

Results of a Ringing Expedition to the Parque Ambientale, Vilamoura, Portugal

24th September-1st October 2013

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Introduction:

This expedition builds on the six very successful trips since 2007.

Unfortunately, this trip continued the emerging trend from 2012, resulting in the lowest number of birds ringed, although of a good number of species. However, the reason for this outcome has been easier to identify than for any previous trip i.e. the weather conditions.

Prior to our leaving England, medium-term weather forecasts had shown that there was a very large low pressure system lodged off the west coast of Portugal. Unlike typical fast-moving low pressures, this one was locked in place by surrounding high pressures. Furthermore, the system was generating numerous weather fronts—some of which stretched from the coast of Morocco to Scotland.

Daily totals show the effect of the movement of these fronts from the afternoon of 26th September—after which strong winds and intermittent showers and persistent rain had a profound negative effect on ringing success. Perhaps worse still was that because the effect of the low pressure was so geographically extensive, migration appeared to have been largely stopped as evidenced by dwindling bird numbers as the visit wore on. This was starkly revealed by the first net round on our last day which resulted in not one single new bird caught—a situation we have never experienced in the six previous visits. At the individual bird level just one example illustrates the point. A Reed Warbler (*A. scirpaceous*) ringed on the second day of the visit weighed in at 14g. and had a fat score of 4. The same bird was re-trapped on the last day—i.e. one week later; its weight had dropped to 12g. and its fat score to 2.

Although this weather pattern was the main culprit behind the low numbers, there was one other negative factor. The fields surrounding the ringing sites have in the past typically been left rough and have as a result been well stocked with common agricultural weeds, providing food for sometimes large flocks of finches, particularly Greenfinches (*Carduelis chloris*), Linnets (*Carduelis cannabina*) and Serins (*Serinus serinus*). All of the fields this year had been planted with cereal crops which had been harvested leaving relatively barren stubble, with little evidence of any finch flocks in the area. Even the semi-desert area where, in previous years Red Necked Nightjar (*Caprimulgus ruficollis*) were caught, was now stubble, with no Nightjar habitat remaining.

On a positive note, one new species was added to the list in the form of a Bonelli's Warbler (*Phlloscopus bonelli*), and the highest total (3) of Nightingales (*Luscinia megarhncos*) was ringed.

Once again, our visit was well supported during the planning and implementation stages by our friends and contacts in Portugal; Nuno Grade, Ana Luisa Quaresma; Vitor Encarnacao and Michael Armelin, to whom we owe, as always, an immense debt of gratitude. The provision of a heavy duty

undergrowth 'strimmer' by the Parque authorities, was particularly useful in quickly opening up traditional net rides.

Methodology:

Catching used on average 12 Japanese/Polish mist nets, set at fixed positions, practically identical to those set in previous years. However, the main reedbed had been denuded by grazing goats, so the nets had to be set on the opposite side of the outflow canal. This did not appear to have a particularly negative effect on catching, and probably had a positive effect on roost catching of hirundines since the nets were now nearer to natural roost sites in waterside reeds. Despite these changes we believe the comparative potential of our data is still relatively robust.

The northern edge of the marsh, (aka the 'Tip') which has been netted in all previous years except 2010, again proved impossible to get into due to dense growth of bramble in particular. It is unlikely that this site will be re-opened in future unless we have a very large team and heavy equipment with which to open the access.

However the interesting area we opened up for ringing in 2011- an area of scrub and young olive bushes adjacent to the water treatment works- proved a useful additional ringing site, producing a significant proportion of the daily catch on most days. Given the early dates of recent visits we have still not tested the theory that this area would be fruitful later in the season for Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*) in particular as they feed on the abundant fruits.

Extra nets were set in the fields to target wagtails and hirundines but these proved very disappointing compared to previous years, for which we have no plausible explanation. No evening trips to dazzle Red Necked Nightjars (*C. ruficollis*) were tried as explained above. Efforts to catch raptors resulted in only two Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*). The usually abundant raptors were again much less obvious this year.

One new project this year made use of a small fibreglass boat left on site, which was used to access the small reed island in front of the observation hide. Unfortunately none of the hundreds of Cattle Egrets (*Bulbulcus ibis*) which roost on the island were persuaded into the nets, but decent numbers of hirundines, Spotless Starlings (*Sturnus unicolour*) and acrocephalus warblers were caught to make the venture worthwhile.

