prompt departure in the hire car, an excellent, new Renault Megane 2.0 litre DCi estate, found us birding the Ludo Farm area very close to the airport. Here pools, saltmarsh and salt pans, reeds, bushes and woodland provide a habitat for a variety of resident and winter visiting birds. Waders seen here included Curlew Sandpipers, Dunlin, Green Sandpipers, Greenshanks, Redshanks, Sanderling (hundreds), Black tailed Godwits, Black winged Stilts, Common Sandpipers, Snipe, Little Stints and Ruff, Ringed and Kentish Plover all in good numbers and a single Spotted Redshank. The pools also held good numbers of Pintail, Teal, Gadwall, Shoveler and Mallard, Pochard and Red Crested Pochard, Tufted Duck and Wigeon. Great crested Grebe, Little Grebes, Cormorants, Cattle and Little Egrets, Spoonbills, Herons and White Storks, Moorhens and Coots completed the water-bird scene.

In the air above, 4-5 Booted Eagles were seen, a species formerly thought to wholly migrate to over winter in Africa. The Ludo area is one of Europe's sites where the species now regularly spends the winter. Another winter visitor, a Peregrine flashed through causing brief panic among the waders and duck. Other raptors noted were Marsh Harrier, Common Buzzard and Kestrel. In the trees nearby a party of noisy Jays moved through, among a large group of the common, attractive Azure Winged Magpies. Spotless Starlings, Chiffchaffs, and a Blackbird here too. Reeds held a Bluethroat, 6 Stonechats, Cettis Warblers calling loudly and Sardinian Warblers. Other common species here were Crested Larks and Yellow legged and Black Headed Gulls.

A short drive to our first night's hotel followed, where a calling Tawny Owl greeted us. A good meal and a few beers later and we completed the day's log before bed.

The hotel set in woodlands, provided several species the following morning. These included 3 Hoopoes, 2 feeding on a grass verge, Serins, Robins, a pair of Mistle Thrushes and more Azure Winged Magpies. A Parakeet species flew by, probably Rose-Ringed. White Wagtails, Blackbirds, Chaffinches, Collared Doves and Meadow Pipits were all noted and a male Blackcap and Chiffchaffs also seen.

Leaving the Algarve coast, we headed around 60 km north into the area of Portuguese grasslands around Castro Verde. The temperature reached a pleasant 19 degrees centigrade in a hazy sun. As we turned off the main road into country lanes, a brief halt in the village of Entradas saw 3 Swallows warming up in the morning sun of a village window ledge, then foraging out and back for emerging insects. Not all these birds go as far as Africa in the winter. A rough track leads from this village over open grassland country to Sao Marcos de Atoboeira, along which we made many halts, the first of which revealed our first Great Bustards of the holiday with several birds standing tall along a nearby ridge, then slowly walking away out of sight before taking a short flight, joined by previously unseen

others, a total of 17 seen in the area. A familiar call attracted us to a pair of Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, flying past, followed by several calling groups of Black Bellied Sandgrouse, with their different calls, totalling 19 birds. One group landing, allowing a bird to be 'scoped. An Iberian Grey Shrike hunted from a roadside fence as Red Legged Partridges, Calandra and Crested Larks, Skylarks, Black Redstarts, and Stonechats, Meadow Pipits, Corn Buntings, Chiffchaffs and Fan tailed Warblers were all commonly seen. A Red Kite and Kestrel floated overhead and around 50 Lapwings were noted, usually in singles or pairs. A halt at a stream revealed 2 Green Sandpipers and a Grey Heron, with Chiffchaffs flycatching in the warm conditions. A nearby pool held a few Teal and Snipe and a group of 12 Carrion Crows flew past. At Sao Marcos in 2013, I had seen an immature Spanish Imperial Eagle and right on cue as we arrived, another was watched well, circling nearby! Great views being had. This area held about 10 Buzzards and 15 Red kites, some of which were feeding at a sheep carcass alongside a wary Raven. A flock of 34 Golden Plover flew by and more Lapwings were seen. Then a pair of Little Owls was spotted at their rock-pile home with another Heron and several Cattle Egrets nearby and several large flocks of Spanish Sparrows. Large flocks of Skylarks and Calandra Larks fed here, frequently taking to the air as did around 500 Spotless Starlings, usually in response to a passing raptor. One of the last birds of a good day, was a fine Black Shouldered Kite perched atop a roadside tree.



The following morning, after a hearty breakfast, garden birds at the guesthouse included Azure Winged Magpies, Crested Larks, Collared Dove, Stonechat, flocks of Serins and Spanish Sparrows. A Blackcap, Fan tailed Warbler and Goldfinches.



