

Portugal and Spain 11th – 15th April 2011

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Introduction

Portugal and, in particular, Spain have long been popular as a quick getaway for birders from Northern Europe. The purpose of the Portuguese part of the trip was to target the long-staying Rüppell's Vulture near Vila Velha de Ródão and a few introduced species near Lisbon, while across the border in Spain the steppes of Extremadura offered quality spring birding with, for instance, displaying bustards. Overall, this turned out to be a successful, chilled out trip at excellent value for money.

Logistics

We flew to Lisbon with Easyjet (from London Luton) at a cost of £189. We hired a Fiat Punto through Europcar at an extremely reasonable £105 for the total duration of the trip, with €165 spent on fuel in total. For accommodation, two of us slept in the car each night and the other used a small tent. Showering facilities were provided at the beach at Carcavelos (just west of Lisbon), allowing us to freshen up and not offend fellow Easyjet passengers on the return flight. We used supermarkets for daytime rations, eating each evening in local restaurants at a cost of €10-15 per person.

Prior information and acknowledgements

David Monticelli, Tommy Frandsen, Lars Højmark Mortensen and Chris Lansdell all supplied useful information for Portugal while Lee Gregory was extremely helpful for the Spanish leg of our trip, supplying us with his excellent trip reports and information from previous trips. I had also visited Lisbon with João Jara in 2009 and Extremadura in 1993 and 1999, so had prior knowledge of a few of the sites we visited.

We also used, to some extent, a couple of birding books – John Muddeman's 'Birdwatching Guide to Extremadura' and Ernest Garcia and Andrew Paterson's 'Where to Watch Birds in Southern and Western Spain'. These helped a little bit, but there's not much in them that can't be found on the internet or talking to birders while you're out and about on the Extremadura steppes.

Itinerary

11th April – Arrival in Lisbon late morning. 2 hour drive to Vila Velha de Ródão, and birded here until dark. 2 ½ hour drive to the steppes northwest of Trujillo; slept overnight in car/tent near Santa Marta de Magasca.

12th April – Early to mid morning birding on the steppes near Santa Marta de Magasca and Monroy. ½ hour drive southeast of Trujillo to the village of Madrigalejo where birded area near bridge. 1 hour drive north from here to Monfragüe, where we birded until early evening. Last couple of hours spent birding near Torrejón El Rubio and Monroy; slept overnight in car/tent near Santa Marta de Magasca.

13th April – Early morning birding on the steppes near Santa Marta de Magasca. The rest of the morning spent near Torrejón El Rubio, departing at 1pm. 3 hour drive to Vila Velha de Ródão, and birded here until dark. 2 hour drive to Alcochete, Lisbon where we slept overnight in car/tent.

14th April – Early morning birding at Barroca d’Alva near Alcochete. 1 hour drive south to Zambujal near Setúbal where we birded until early afternoon. 1 hour drive to Carcavelos near Cascais, before birding at Alcochete and Barroca d’Alva in the evening; slept overnight in car/tent near Alcochete.

15th April – brief birding early morning near Alcochete before heading to Lisbon airport for late morning flight back to Luton.

Daily Sightings

11th April 2011 (PORTUGAL)

After arriving in Lisbon late morning, it took very little time to sort out our bags and get the car keys from the Europcar desk. Navigating Lisbon was straightforward, and so after a drive of a couple of hours along the A1 and IP6 (paying about €5 in tolls) we arrived in eastern Portugal near the village of Vila Velha de Ródão.



Vila Velha de Ródão – this is the favoured site of the longest staying **Rüppell's Vulture** in the Western Palearctic, having been present in the small Griffon Vulture colony here since 2003. Strictly speaking, the actual site where the vulture is regularly seen is Portas de Ródão - rock promontories on either side of the River Tejo. There are a couple of places to view the cliffs: -

- Heading west from the village of Vila Velha de Ródão, and 250 metres past the bridge on the north side of the river, there is a layby on the left that overlooks the area – this is where at 3.30pm we first found the Rüppell's Vulture sitting on the cliffs.
- Continue for a further 3km from here, ascending through hairpins until you reach a road on the left signed 'Ermitas' – take this road, park at the end by the small chapel and then walk towards the castle to the viewing platform. This wonderful panorama overlooks the same area of cliffs as described above, with the added advantage of being at an equal height to observe soaring vultures coming off the colony. However, the view of the cliffs below (on the north side of the river) is obscured due to the angle you are looking. The Rüppell's Vulture was seen in flight from here at 4pm, before it gained height and headed off northeast with a couple of Griffon Vultures.

