

Visit to THE SOUTH EASTERN ALGARVE – PORTUGAL September 22nd to September 29th 2010.

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We had no intention of taking another holiday abroad this year as we had already visited Sri Lanka in January and Bulgaria in June. We had intended to take a break up on the North Norfolk coast, which we have always enjoyed, but on investigation found that the prices for bed breakfast and evening meal were unbelievably excessive. Trawling the internet, we found that for a similar holiday abroad, the price was half of that in Norfolk, and that included flights as well. We eventually decided that The Algarve in Portugal looked interesting, but having never been there before, a bit of research was necessary to assess the birding capabilities. Luckily we visited the Portugal stand at the Bird Fare a few weeks earlier, and picked up some useful information on the Algarve. We had already decided that the holiday would be without transport, (car), so it would be interesting what we could possibly uncover by just finding our own way around. We analysed four reports from travellingbirder.com, and realised that we should be able to amuse ourselves for a week, and estimated that we could record about 70 species, but only one lifer was expected, the **Azure-winged Magpie**.

We found a holiday through www.bookableholidays.com and selected a small town, **Monte Gordo**, close to the Portuguese/Spanish border. The price worked out to about **£250** per head, and was based on a half-board basis, travelling with Easy Jet from Stansted.

The flight to Faro was uneventful; except for one silly person deciding that he did not wish to travel after booking in, resulting in an hours delay locating his luggage in the hold before we could take off. We travelled very light, with only hand baggage, so no scope, no books, just our bins. We arrived at the hotel "Baia de Monte Gordo" just before midnight, so it was straight to bed, hoping for a good day tomorrow.

Day 1 We awoke to cloud laden skies with a light drizzle in the air, but not enough to stop us from walking. We ventured down to the promenade where we found a small grassy area which had just been watered, and found loads of **House Sparrows** bathing in the pools of water. We noticed a small bird which flew up into the base of a leafy shrub, and on locating it found it to be a **European Robin**, incidentally the only one we saw during our stay. We were made aware from our investigations prior to departure, that Monte Gordo was surrounded by pine forests, dotted with tracks which could make our walks quite interesting. We ventured eastwards passing sand dunes which separated the promenade from the beach, and were alerted by a sound we recognised, it was a **Crested Lark** which we soon located. A little further on a couple of **Northern Wheatears** were spotted in the dunes. We reached an area of car park and noticed quite a large flock of small birds fly from the ground into a waste area of bushes and small trees, and it was soon apparent that they were **European Goldfinches**. As we reached a track which led into the pine forest a couple of **Eurasian Blackbirds** noisily crossed the track in front of us. The drizzle was not getting any heavier, so we decided to see where the track would lead us. We were surprised to see almost everywhere, nest boxes attached to the trees. With the moisture on the pines, the smell was quite intoxicating, and as we moved deeper into the forest we could hear the call of **Sardinian Warblers** from almost every bush. They were there, but it was after some very patient searching, that we eventually found our first one. Once in the forest one of the most common species around was the **Eurasian Collared Dove**, they were everywhere, but it was always worth scanning them to see if we could find any **European Turtle Doves**, or was it too late in the season. We walked a long way into the forest towards the Guardian River which separated Portugal from Spain, but the birdlife seemed quite sparse apart from a couple of female **Common Chaffinches**, whether it was due to the conditions, or that there just weren't many birds there, who knows. We decided to return to the resort where we had a light lunch prior to further exploration. With pine forests all around it didn't really matter which way we walked, so we decided to venture in the other direction, westwards. The clouds had now lifted, and the sun was now shining brightly, much better than earlier in the day. We could see, in the distance, a number of large gulls on the beach area, near to where there were fishing boats moored up on the beach. We approached, via boardwalks along the edge of the beach. The gulls were quite tame and very approachable, majority being the **Lesser Black-backed** species, intermixed with quite a few **Yellow-legged Gulls**. There were also a few **Sanderlings** feeding amongst the gulls. As we continued along the beach we noticed masses of hirundines in the sky, over an area of waste ground. When we left home in Suffolk, hirundines were disappearing fast, so it was quite obviously a visible migration spectacle. We sat on a low wall overlooking the waste ground and easily picked out **Barn Swallow**, **Red-rumped Swallow**, **Northern House Martin**, **Bank Swallow**, and just a few **Common Swifts**. There were lots of birds feeding on the grass seeds in the waste area, but nothing new mainly **House Sparrows**. Walking further, we came to a track which led into more pine forests, and it was strange to see quite a few pigeon lofts located on the right hand side of the track. There were no houses nearby, just these lofts built on a waste piece of ground, most surrounded by security fencing. Being an ex

pigeon fancier for more than forty years myself, it interested me; I had no idea that Portugal was a pigeon racing hotspot.