More effort was put into hirundine roosting this year as they were the only birds around in significant numbers, and the results of this aspect of the trip were very positive. However, on the negative side was the almost complete absence of roosting Corn Buntings (*Emberiza calandra*) in the area, with only two individuals of this species caught in total.

All birds were ringed using CEMPA rings and all were processed to record; age, sex, weight and maximum-chord wing length. Migrant species were scored for fat, using the 5-point Euring scale.

Results:

Species	24 th	25 th	26 th	27 th	28 th	29 th	30 th	1st	Total	2012	2011	2009	2008
<i>Ixyobrychus minutus</i>			1						1	2	2	3	

<i>Bulbulcus ibis</i>													
<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>													
<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>													
<i>Tringa ochropus</i>					1				1	1			
<i>Gallinule chloropus</i>													1
<i>H. pennatus</i>											1		
<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			1		1				2	2	4		
<i>Columba livia</i>											1		
<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>											1		
<i>Tyto alba</i>											1		
<i>C. ruficollis</i>											6		
<i>Upua epops</i>				1					1	3	8		
<i>Estrilda estrild</i>		3							3	6	46	264	120
<i>Plo. Melanocephalus</i>		2	1	1				1	5	5		0	25
<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1	3	4	1		1	1		11	12	36	18	25
<i>Picus viridis</i>											2		
<i>Jynx torquilla</i>											1	1	
<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		47	53	37	15			163	315	19	140	29	
<i>Delichon urbica</i>			3					1	4	5	199		
<i>Hirundo daurica</i>			3	6				2	11	11	334	6	3
<i>Riparia riparia</i>		19	22		1			2	44	2	163	15	
<i>Motacilla flava</i>		2				4			6	5	84	4	19
<i>Motacilla alba</i>											2		
<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>										1		1	
<i>Anthus trivialis</i>											2	1	
<i>Anthus pratensis</i>													11
<i>Galerida cristata</i>												1	
<i>T. troglodytes</i>													
<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>										13	1	16	73
<i>Luscinia svecica</i>		1			1	3	2		7	15	40	41	12
<i>L. megarhyncos</i>			1	2					3	1	2	1	
<i>Phoe. Phoenicurus</i>											1	2	1
<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>											1	3	1
<i>Oen.oen.leucorrha</i>											1		
<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>								2	2	1	28	13	3
<i>Saxicola torquata</i>		1						1	2	9	9	25	19
<i>Turdus merula</i>	1	12	6	7	4	6	2	3	41	45	44	48	63
<i>Turdus philomelos</i>													7
<i>Turdus torquatus</i>													
<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		4	3		1	8		1	17	111	38	44	258
<i>Sylvia borin</i>		4	3			1			8	16	18	10	11
<i>S. melanocephala</i>	1	9	4	2	2	2		2	22	26	61	35	23
<i>Sylvia communis</i>		5	2			1			8	5	26	30	1
<i>S. conspicillata</i>											1		
<i>Sylvia cantillans</i>	1	3	1		1				6	12	32	32	2
<i>H.polyglotta</i>		1							1		2	1	
<i>Acro.schoenobaenus</i>		2	1	1		2	3	1	10	2	10	7	3
<i>A .paludicola</i>										1			
<i>A. scirpaceus</i>	3	50	25	16	13	11	2		120	110	206	109	86

<i>A. arundinaceus</i>						1			1	1	4	1	
<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	2	7	3		1	3	1	1	18	24	32	26	33
<i>Locustella naevia</i>		2	1			1			4	8	5	14	10
<i>Cettia cetti</i>	1	19	7	2	3	6		1	39	38	93	86	40
<i>Phyl. trochilus</i>		12	10	3	2	2		3	32	80	91	116	19
<i>P. collybita</i>		3	3		1	1			8	183	29	65	304
<i>P. bonelli*</i>				1					1				
<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	1	6	4		1	1			13	3	9	5	4
<i>Muscicapa striata</i>			1						1		1		
<i>Parus major</i>		2	2						4	5		1	2
<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>										1			6
<i>Lanius senator</i>											2		
<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>		1	3						4	8	8	8	5
<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>										1			
<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>					2	1			3	1		1	
<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>			1		12		2		15	3	38	3	
<i>Passer domesticus</i>											16	31	11
<i>P. hispaniolensis</i>										37	2	4	2
<i>Passer sp.</i>			1		1	1			3				
<i>Passer montanus</i>													
<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>													
<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		2				1		1	4		10	4	
<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		8	4	1	1				14	14	70	14	9
<i>C. cannabina</i>						1			1	2		11	4
<i>Serinus serinus</i>			5						5	9		7	12
<i>Carp. erythrinus</i>													
<i>Emb. schoeniclus</i>													1
<i>Emberiza calandra</i>		1					1		2	25	8	44	76
<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>													
ANNUAL Sp. TOTALS	8	28	30	14	19	21	12	11	44	45	54	47	38
ANNUAL TOTALS	11	231	179	81	64	58	182	17	823	886	1941	1202	1312