(Unbeknown to us at the time, as we only discovered this area on our return leg on 13th April, there is also a vulture roost/area of cliffs where vultures can be found to the north of Vila Velha de Ródão. This area can be viewed very distantly from the viewing platform, by turning 180° and looking away from the cliffs in the direction of the distant hillside with the radio masts. However, to get good views of the cliffs here - where we had 32 roosting Griffon Vultures – you need to head into Vila Velha de Ródão, and go through the village centre heading north until you reach the small settlement of Gavião de Ródão. As you leave this place, turn left signed 'Penedo Gordo' and view the cliffs above you after a couple of hundred metres. Perhaps this area is where the Rüppell's Vulture hangs out when it's not at Portas de Ródão? Must be worth a try...)

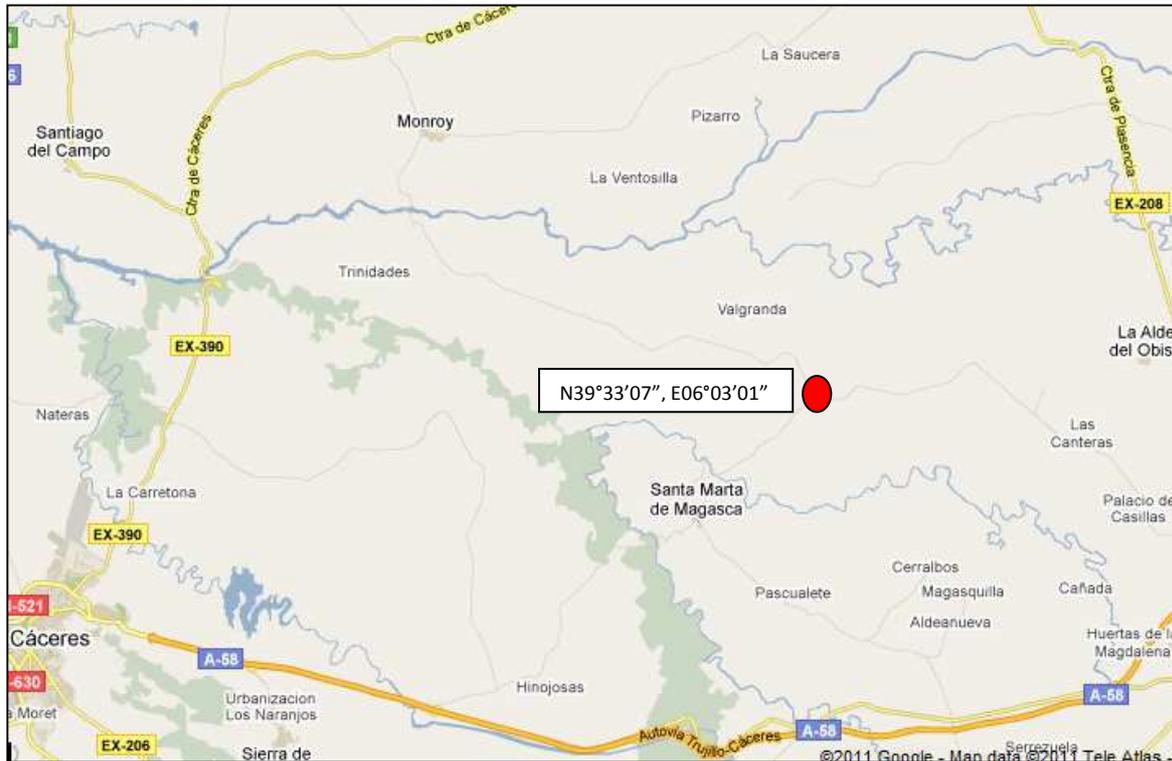


Rüppell's Vulture at Portas de Ródão, April 2011

We spent from 2.30pm until 8pm in the area, and as well as the Rüppell's Vulture, the viewing platform at Portas de Ródão was brilliant for raptors. Two **Bonelli's Eagles** flew through, showing well before disappearing below the ridge behind us and an immature **Golden Eagle** was the only one we saw all trip; a couple of **Egyptian Vultures** appeared amongst the 25+ **Griffon Vultures**, and a **Short-toed Eagle** and a couple of **Hobby** were also noted. Two **Black Storks** flew over early evening, albeit at some height. **Red-rumped Swallows** and **Crag Martins** were common, and the hillside scrub provided plenty of habitat for **Subalpine** and **Sardinian Warblers**, as well as massive numbers of singing **Serins**.

12th April 2011 (SPAIN)

Following a couple of hours driving the previous night, we arrived on the Spanish steppes to the west of Trujillo at around midnight. We eventually managed to find a suitable area to pitch a tent near Santa Marta de Magasca, though the rocky ground meant we had to tie the guy ropes to the wheels of the car. A **Red-necked Nightjar** was calling distantly as we fell asleep.