As we walked along the track, apart from the usual birds that we had picked up during the morning stroll, we heard a call which we did not recognise. It sounded something like our Green Woodpecker, but was much different. Further along the track we met a British birder, and stopped to have a chat. He informed us that there were quite a few birds further along the track, and towards the end, a lake containing a few water fowl. We mentioned the call that we had heard, and he confirmed that it was a **Green Woodpecker** but of a different race (*sharpie*), he said that he had seen two further along the track. As during our walk in the morning, we could see that there were many nest boxes attached to the side of the pines. The walk was pleasant, as, every so often there were seats located, which were ideal for a rest to just sit and watch. Whilst sitting on one of those seats, out of curiosity I played the song of **Crested Tit**, as, having never seen or heard one, it could be helpful for identification purposes. We decided to walk on a little further when a bird flew into the top of a pine where we had been sitting. It was followed by three more, and once located, we could see they were in fact **Crested Tits**, a lifer for us to add to our list, what luck. We eventually reached the small lake where we found a large number of **Coots**, A large group of **Common Pochard**, and about eight to ten **Red-crested Pochard**, mostly females, but also a couple of handsome males with their bright red bills shining in the sunlight. We searched for other species on the lake but were out of luck, but we did spot a half a dozen beautiful **Azure-winged Magpies** fly into the pines on the other side. Once again this was another lifer for us, not bad, two on the first day. A noise overhead alerted us to a sound we recognised; it was a **Fan-tailed Warbler**. On the way back, the only other birds of note were **Willow Warblers** and a single **Sandwich Tern** plunging into the sea near to where the gulls were located.

Day 2 We had decided that we would pay a visit to Castro Marim Salt-Marsh Nature Reserve. The Reserva Natural do Sapal de Castro Marim is located near Villa Real de Santo Antonio in the extreme eastern side of the Algarve, Portugal - only minutes away from the Portuguese/Spanish border. We enquired at reception, and they recommended that the best way would be to hire a taxi, as the local bus would only drop us off at Castro Marim town, and not the Nature Reserve. Taxis were located just across the road of the promenade and were quite easy to find. It was a beautiful morning with clear blue skies and warm sunshine. The journey which took us past Castro Marim town was about 15 to 20 minutes, and passed by areas of marshland and pools which were full of water birds. The driver dropped us at the entrance to the reserve at about 10:00 am, where we asked him to pick us up at 16:00 pm. With no instructions or maps we had to find our own way, which, in a way, added to the enjoyment. Initially we went up to the information centre where we expected to get an idea of where to go, but it was just a building where possibly the local warden lived. From the higher vantage point we could observe the surrounding area, including the vast tract of marshland, the salt pans and the huge bridge over the Guardiano River. We could see a track winding through the reserve and that looked like the obvious way to go. Some of the first birds we saw were quite a few **White Storks** high in the sky drifting in circles on the thermals. The pools held a number of waders, but unfortunately without a scope, identification was extremely difficult. **Bar-tailed** and **Black-tailed Godwits** were quite easy, especially as they flew onto the pools, and **Common Redshanks** were also in abundance. Further along the track we noticed three **Greater Flamingos** over to the left, but were disappointed that there were not more. A number of **Feral Pigeons** flew up from the track in front of us, and we were pleased to spot a group of four **Eurasian Spoonbills** overhead, heading for the river. **Eurasian Marsh Harriers** also gave us a display, and further along the track we had a **Common Kingfisher** hovering looking for his lunch. We walked for probably one and a half miles and realised that as the terrain all around was very similar so the chances of finding anything else was quite remote, so we decided to make our way back to the information centre. On the way back we came across an section of water which we had not really noticed on the way. Scanning the area gave us a couple of pairs of **Mallards**, a few **Gadwall**, loads of **Little Grebe**, and a **Grey Heron** standing motionless by the waters edge. A little further along we noticed a black and white bird which flew up onto a low bush. It turned out to be a **Southern Grey Shrike**, certainly one that we did not expect to see. We arrived back at our starting point just after 13:00 pm where we had our lunch, a couple of lovely juicy peaches. As we sheltered from the sun under a canopy in the picnic area, Isabel spotted four **Spotless Starlings** which flew onto the roof of the building directly in front of us. On a grassy bank just a few yards away we could see quite a lot of movement in the shrubbery. Further investigation showed that there were a number of brightly coloured **Willow Warblers** feeding on the seeds. We contemplated our visit to Castro Marim, and felt slightly disappointed with our morning walk. Yes there were plenty of birds about, but in most cases they were too distant for any positive identification. We decided to spend the afternoon walking in a different direction, either towards the river, or back along the entrance track from which we entered the reserve. We walked about 50 yards in the opposite direction and came across a track which seemed to go almost parallel to where we went earlier in the morning. However, as it seemed to dissect the working salt pans, it was quite apparent that the