We headed east towards Mertola, aiming to cross the border into Spain at the Castro Marim marshes and then on to more marshes at the Odiel Estuary. Driving through open country with scattered trees, we counted 19 Iberian Grey Shrikes hunting from their perches. A halt revealed Hoopoe, Jay, Buzzard, Raven, flocks of Spotless Starlings and numerous (100+) Red legged Partridges and some large flocks of Goldfinches. Arriving at the coast we headed for the Castro

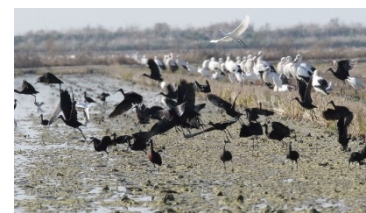
Marim visitor centre, which although a very imposing building with excellent displays and information, the huge glass viewing windows were far from ideal, being double glazed and dirty, with a limited outlook. Back outside, we walked a short way to a rise overlooking saltmarsh, pools, inlets and saltpans. Here good views showed us many birds including 11 resting Caspian Terns with the many assorted gulls, 7 Common Terns fished the pools where 12 Flamingos strutted with over 20 Spoonbills. Waders here feeding in muddy channels included a good count of 93 Grey Plover and many Dunlin, Sanderling, Ringed and Little Ringed Plover, Kentish Plover (40), Turnstones, 2 Common Sandpipers and a Little Stint. In a nearby tree a juvenile Peregrine perched with several Marsh Harriers in an uneasy peace. On the open water Shoveler, Mallard, Teal, Gadwall and Shelduck could be seen. A distant call alerted me to a pair of high-flying Lesser Short Toed Larks, one of which began to then sing, circling closer. Then another call revealed a Dartford Warbler skulking in close cover before flying to a bush-top perch



giving brief views. Puddles attracted a bathing group of colourful Azure Winged Magpies and Stonechat, White Wagtail and Fan tailed Warblers could be seen. A Short Eared Owl glided past, hunting, a winter visitor only here. Moving on east, across the border bridge into Spain, we arrived at the Odiel Estuary at Huelva, always an excellent area. The weather remained a warm 19 degrees in hazy cloud. The most obvious species was Flamingo, with hundreds feeding out in the shallows. Many waders here too, including around 100 Black winged Stilts, good numbers of Dunlin, Redshanks, Bar tailed Godwits and Sanderling. Also a few Whimbrel, Little Stints, Common and Green Sandpipers, Curlew, Greenshank and Turnstone. Ducks were represented by Gadwall, Mallard, Teal and Shoveler, also 100+ Black necked Grebes, with one Great Crested Grebe. Among the many resting Black headed and Yellow Legged Gulls on a bank, was a Slender Billed Gull, then feeding over a pool with 3 Sandwich Terns. Hunting raptors here were Osprey, Hen Harrier and three Marsh Harriers. The night spent in Matalascanas on the edge of Donana National Park when we eventually located the hotel in the sprawling resort.

A cool morning found us in the Stone pine woods and scrub of the Rocina visitor centre, where typical birdlife included Sardinian Warblers, Chiffchaffs, Blackcap and Cettis Warbler. A few Chaffinches, then a Hawfinch, Great spotted Woodpecker and several Short Toed Tree creepers, the latter more heard than seen. Song Thrush, Stonechats, Wrens and Robins. Azure winged Magpies, Great and Blue Tits, Spotless Starlings and a few Black Redstarts could be seen here. The centre has a series of hides overlooking reed fringed lakes. The lakes contained Shoveler, Teal, Mallard and Pochard with several noisy Purple Gallinules in view.

El Rocio village with its famous church and "Wild West" sand streets, provides the backdrop to the "Mother of the Marshes" a large expanse of wetland pools and lakes, seasonally flooded and almost always alive with birdlife. Today was no exception, with hundreds of Glossy Ibis, White Storks and Flamingos feeding in the shallow water. 600 Black winged Stilts were estimated, with a similar number of Grey Lag Geese and Cattle Egrets



too. Hundreds of duck such as Teal, Mallard, Shoveler and Pintail could be found and many Coot and Moorhens. The reedy edges revealed a fine Bluethroat, Stonechats, many Chiffchaffs, more Black Redstarts and Meadow Pipits. Spotless Starlings called from nearby ariels. A panic among the throngs and a Peregrine flew in and over the marsh, unsuccessful this time.

Moving on, we drove east towards the Northern Marshes of Donana, passing many Grey Shrikes and Stonechats, Black Redstarts, Robins and Meadow Pipits on roadside fences. A small Lapwing flock in a field. The Corredor Verde, a well vegetated river, with adjacent often flooded fields, was quite dry this winter, with little or no rain falling for several months. This meant birds were fewer than on previous visits. One common winter visitor was Buzzard, with dozens of birds hunting from fence post perches in the area, many of them juveniles, allowing close approach in the car.