Steppes northeast of Santa Marta de Magasca – there is plenty of steppe habitat between Cáceres and Trujillo, though through previous experience and reading of the literature told us that the area to the northeast of Santa Marta de Magasca (often referred to as the ‘Monroy loop’) was potentially the best for species diversity and numbers. We found the best area to be the junction (N39°33'07", E06°03'01") of the CC-99 (from Santa Marta de Magasca) and the road between Trujillo and Monroy (signed Monroy 23km/Trujillo 23km).



Little Bustard near Santa Marta de Magasca, April 2011

So, within the first hour of light, we quickly found our first displaying **Little Bustards** – an amazing sight and sound – with this species occurring commonly in every bit of open steppe that we scanned (at least 15 birds seen with several more heard). Six **Great Bustards** were also feeding at mid-distance. **Corn Buntings** were singing from every other fence post, and **Calandra Larks** were extremely common as they displayed over short grass fields. A small colony on **Montagu's Harriers** was seen in aerial display over a cornfield while two **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** were much more distant, as was a single **Stone Curlew**. Small flocks of **Bee-eaters**, a male **Black-eared Wheatear**, half a dozen **Short-toed Larks** and a **Southern Grey Shrike** added to the Mediterranean feel of the area.

Heading southeast along the road towards the junction with the EX-208 and Trujillo, the first large raptors of the day were noted – a **Short-toed Eagle**, a **Booted Eagle** and two **Black Vultures** – while large flocks of **Spanish Sparrows** fed along the roadside.



Spanish Sparrow near Palacio de Casillas, April 2011

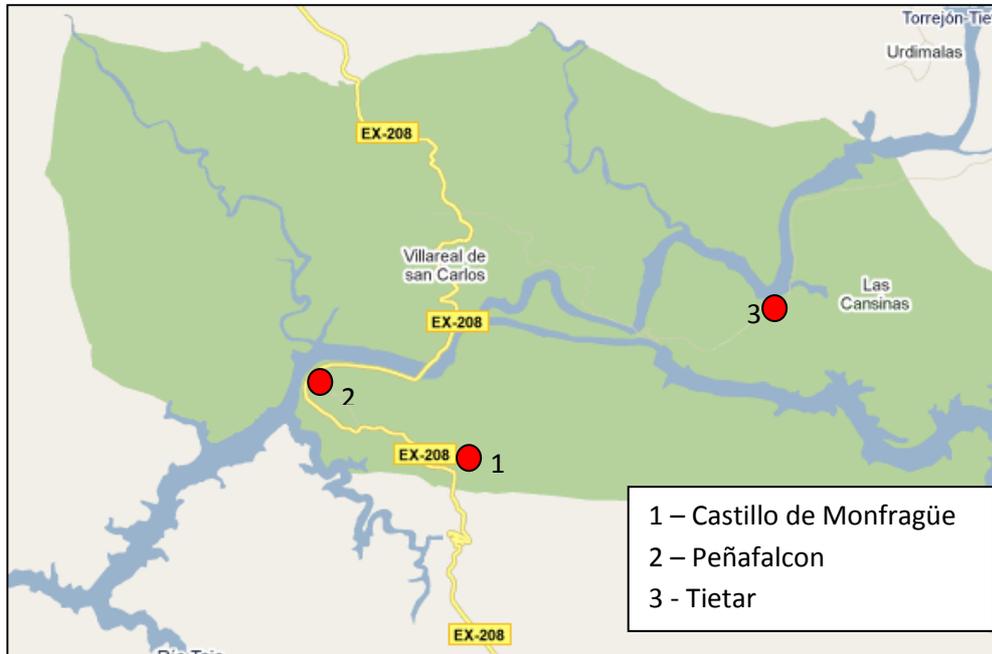
Madrigalejo – about 50km southeast of Trujillo, the road bridge on the north side of Madrigalejo (N39°08'29", E05°37'40") is a well known site for two introduced species – **Red Avadavat** and **Common Waxbill** – that have colonised the reedbed here. Both species were seen relatively easily, with the Avadavats being particularly numerous. A pair of **Little Bitterns** were also seen occasionally in flight, while **Great Reed Warbler**, **Crag Martins**, **Red-rumped Swallows**, **White Storks** and **Fan-tailed Warblers** were also quite common in the half hour or so spent at this site.