birds were much closer, and were far more numerous. We could see a large pan in front of us with loads of waders feeding in the shallows, and a huge heap of salt giving us cover to enable us to get really close. We soon spotted **Black-winged Stilts**, a few **Pied Avocets**, and many **Little Egrets** feeding. Around the edge there were **Little Stints**, **Dunlin** and **Sanderlings** busily probing for a meal. As we tried to move closer to them, up they got and landed some distance away. We continued along the track and reached a building which we assumed was a workers hut. Outside were a rickety table and a few old chairs. We chose the best two chairs and positioned ourselves in the shade of the hut, sheltering from the sun which by now was extremely warm. The pan on front of us was literally teeming with birds, and on a bank which separated the pans there were quite a number of Gulls and Terns. As we became part of the furniture, the birds moved much closer to us, and as well as the **Stints**, **Dunlin** and **Sanderlings**, we also located **Curlew Sandpiper**, **Green Sandpiper**, a single **Ruff**, and a **Ruddy Turnstone** on a far bank. **Common Redshanks** were two a penny, but we were unable to sort out any of the **spotted** variety. It became more apparent that without a scope we were obviously going to miss out on a few species, but it didn't really matter. We scanned the bank which held the gulls and terns and soon picked out **Black Headed Gull**, **Mediterranean Gull**, **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, and **Yellow-legged Gull**. Of the terns there were half a dozen of the large **Caspian Tern**, **Sandwich Terns**, and a few **Common Terns**. Although the **Slender-billed Gulls** should be quite common here we failed to locate any. After about an hour we decided to continue our walk and eventually came to a group of dilapidated buildings. As we approached a bird took off, startled by our presence. Observing the colouration, size and wing patterning, it was obviously a **Eurasian Thick-knee**, (**Stone Curlew**), another one for our Portugal list. There were a few **Terns** diving into the water fishing; amongst them were a number of **Little Terns**. We notice a couple of **Stonechats** on a bush and a group of unidentified birds flew up from a grassy bank. They were partridge size but much too quick for us. It was now about 14:30pm, so we decided to turn around, and head back towards the workers hut where we sat for another half an hour before returning to our pick up spot. As we again sat in the shade for a short time the taxi arrived ten minutes early to take us back to our base at Monte Gordo. The taxi fare was 11 euros each way, so that was quite an inexpensive price to pay for a good days birding. Feeling quite tired after walking for almost six hours in the sun, we decided it was time to relax. We found our way to the swimming pool area which was situated at the top of the hotel on the roof. From what we had seen during the couple of days we had been there, it was apparent that every hotel had swimming pools on the roof, obviously a space saving exercise. Looking from the high vantage point we could see quite clearly the bridge over the river, and the areas of salt marsh at Castro Marim where we had visited earlier in the day. We could also see an area of water which looked easily reachable in a northerly direction, certainly worth investigation on another day.

Day 3 We decided to spend most of the day on the beach which was really quite amazing with white sand and beautiful clear shallow water, ideal for a family holiday. As we relaxed on our sun beds enjoying the warmth of the sun, I spotted, high in the sky, a group of light coloured birds flying northwards. Further investigation showed them to be a crowd of **Greater Flamingos**, which we watched for some time until they lost height, and appeared to go down to the north, probably near to the water we could see from the roof of the hotel. Wherever we went on holiday we always have our bins with us, and whilst scanning out to sea, we watched a group of birds plunging into the water from a great height. We could see from their shape they were not **Terns**, and once they came closer to the beach it was apparent that they were **Northern Gannets**. Throughout the day we enjoyed the **Gannets** spectacular feeding displays, folding back their wings before plunging into the sea, which at times were very close to the shoreline. The numbers of hirundines seen on our first day had declined considerably, and although there were still some about, nowhere near the numbers we had seen earlier. As the day wore on, we both began to get "itchy feet", so by mid afternoon we felt that it was time for another stroll, this time towards where we had located the water to the north. By this time, our count for the holiday was 59 species not far from the total we had estimated prior to departure. After a quick cup of tea we followed the direction of the water and eventually reached a sandy area of pine forest at the back of some houses. We found a track which appeared to go in the right direction and entered the start of the forest. We had plenty of time, so our walk was just a leisurely stroll. Amazingly the first birds we encountered were another group of **Crested Tits**; easy these birds!! We had our first **Great Tits** of the holiday, and once again plenty of **Eurasian Collared Doves** and **Eurasian Blackbirds**. The trees were once again littered with nest boxes, there must have been hundreds and hundreds throughout the forest. Walking was a bit awkward because of the nature of the sandy soil, so we had to pick our way though the shrubbery. Halfway up the hill we were startled by a covey of **Red-legged Partridges** which flew from the forest floor and disappeared through the pines. We continued upwards and eventually reached a ridge where we found somewhere to sit for a while. Over the ridge we could see a small town and beyond we could see the water we wanted to head for. Unfortunately for us the houses were separated from the ridge by a strong wire mesh fence so it appeared we could go no further. We noted **Spotted**