(Species marked * were ringed for the first time in 2013)

For comparison, the dates of previous visits were:-

2008:- 15th-21st Oct; 2009:- 30th Sept-7th Oct; 2011:- 20th-28th Sept; 2012:-5th-13th Oct.

Analysis:

NON-PASSERINES

No new non-passerine species were added this year despite the targeted effort for Cattle egret (*B. ibis*)—in fact the numbers caught were again very low. A Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) was a welcome capture as a ‘by-catch’ when trying for egrets—we suspect we would have caught more since there were at least eight individuals feeding in the catching area. Unfortunately rain caused the water level to rise and covered the exposed mud before we had a chance to really try for this species and other waders.

Undoubtedly the most disappointing species in this group was Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*). We have become accustomed to ringing around 30 new birds on these trips, regardless of the timing of the visit, but this year with the same ringing effort we ringed only 11 new birds, which is even lower than the total last year. We hope this is not part of a worrying trend.

HIRUNDINES

There were many swallows and martins in the area throughout the visit, with Red Rumped Swallow (*H. daurica*) being especially evident during the day. Attempts at catching during the day proved fruitless, but catching at roosting time was variably successful, as predicted in the relevant section of the 2012 report. This was in part due to our new net position in the main marsh area which was closer than in previous years to classic hirundine roost sites in reeds over open water. A Swallow (*H. rustica*) wearing a ring from one of the Spanish ringing schemes was the first such control during our visits.

CHATS and BLACKBIRD

Overall these groups were very poorly represented this year, even given the low numbers caught generally. Only two each of Whinchat (*S. rubetra*) and Stonechat (*S. torquata*) were caught which is significantly fewer than on any previous trip.

The very low number of Bluethroats (*L. svecica*) caught is difficult to explain, although it may in part be due to the early trip date and generally poor migration conditions. They appeared to be arriving, albeit in small numbers towards the end of the visit.

The daily pattern of Blackbird (*T. merula*) numbers is consistent with previous years and typical of what we assume to be mainly resident birds at this time of year.

WARBLERS

The patterns shown by the 2 'resident' warblers, Cetti's (*C. cettia*) and Sardinian (*S. melanocephala*), are in line with 2012 and towards the lower end of the annual total. Subalpine warblers (*S. cantillans*) were in short supply, refuting the thesis put forward last year that this species passes through in its biggest numbers during late September.

Blackcap (*S. atricapilla*) and Chiffchaff (*P. collybita*) were caught in very low numbers. In part, we would have expected this due to the earlier visit, but the low numbers were probably compounded by poor migration conditions. Bonelli's warbler (*P. bonelli*) was the only new species to be added this year and was a welcome 'lifer' in the hand for most of the group. We assume this was a local bird staying around the breeding locality a little longer than usual.

The pattern for Reed warbler (*A. scirpaceus*) was probably the most consistent of the warblers. Large numbers were caught early in the trip, until birds got to know the net sites, after which incoming migrants increase the numbers caught—although the early date and the damping effect of the weather probably accounts for the low numbers; since unlike last year there were no reports of poor breeding in their more northerly breeding range.

The Parque again showed its potential as a staging post and/or a wintering area for warblers from northern Europe with Reed Warblers controlled wearing rings from France and Germany.

Finally, we would like repeat our thanks to the management of the Parque Ambientale for allowing us access to the site during our stay, and to Vitor Encarnacao and Michael Armelin for providing us with the necessary permits and rings. We are immensely grateful also for the support during the planning stages and when on site from Nuno Grade, and Ana Luisa Quaresma, who again made us very welcome and helped in a great many ways to make our visit successful.

Colin McShane (on behalf of the ringing team); October 2013