Little Bittern at Madrigalejo, April 2011



Once finished at Madrigalejo, we headed north again retracing our steps to Trujillo and then took the EX-208 north to Monfragüe National Park.

Monfragüe National Park – the EX-208, north of Torrejón el Rubio, heads into Monfragüe National Park.



The first site you come to, heading north, is **Castillo de Monfragüe (1)** – clearly signposted to the right (east), follow the steep track up to the castle from the car park. From late spring, this is probably the best place in the area to find White-rumped Swift; notoriously late migrants, our visit was far too early in the season.

Heading north a short way, there is an obvious mirador (viewpoint) on the left hand side of the road that overlooks the main **Griffon Vulture** colony at **Peñafalcon (2)** – there is plenty of parking here and, despite the crowds, is worth a look for excellent vulture views as well as the potential for other raptors. We were fortunate to locate a distant **Bonelli's Eagle** along with a couple of **Egyptian Vultures**, and other observers have seen Spanish Imperial Eagle from here this spring. A **Rock Bunting**, a male **Black Redstart** and a couple of **Blue Rock Thrush** were on the rocks adjacent to the viewpoint.



Griffon Vulture at
Monfragüe, April 2011

We headed north along the EX-208 and 1km north of the small village of Villareal de San Carlos, turned right (east), going over the dam bridge and following the road uphill through a small pinewood to the viewpoint opposite the cliffs at **Tietar (3)**. It was 12 years ago that I first saw **Eagle Owl** here, and once again the species was present – an adult and a well-grown young were seen roosting in a crevice mid afternoon, providing decent scope views. Apparently this area has provided regular sightings of Spanish Imperial Eagle, although we had no luck. However, we did see a **Red Kite**, a couple of **Black Storks** and **Black Vultures**, along with a **Short-toed Eagle** and several **Griffon Vultures**. The small valley just before the viewpoint provided us with our first decent views of **Azure-winged Magpies**, with a noisy flock of 15 or so birds moving through the area.