Flycatcher, **Whinchat** and **Stonechat** all sitting on this wire fence at different times and by peering through this fence to some gardens gave us a **Cattle Egret** sitting by a poly-tunnel. We watched as a couple of groups of **Common Wood Pigeons** did a flypast, and a **Eurasian Marsh Harrier** could be seen in the distance. We followed the fence eastwards hoping to gain access to the road we could see just a short distance away, but alas the fence was impenetrable. Our walk along the ridge gave us more **Willow Warblers**, umpteen more **Eurasian Collared Doves**, and a **Common Chiffchaff**. It was so frustrating, the water seemed only a few hundred yards away, but from where we were it might well have been a hundred miles, as we could not reach it. On our journey back we disturbed another large group of **Red Legs** but nothing we had not seen before. We had thoroughly enjoyed our first three days in the Algarve and were very pleased with our count so far, but whether we would reach our target of 70 species was debatable.

Day 4 We decided once more to explore the pine forest track by the pigeon lofts, knowing that we were probably running out new species to find. Halfway along the track we could hear the call of the **Green Woodpecker** fairly close by, so with great care we crept through the undergrowth in an attempt to locate it. We searched in vain, but just as we were admitting defeat, we saw the bird fly from a bare tree through the edge of the forest with its unmistakable undulating flight pattern. It was another for our Portugal list, and could be added to our world list as a split. In the Collins Bird Guide it is referred to as an **Iberian Green Woodpecker**. (*Picus viridis sharpei*). Most of the other species we recorded were much as before, but as we approached the end of the track we noticed a feeding party high in the pine canopy and identified them as **European Pied Flycatchers**, and suddenly we spotted them everywhere. Unfortunately the males did not show the smart black and white plumage of the breeding birds, as, because of the time of year, the black had turned to the winter plumage brown. There were side tracks leading off the main track so we took the one which led to what was called the resting place. It wasn't a resting place at all, it was the beach. We met a couple who had been to Monte Gordo for a number of years, and after talking to them we learned that the stretch of water we had referred to earlier was easily reachable on foot, and when there, if we continued to the left we would reach the railway station where we could view the large flock of **Greater Flamingos**. We tracked back, and reached an open area which appeared to be a beach car park. On the way we picked up our first **European Greenfinch**, and more **European Pied Flycatchers**, **Great Tits** and **Crested Tits**. Getting close to lunchtime we decided to return to base. We decided after lunch to continue our search for that elusive stretch of water, so walked along the road towards Villa Real de Santo Antonio. We reckoned that if we walked far enough we should be able to branch off to the left and maybe reach the road which would take us to the water. We did find a track, much wider than the one we had taken a few days earlier, so it looked quite promising until we suddenly came across that impenetrable wire fence. We found ourselves on the same ridge which we had found before, so once again we were out of luck.

Day 5 After a full days walking on the previous day, it was to be a relaxing day on the beach. Once again we marvelled at the **Gannets** fishing displays and saw a few **Common Terns** pass by over the waters edge, but apart from a passing **Eurasian Spoonbill**, we saw nothing else to whet our appetites. After lunch we returned to our favourite track by the pigeon lofts and we lucky enough to spot a couple of **Eurasian Jays**, another to add to our Portugal list. Nearing the small lake we heard quite a lot of chattering calls in the forest and found at least twenty **Azure-winged Magpies** feeding on the forest floor. This was the closest we had been to them and it was nice to be able to study the plumage characteristics; they really are beautiful birds, and made us wonder why it is not their national bird. In the open area at the end of the track we found our first **Eurasian Hoopoe**, once a bogey bird for us, but no more. We were extremely pleased when checking our sightings that we had reached the 70 species we estimated before departure, and were speculative on adding a few more during our last couple of days.