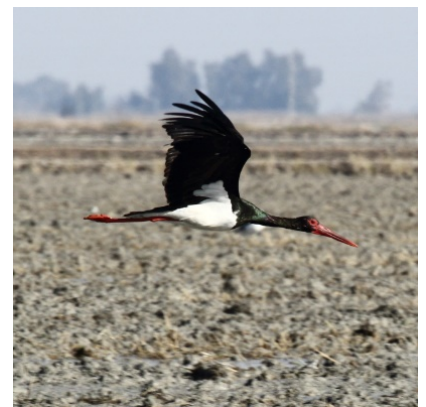
Crossing a ford leading east, we crested a rise to reveal a stunning sight of hundreds of feeding birds taking advantage of the irrigation of the rice fields here. Even in severe drought, the rice fields of the area are always well watered, providing a wealth of food for the birds, especially during and after the late autumn rice harvest. We estimated around 1,800 Flamingos here feeding with 250 Glossy Ibis, 30 White Storks and 4 Black Storks and 4 Great White Egrets, as well as a large flock of Cattle Egrets taking to the air. Waders were represented by 8 Ruff,



50+ Snipe and Dunlin, 7 Little Ringed Plover and 20+ Green Sandpipers and Redshanks. Hunting raptors were several Marsh Harriers, Buzzards and a Short eared Owl, as well as good numbers of Kestrels. Beyond here is the Rianzuela Lake which held a huge flock of around 1,500 Black Winged Stilts! 400 Shoveler were noted and with them, 35 Red Crested Pochard and 10 Black necked Grebes, with a single Great Crested Grebe. Three Greenshanks and a Spotted Redshank too. The drive back to the hotel followed with us seeing 3 Black Shouldered Kites perched on poles and trees, then hovering. A huge flock of Grey Lag Geese in the distance, thought to be around 10,000 birds headed for their roost. Roadside birds included Red Kite (10).

Buzzards and large flocks of Goldfinches and Serins.

The following morning, we were back in the area, this time heading south for the remote Jose Valverde visitor centre over rough tracks overlooking the now mainly dry Northern Marshes. In these conditions irrigation channels and canals concentrate the birdlife, with one such channel holding a mix of Black Storks, including juveniles (13), Great White Egrets (21), Spoonbills and White Storks. Familiar calls alerted us to our first Cranes of the trip, with 103 overhead shortly followed by around 1,500 heading past and coming down in distant fields, where we would catch up with them later. A fantastic spectacle, an estimated 100,000 winter in Spain, Donana being their southern-most site. Hen Harriers were commonly seen in this area, with nine noted during the morning, three splendid males. Resident Marsh Harriers too were common, as were Red Kites and Kestrels, 25 of the latter counted. Three Black Shouldered Kites hovered over the fields. A group of Night Herons were disturbed from their daytime slumber as we pulled up at one channel, only flying a few metres to fence



posts, giving great views. Coming into an area of longer grass in the fields, the air was filled with the song of Calandra Larks, 10-12 in full song in December. At least 50 birds were seen here as small flocks broke off from feeding to chase one another, calling. Easily the commonest Lark of the region. Feeding on wind blown seeds on the track was a Lesser Short Toed Lark too, while common birds here were Corn Buntings, Goldfinches, Serins and Stonechats. Two Dartford Warblers were skulking nearby. Arriving at the centre the Cranes we saw earlier were all feeding in fields, a fine sight. Overhead, a gathering of raptors appeared, a pale phase Booted Eagle and 4 Griffon Vultures circled above joined by a Black Vulture, quite a rare sight here on these lowlands. Then an immature Spanish Imperial Eagle right over us, a second Booted Eagle and several Red Kites. We estimated 35-40 Buzzards in this area too in total. The centre itself, where many Egrets and Herons breed in spring, was quiet, but a nice coffee stop. We did see Little Grebe, Shoveler many Coot and 12 Purple Gallinules. Heading off we stopped at regular intervals, seeing a total of 21 Green Sandpipers along the roadside channels. Then a small reedbed had attracted an amazing 20 hunting Marsh Harriers! Wires held huge flocks of Spotless Starlings. A flock of 40+ snipe was flushed into the air and several Lapwings noted. Chiffchaffs were common and a Black Redstart added to the day's species. A herd of 40 Fallow Deer grazed in a field, then a Hare spotted running along a ditch. A couple of Painted Lady butterflies seen. As dusk approached, many Corn Buntings headed for the reedbeds for the night.