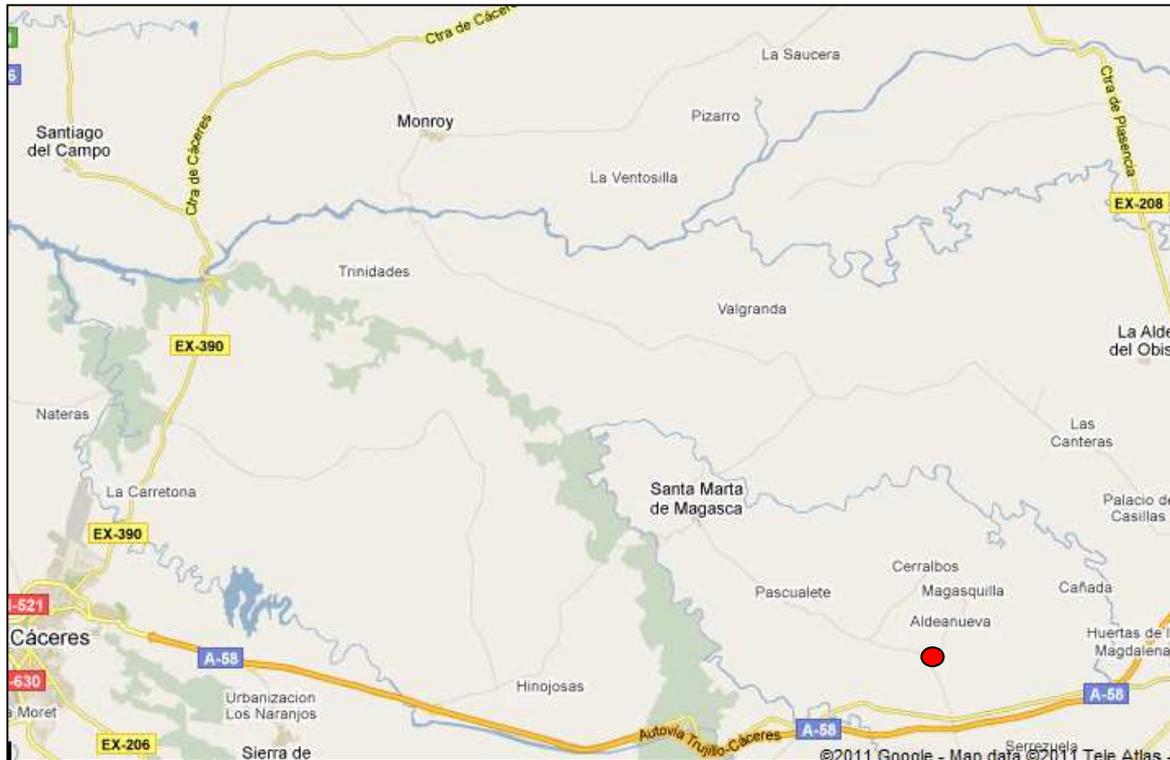
Torrejón el Rubio – the remainder of the afternoon and early evening was spent at a stake out for Spanish Imperial Eagle. Remarkably, this was the same site that I visited in 1999 and, for obvious reasons, that's as far as the information goes. Unfortunately, despite an hour or so of searching, the eagles did not appear although a **Woodlark** and showy **Woodchats** and **Bee-eaters** made for some compensation.

Bee-eater at Torrejón
el Rubio, April 2011



Woodchat at Torrejón
el Rubio, April 2011

After a really poor meal at the Hostal León in Trujillo, we headed west along the old road (i.e. not the motorway) towards Cáceres, and took the first road signed to Santa Marta de Magasca. We continued along this road for a couple of km until a left hand bend, where two sandy tracks veer off to the right – one at 90° to the road and the other heading straight on. This area (marked as a red dot on the map below) has apparently been decent for Pin-tailed Sandgrouse this spring, but for us it was also a convenient place to pitch a tent and sleep.



13th April 2011 (SPAIN and PORTUGAL)

Steppes southeast of Santa Marta de Magasca – at first light, we had a quick look from the track where we'd slept. Lots of **Calandra Larks** as well as the 'farting' noise of displaying **Little Bustards**, but we quickly realised that any sandgrouse views would be distant, if at all, so headed off northwest along the main road towards Santa Marta de Magasca. Within a km or so, we turned right onto a track signed 'reserva natural' – after half a km, we scanned the small hillock to the left of this track and were delighted to find 15 **Great Bustards**, including some excellent views of displaying males – much better than the previous morning's distant feeding flock. The odd **Montagu's Harrier** coasted over, and slightly further up this track 15 **Black-bellied Sandgrouse** showed relatively well as they fed in a ploughed field before flying off.

Torrejón el Rubio – having been unsuccessful the previous evening, we returned to the **Spanish Imperial Eagle** site and eventually managed to see a superb adult, mobbed by 2 **Ravens**, after three and a half hours searching. However, the site was excellent for other raptors including sightings of **Booted** and **Short-toed Eagles** as well as plenty of **Black** and **Griffon Vultures**. The adjacent scrub held a handful of **Azure-winged Magpies**, a few singing **Hoopoes** and **Woodlarks**, while **Woodchats**, **Bee-eaters** and **Red-legged Partridges** were also fairly common.

