

Portugal

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Participants

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Rüppell's Griffon

Leaders Vaughan and Sveta Ashby

Day 1: A late morning scheduled TAP flight got us into Lisbon early afternoon and after meeting Eric and picking up our minibus we were on the road heading around the city towards Carcavelos. Unfortunately, the signposts around the city left a lot to be desired and we ended up going right through the centre. We didn't lose much time however, and we were soon heading west with the Rio Tejo on our left. Arriving at the fort, we parked and started our search for the introduced Crested Myna. No sign initially around the fort so we crossed the busy dual carriageway to check waste ground on the opposite side of the road and there they were! We then spent the next hour covering the area seeing around 12 of these well-established birds as well as White Wagtail, Spotless Starlings, Zitting Cisticolas, Stonechats and singles of Woodchat Shrike and European Serin on the waste ground and Great Cormorants, Sanderling and Black-headed and Yellow-legged Gulls on the adjacent coast. Not wanting to get caught up in the Lisbon 'rush hour', we headed back west and successfully found the ring road back past the airport and over the impressive Vasco da Gama Bridge to our comfortable hotel in the town of Montijo. Not wanting to waste birding time, we were soon out again to the nearby marshes of Alcochete. Lack of up-to-date maps, new roads and confusing signposts didn't help but it didn't take us long to reach the marshes and we were soon checking the reed-filled ditches in search of our next introduced species. Because of the drought throughout the Iberian Peninsula however, many of the dry reeds had been burnt down and although there was fresh growth, it hadn't developed very much yet. Despite this initially depressing sight, we soon found several Black-headed Weavers including a near breeding plumage male together with a number of Common Waxbills. For the next couple of hours we scoured the area enjoying views of several Squacco Herons, a single Purple Heron, many White Storks, Cattle and Little Egrets, Glossy Ibis, singles of Western Marsh-harrier, Purple Swamphen, Green Sandpiper and Cetti's Warbler, Common Kestrels and Corn Buntings. There was no sign of our other target birds however, Black-headed Munia; they would have to wait for another day. And so it was back to the hotel for an excellent dinner and our first log.

Day 2: Pre-breakfast, we headed out to the marshes of Alcochete again. Many of the birds we had seen yesterday were present again although these were supplemented by increased numbers of Purple Herons, three Eurasian Spoonbills, a flock of Northern Shovelers flying over and best of all a Black-shouldered Kite showing how much this species has expanded its range. Extending our search deeper into the marshes along tracks, we found single of Wood Sandpiper and Spanish Yellow Wagtail and several Meadow Pipits and Common Chiffchaffs before finally connecting with another of our target birds, Yellow-crowned Bishop. In fact there was a very large flock of them but unfortunately, no sign of any males coming into breeding plumage like the Black-headed Weavers. We estimated the total number to be around 300 but it was very difficult to do an accurate count as they were very mobile. Although there were no males in breeding plumage, it was possible to tell males from females on plumage from my experience of them in Africa. Despite our best efforts, we were still unable to find any Black-headed Munias so we headed back to our hotel for breakfast. After packing up, we decided that rather than return to the marshes, we would head straight to Vila Velha de Radao to the vulture colony. As we headed north through another part of the

Alcochete marshes we passed a number of pools full of Black-winged Stilts and coots. They were probably all Eurasian Coots but because the road was so busy we were unable to stop to check if there were any Red-knobbed Coots. After a brief stop at a motorway service area, we arrived at the Castle viewpoint over the Rio Tejo gorge late morning. Taking a picnic lunch with us, we climbed up the hill to the viewing area and immediately starting to see Eurasian Griffons. At first more distantly against the rock face on the opposite side of the river and then at point blank range over our heads. We knew that some groups had taken up to two days to see our target bird so we were prepared to wait and check all the vultures. Telling a Eurasian Griffon from a Rüppell's Griffon isn't actually very difficult but sometimes with so many birds in the air it was slightly worrying that we may miss the bird. With six sets of keen eyes however, we felt confident and sure enough, within an hour, the Rüppell's Griffon flew in from the left, circled a couple of time and landed on a prominent ledge with two Eurasian Griffons. Despite the distance, the light was superb and we were able to make out all the details on this vagrant and compare it to the adjacent Eurasian Griffons despite it going to sleep! There have been increasing numbers of reports of this species in the Iberian Peninsula in the last few years and it appears that migrant Eurasian Griffons have been bringing odd birds back with them from their wintering grounds in Africa. Not all Eurasian Griffons migrate to Africa however, but obviously this bird joined them some time in the past as it has now been present for several years. A couple of Egyptian Vultures joined the throng of Eurasian Griffons, both Blue and Great Tits flitted around the bushes and Eurasian Cragmartins flew around whilst we watched the Rüppell's Griffon. Eventually however, an aggressive Eurasian Griffon dislodged the Rüppell's Griffon, which then circled over the gorge again and landed in a cleft in the cliff face out of sight. Returning to the minibus, we drove back down the hill and across the river to a small track heading up towards the cliff face. Despite trying our best, we were unable to find a way through the bushes to get a clear look so we returned back across the river and found a small track going under the railway to a scrapyard overlooking the cliff face where the Rüppell's Griffon had landed. After a few minutes of searching, we located the bird and amazingly it was perched close to another griffon on a nest. It was impossible to say where it was another Rüppell's Griffon although there haven't been any reports of two birds so it's possible that it's hybridising with a Eurasian Griffon. As the owner of the scrapyard who had kindly let us in was closing the gate at 5.00 p.m. we said our thanks and drove towards Castelo Branco, our base for the next two nights. En route, we saw several Azure-winged Magpies before eventually reaching the town. It proved to be quite an ordeal navigating through the maze of one way streets in the town but eventually we found the hotel only to find that the underground car park was even more of a challenge to get into with a minibus! The hotel proved excellent with the receptionist speaking good English and the near-empty restaurant providing us with a good dinner at the end of a very productive day.