Several fords cross the Corredor Verde and next day we began the day at one of these, where 3 Bluethroats and Crested Larks fed on the road and calls revealed 4-5 Penduline Tits feeding in the reeds. Here Cettis Warblers were common as were Waxbills (100+). 8 Black Storks, many Flamingoes and Glossy Ibis fed in a wet rice field nearby as 50 Snipe took to the air. The other side of the ford revealed a fantastic sight as thousands of birds had gathered here too to feed in the well-watered rice fields. 1,500 Flamingoes was a conservative estimate, 30 Black Storks and hundreds of White Storks, 1,000 + Glossy Ibis, hundreds of Grey Herons and 50+ Spoonbills all vied for available food. A ditch alongside the car revealed no less than 9 Squacco Herons which gave fantastic views. 10 Marsh Harriers hunted among the throngs, as did a male Hen Harrier and a Black Shouldered Kite. Kestrels were seen commonly here. Waders were represented by 41 Grey Plover, Greenshanks, Redshanks, Dunlin, Kentish and Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers. 3 Kingfishers were also seen.

Many Gulls also present, with Yellow Legged, Lesser Black Backed and Black Headed in good numbers. Passerines noted included White and Yellow Wagtails, Meadow Pipits, Linnets and Goldfinches.

The final site today was a parkland area which produced a Crested Tit, several Hoopoes, 30 Azure Winged Magpies, 3 Black Redstarts, Chaffinches and a flock of Corn buntings heading for their roost site.

Next day saw us heading to El Rocio and a second look at the marshes there and a visit to the two reserve centres. A brief halt in some roadside pine woods on the way at Hinojos gave us Blue and Great Tits and a fly-over Woodlark. The marshes are overlooked by a fine visitor centre with elevated views over the area. Souvenirs were purchased in the shop and coffee and sandwiches were welcome. Looking out over the wetland produced good views once again of the many hundreds of waterbirds. Flamingoes, Glossy Ibis, Black Winged Stilts, Spoonbills, Cattle and Little Egrets, Grey Lag Geese and Coot were all in impressive numbers. Pintail, Mallard, Teal, Shoveler again in their hundreds, with 15 Red Crested Pochard. A Black Redstart, several Chiffchaffs and a pair of Sardinian Warblers and a Bluethroat fed along the





reed fringed marsh edge. A nice surprise was a single House Martin over the town. Spotless Starlings called from several rooftops.

Heading next to the nearby Acebuche Visitor Centre, a walk through wooded heath here and we found a party of 4 Woodlarks feeding on the ground. A Goldcrest was a trip addition and another Black Redstart seen with a Blackbird. Famously, this site is known for the very tame Azure Winged Magpies which come close to be fed. Sure enough around 40 birds provided amazing close views.

We now headed west, back toward the Portugese border and our guest house for the night. On the way we called at Isla Christina, where salt pans and marshes held a good selection of birds. Loafing gulls included a count of 191 Audouin's , 5 Slender Billed and 2 Mediterranean . 10 huge Caspian Terns rested on the ground, as a Common Tern and two Sandwich Terns fished the pools. Many waders found here including 200+ Dunlin, 90 Black Tailed Godwits, 19 Avocets, 80+ Ringed Plover and 20 Kentish, 20 Sanderling and several Turnstone. 40-50 Spoonbills and a single Flamingo completed a good selection.



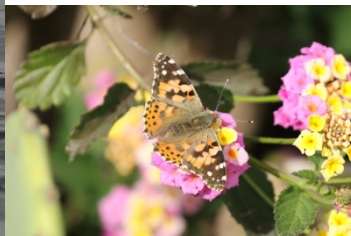
Our final day began in Portugal at Monte Gordo sea-front where large numbers of gulls loitered on the beach where fishermen's boats came in. A fishing "port" with huts and boats on the sand. We guessed at around 1,500 birds, mainly Yellow Legged and Lesser Black Backs. A feeding party of Sanderling at the water's edge and one Common Sandpiper seen. Offshore, several Gannets dived for fish. A fast flying hirundine passed, a Crag Martin, and then we found 35 of them perching on their sea-front hotel window ledge roost sites. A known wintering site, we didn't expect to find so many. Another Black Redstart and some Chiffchaffs here too.



Moving on to the Castro Marim Visitor Centre, we saw Spoonbills, Flamingoes, a Caspian Tern, 11 Shelduck, many Dunlin and several Black Winged Stilts and Kentish Plover. Dartford Warbler again here and a few Crested Larks.

Tavira with it's salt pans finally, where 19 more Audouin's Gulls stood on a bankside with 95 Mediterranean Gulls, 4 Sandwich Terns and a Caspian. 44 Spoonbills here and 20 Avocets, several Greenshanks, Dunlin and Common Sandpipers. Grey Herons, Cattle and Little Egrets with more Stilts completed a

superb mid- winter escape to this excellent area of southern Iberia.



A.S.Jack.