Happy with our success, we made tracks and started our long journey west, back into Portugal. After a quick supermarket stop in Cáceres, we arrived at Vila Velha de Ródão mid afternoon.

Vila Velha de Ródão – this was a convenient ‘break the journey up’ stop, and given our success a couple of days ago we hoped for more of the same – better views of the Rüppell’s Vulture and more raptors. However, on both counts, it was not to be as there was significantly less activity than a couple of days ago with just a few **Griffon Vultures** and a couple of **Egyptian Vultures** to show for our efforts. We did manage to find an area that may also be worth searching for the Rüppell’s Vulture when it’s absent from the viewing platform at Portas de Ródão (see 11th April entry for details). The usual **Crag Martins**, **Red-rumped Swallows** and **Blue Rock Thrushes** were present in good numbers, and as the sun started to set it was time for us to head towards the bright lights of Lisbon.



Egyptian Vulture at Portas de Ródão, April 2011

After a good meal in Abrantes, we ended up getting to Alcochete (near Lisbon) slightly later than anticipated. However, it was easy to find a place to put up the tent and we were asleep a short while after midnight.

14th April 2011 (PORTUGAL)

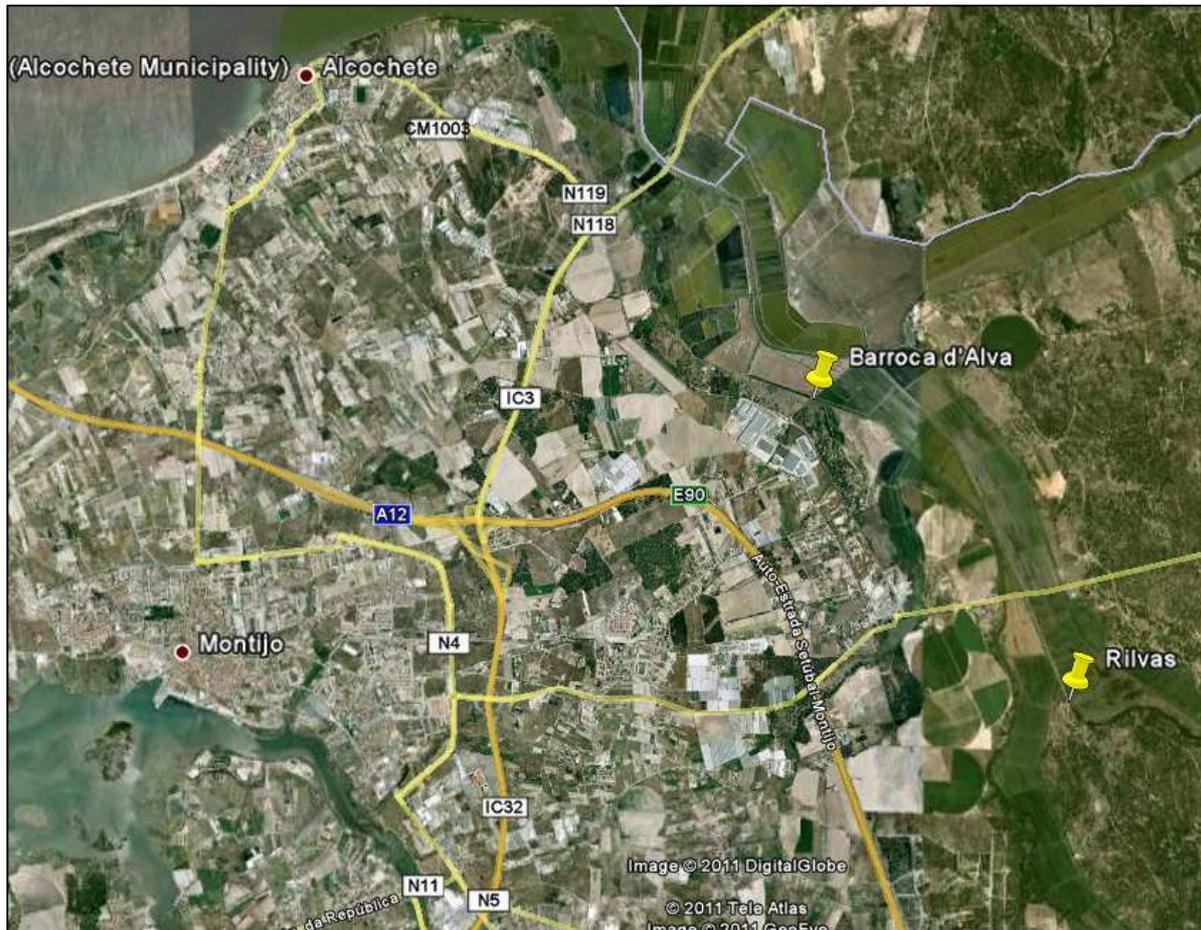
Today was to be devoted to the four introduced species that are present around Lisbon – Black-headed Weaver, Yellow-crowned Bishop, Crested Myna and Black-headed Munia. Three of these species are pretty straightforward, though Black-headed Munia is extremely difficult – a site where I saw this species in 2009 is now apparently redundant, so we tried a new site near Setúbal.