Day 3: There was little reason to go out before breakfast as we had already seen the key bird. After breakfast, we decided not to return to Vila Velha de Radao but to head into Spain for the day for some general birding. It was a pleasant drive through a mixture of arable land and woods punctuated by stops for Azure-winged Magpies. Close to the Spanish border the signposts let us down again and we arrived in Spain by a different route! We soon passed the ancient town of Alcantara however, before turning off on a minor road heading onto the Spanish Steppes. An opportune stop at a bridge gave us nice views of Hawfinch as well as Common Whitethroat. As the steppes opened up, it became apparent that there was a serious drought as there was very little crop or grass growth. At first we thought this would help us in our search for bustards but it soon became apparent that many species (including bustards) did not appear to have returned to breed yet as the conditions weren't suitable. Nevertheless, we kept our eyes peeled and were rewarded with good numbers of Black Kites together with the occasional Booted and Short-toed Eagles. Best of all however, were excellent views of three Cinereous Vultures during the day, as well as many Eurasian Griffons. A field on the edge of a village held our only Black-eared Wheatear of the tour alongside several Spotless Starlings whilst four Northern Wheatears were seen during the day. White Storks were very conspicuous whilst Montagu's Harrier was added to our growing raptor list. After reaching the furthest point of our drive, we started the return part of the loop when suddenly our diligent searching was rewarded with excellent views of three Great Bustards. With our morale boosted, we headed to the steppe reserve of Malpartida de Cáceres but the story was the same, very little crops or grass growth and no sign of any Little Bustards. So we headed back west again towards Portugal stopping at any location with suitable looking habitat. We did see good numbers of Calandra Larks during our search and Red Kite, Red-legged Partridge, Common Cuckoo, Pallid Swift, Red-rumped Swallow, Common Nightingale, Southern Grey Shrike, Common Raven and Spanish Sparrow

were all added to our list but in the end we had to accept that wintering flocks were somewhere else at the moment and headed back across the border into Portugal and to our hotel.

Day 4: No early start necessary again so after breakfast we headed back to Vila Velha de Radao to the vulture colony. Although there were a few Eurasian Griffons around, there was no sign of the Rüppell's Griffon so our timing had been perfect the day before last. We did enjoy some casual birding around the viewpoint however including views of our first Crested Tit and Eurasian Wren. We then headed back the scenic route towards Montijo adding Little Owl, Eurasian Jay and Cirl Bunting to our list before checking into our first night's hotel again. With just one target bird left to look for, we headed back into the field to check the areas where they had last been reported. Black-headed Munias are the most difficult of all the introduced species in Portugal due to their small size, reclusive nature and small population size. We nevertheless had a very enjoyable late afternoon/early evening birding the edges of the marshes seeing a good variety of species including our first Black-crowned Night-herons, Great Egrets, Common Snipe and European Reed-warbler, Squacco and Purple Herons, two Black-shouldered Kites and three Spanish Yellow Wagtails but there was no sign of any munias so it was to our hotel for our last dinner and log.

Day 5: Last morning and after breakfast, we once again headed to the Alcochete marshes. We explored around a small hamlet and along a track deep into the marshes but to no avail, there was simply no sign of any munias. A dozen Black-crowned Night-herons were in their roost tree and Yellow-crowned Bishops were present in large numbers but sadly none in breeding plumage. Heading to another part of the marshes we encountered more Black-headed Weavers, this time with several in smart breeding plumage. A flyover group of Greater Flamingos were new for the tour and a couple of Great Reed-warblers were seen but again, no sign of any munias despite an extensive search of fields and scrub. So we packed up and headed to the motorway where we stopped for a pizza at a service area. The lady spoke no English but we were surprised to hear that she spoke Russian (she was actually Ukrainian) so Sveta was able to order everything for us! We then drove back across Ponte Vasco da Gama to the airport where we said our goodbyes to Eric who was staying overnight. The flight home was one time and we all arrived back at Heathrow early evening at the end of the tour.