Day 6 We hired a taxi to take us to Villa Real de Santo Antonio, and were dropped off near to the fountains in the main promenade. One of the reports I had downloaded at home reported that a walk along the river could be quite advantageous, as there were plenty of birds to observe. We strolled past the Spain/Portugal ferry terminal keeping as close to the river as possible. We reached a area of rocks on the edge of the river where we were surprised to find a nice **Whimbrel**, and a feeding **Common Sandpiper** darting in and out of the rocks. The further we went the more difficult it became to hug the river bank, and one attempt was thwarted by a guy who said we were trespassing and ordered us away. We reached the end of the promenade and found a rough track which we hoped would lead us to the river bank, but it led us nowhere. On the way back we came across what can be described as a rubbish dump where a couple with two young children seemed to be living rough. We crossed the dump and climbed onto a heap of rubble to see if we could reach the river bank. Yes we could, but our attempt came to an abrupt end when we felt ourselves sinking into the marsh. Back on the top of the heap of rubble we could see that there was a waterway to the left which eventually led to a stretch of open water. Could this be the elusive water we had been trying to reach for the past two days? We made our way

back to the road, and decided to continue our walk towards the open water. On the top of a nearby lamp-post we saw our first **Eurasian Magpie**. As we walked the road, it became more obvious to us that this was the “walk along the river bank” referred to earlier. There were lots of birds on the muddy banks of the inlets, but most were not new for us. **Egrets, Redshanks, Godwits, Stints, Dunlin, Ringed & Kentish Plovers** were all plentiful, and very close, and the edge of the new cycle path which had just been constructed gave us plenty of opportunities to just sit down and watch. As we walked a little further, a **Common Redstart** lighted on the bank, giving us our fourth new bird of the day, and a **Western Yellow Wagtail** was a welcome addition to our list. We had noticed on the left of the road there was a railway track which appeared to be derelict, but when we reached the railway station we realised that it was the last station on the line. Considering what the couple who we met earlier in the week had told us, we looked back and yes, there they were, the **Flamingos**, easily seen, even without our bins. It soon became apparent to us that we were on the southern edge of the Castro Marim Reserve. As we neared the end of the road, **White Storks** were feeding on the muddy fringes, and seemed quite oblivious to our close proximity. We crossed the road by a roundabout and noticed a signpost pointing to Monte Gordo, so the information received from the two people we met was correct. Once on the other side of the road we made our way down to a large stretch of open water, yes, this was the water we had been looking for. It was surprising to see so many **Little Grebes** on the surface and a few **Mallards**, the smart winter plumaged males showing brightly in the sunlight. We could see **Little Terns** and a single **Black Tern** diving into the water and a few **Great Cormorants** flew down onto the surface of the lake. We found a shady area to have our lunch, yet more peaches, and enjoyed the views of the birds flying around us. There certainly wasn't a shortage of **House Sparrows** in the Algarve, and although we searched, we had failed to find any of the **Spanish** species. We returned back to the lake area and noticed a few ducks on a narrow stretch of water to the left of the lake. We spotted **Mallards, Gadwall**, and our first **Northern Shovelers** of our holiday, a male and two females. Our prediction of 70 species for the holiday was now blown right out of the window, and after crossing the road to begin our walk back, a handsome **Black-bellied (Grey) Plover** had appeared with some of the other waders to take our Portugal total to 80. We returned to the promenade where we were dropped off, and hired a taxi to return to Monte Gordo.

Day 7 Our final day was spent relaxing on the beach, as our cases had been packed earlier ready for departure back to Faro airport. We contemplated on our holiday and both agreed that it was a great place for a short break in the sun. Yes, vast majority of the birds we observed were common for us, but that didn't really matter. Had we have wanted a twitching holiday, then we would have hired a car, but that was not part of our itinerary. A scope would have been useful, especially at Castro Marim, but for a short holiday with just hand baggage and our bins, we felt, were quite adequate. The Hotel was good, well maintained, and the food, which was self service, quite sufficient. Monte Gordo was excellent and kept spotlessly clean, what a change from our British holiday resorts. As for the weather, apart from a little drizzle on the first morning, it was beautifully sunny on every day and not at all humid. The temperature all week was in the region of 75 degrees and very pleasant. The area around the resort was very flat, and ideal for walking or cycling. I mentioned earlier in the report the number of pigeon lofts we had seen. Incidentally, in terms of participation, pigeon racing is the second most popular sports activity in Portugal with 18000 registered pigeon fanciers. Value for money – where else can you go for weeks holiday on a half board basis for £250. It is time the British public wised up and boycotted the ‘over the top’ prices charged in the UK. Would we return again? Yes definitely.

Anyone who requires any information please feel free to E Mail us.

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