Barroca d’Alva – the reedy dyke, east of Alcochete, that can be overlooked from the bridge at N38°43’40”, W08°54’18” is a popular site to search for both **Black-headed Weavers** and **Yellow-crowned Bishops**. Within the first hour of light, both species were easily located, and the weavers were particularly evident with several of their nests viewable.

The area was also good for birds coming out of their roost – over 75 **Glossy Ibises**, 20 **Spoonbills** and a couple of **Purple Herons**. A pair of **Little Bitterns** favoured the reedy channel with the exotics, along with several **Great Reed** and **Reed Warblers**.

The best way to get to this site is, from Lisbon, use the Vasco da Gama Bridge (A12) and take the junction to Alcochete shortly after the end of the bridge. Before entering the town, at the first roundabout, take the exit signed to Pegões and Barroca d’Alva. The aforementioned bridge can be found shortly after you turn left at the next roundabout in the direction of Barroca d’Alva.

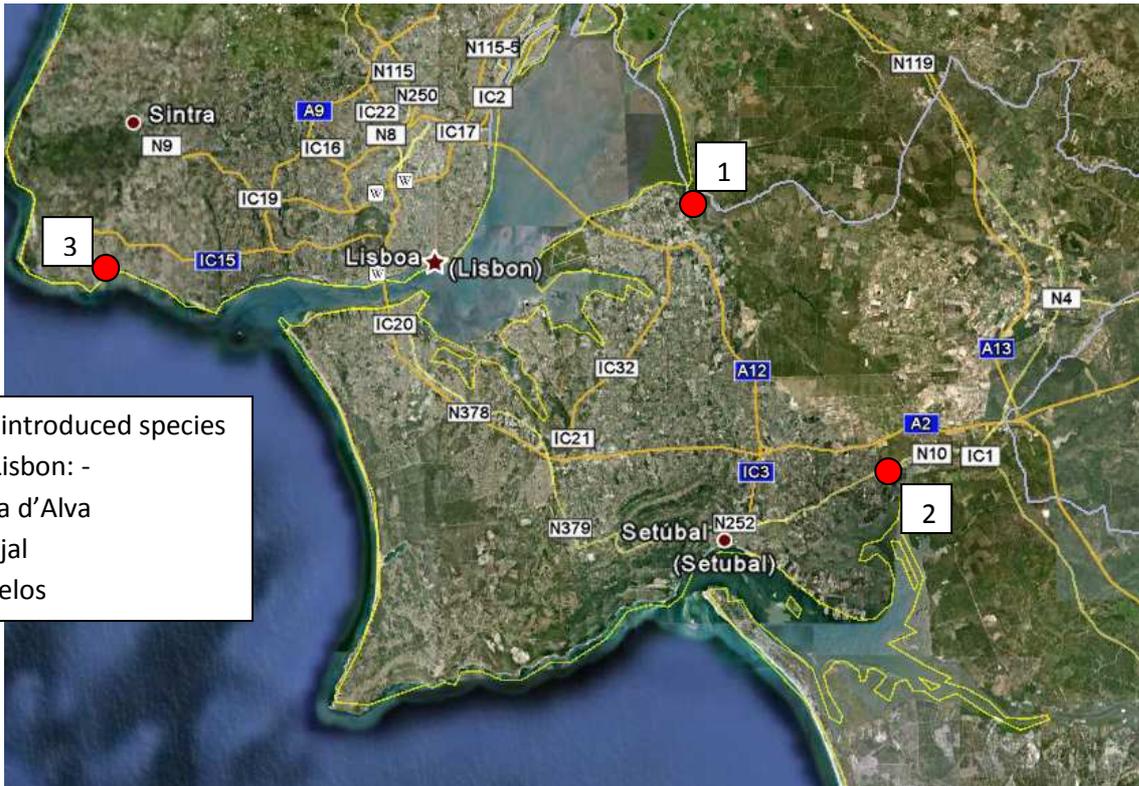
Previously, between 2005 and 2009, the nearby site of Rilvas (N38°42'06", W08°52'36") was the best place to search for Black-headed Munia. By no means guaranteed, they were seen by several birders (including myself in May 2009), although there have been no confirmed sightings in 2010 despite many people searching for them.



Zambujal, east of Setúbal - in May 2010, Danish birders located at least eight Black-headed Munias on the Sado Estuary to the east of Setúbal at Zambujal. The birds were seen along the ditch adjacent to the salt pans on the north side of the bridge (N38°34'08", W08°44'03") and later in the grassy fields on the south side of the bridge. We spent a few hours searching the area with no success, though we did see quite a few **Common Waxbills**, along with a couple of **Little Terns**, **Greater Flamingos**, **Kentish Plovers**, **Purple Herons** and a calling **Wryneck**. Also, in October 2010, no Black-headed Munias were seen but 12 Scaly-breasted Munias were found.

To get to this site, take the N10 east from Setúbal for c.15km and turn right (south) to Zambujal. This road quickly leads you to some salt pans and paddy fields, where you should park on the left just before the bridge and explore the area on foot.

Carcavelos, east of Cascais – keen to navigate through Lisbon during the middle of the day in order to avoid the traffic, we found ourselves near the fort at Carcavelos mid afternoon and amongst the hordes of sun seekers. Our target species here, **Crested Myna**, was quickly located with about eight birds commuting between the grassy area (within the private grounds of the fort) and the car parks at N38°40'36", W09°19'35".



Sites for introduced species around Lisbon: -
 1 Barroca d'Alva
 2 Zambujal
 3 Carcavelos

With time progressing, we headed east across Lisbon and back to Alcochete. Just to the east of the town, we managed to find an area to view the Tagus Estuary and in amongst a large flock of **Dunlin**, were a couple of **Curlew Sandpipers** and 20 or so **Little Stints**.



Crested Myna at Carcavelos (left) and Black-headed Weaver at Barroca d'Alva (right), April 2011

After failing to find a heronry that I'd visited in a couple of years ago at Escarpim, near Salvaterra de Magos, we headed back to Barroca d'Alva where a flock of **Greater Flamingo** were found on one of the salt pans, while a **Black-shouldered Kite** was one of the last birds of the day. As we headed back towards Alcochete for an evening meal, we located three **Little Owls** and a **Tawny Owl** on the drive. We once again slept in the car/tent at Barroca d'Alva, thankful this was our last night as things were getting a bit sweaty despite a wash in one of the beach showers at Carcavelos earlier in the day.

15th April 2011 (PORTUGAL)

Awaking to the sound of a couple of calling **Quail**, we packed our bags and headed off to the saltpans between Alcochete and Samouco. We had an hour or so of birding, before we needed to head to the airport for our late morning flight back to Luton. Despite a half-hearted attempt at locating more of these lagoons, we settled for the ones immediately west of Alcochete village. Admittedly, there was very little here except for a couple of **Kentish Plovers** and a few ubiquitous **Black-winged Stilts**. Having had our fill, we headed over the Vasco da Gama Bridge – savouring a **Peregrine** as we headed to the airport. The flight left on time and we arrived back in Luton mid afternoon, pretty pleased with the trip.



Black-winged Stilt at
Alcochete, April 2011