

Results of the 8th Annual Ringing Expedition to the Parque Ambientale, Vilamoura, Portugal

30th September-9th October 2014

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Introduction:

This is the eighth annual expedition since 2007, all at approximately the same time of year.

Encouragingly, this trip saw a minor reversal of the emerging trend from 2012 which saw gradually lower numbers of birds being ringed. Although not one of the best years since starting, 2014 did see an improvement in numbers caught, and the second highest number of species handled. On top of this we yet again had the good fortune to ring a major rarity, and control birds from Holland, England (an astonishing story) and, for the first time, Sweden. All of these themes are covered in more detail below.

The medium term weather forecast on departure from England suggested settled weather with high pressure dominating—which turned out to be accurate. This of course makes for very pleasant conditions—warm and sunny—but does tend to reduce the numbers of birds grounded on migration as they simply continue their flights during the night in clear, star and moonlit conditions. Fine weather also results in steadily increasing onshore winds during the day which usually makes ringing during the afternoon fruitless.

Nonetheless, the weather on our first morning was absolutely perfect; still, warm and overcast. For a few days prior to this, conditions had been similar, resulting in lots of birds being held up. This was apparent the evening we arrived when the Parque was ‘jumping’ with birds. Unfortunately we were too late arriving to set nets that evening so we had to prepare the site and set nets on 1st October. The disturbance to the site obviously reduced the time for catching and the available birds. However, we still ringed 189 birds including 2 Bonelli’s warblers (*P.bonelli*), and the star rarity of the trip, Portugal’s fourth ever Paddyfield warbler (*A.agricola*). This would surely have been a 300+ bird-day if we had been able to prepare the site previously.

One other pleasing thing to note was that the reed-bed area we use has almost recovered to its former state after having been virtually destroyed in 2013 by a flock of domestic goats.

The weather in subsequent days was as described above, with high pressure, clear skies and increasing wind during the day—the daily totals ringed in the table below shows clearly how these conditions generally promote an outward movement of birds as they are able to use celestial features to migrate. It is worth noting also, that on our day of departure the weather changed and there were 4 days of strong winds and heavy rain—neither of which would have been conducive to any ringing at all.....!

All of the fields had again been planted with cereal crops which had been harvested leaving relatively barren stubble, with little evidence of any finch flocks in the area. Although the semi-desert area where, in previous years Red Necked Nightjar (*C. ruficollis*) were caught, was still

unsuitable, the area to the north west of the observation hide on the isolated pool has developed into a suitable habitat and several nightjars were seen there on one evening.

An afternoon spent birding by SP proved very useful in identifying areas for several sought-after species, and as a result of targeted efforts, Wryneck (*J.torquilla*), Cattle Egret (*B.ibis*), and Hoopoe (*U.epops*) became new species handled by members of the team on their first trip.

A dazzling session led by PA also identified the new area (see above) for Red Necked Nightjar; while a second session on the beach would probably have been more successful with various wader, owl and nightjar species if the moon had not been full and un-obscured. This is certainly a technique worth trying again in the future, given the good numbers of birds seen on the beach during the night.

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 2 heavy duty undergrowth 'trimmers' by the Parque authorities and NG, was again particularly useful in quickly opening up traditional net rides.

Methodology:

Catching used on average 12-14 Japanese/Polish mist nets, set at fixed positions, practically identical to those set in previous years.

The northern edge of the marsh, (aka the 'Tip') which has been netted in several previous years again proved impossible to get into due to dense growth of bramble in particular. Even with 2 petrol brush-cutters, and a determined team this site is no longer able to be used. However, another site was opened a little further east, which proved useful as a roost site and will be used in subsequent years.

The interesting area we opened up for ringing in 2011- an area of scrub and young olive bushes adjacent to the water treatment works was only used on one afternoon when wind conditions became too strong at the main site. Its ability to operate under such conditions was remarkable, and delivered a small but useful number of birds. We have carried out some maintenance of the site in order to keep it open for any teams in future with sufficient numbers of experienced ringers to be able to deploy a team there

Insufficient wagtails were around to justify setting special nets for them, but occasionally there were mixed hirundines around and a small number were caught when conditions were suitable. One evening, trips to dazzle Red Necked Nightjars was tried as explained above. Efforts to catch raptors resulted in only one Kestrel (*F.tinnunculus*). The usually abundant raptors were again much less obvious this year.

Some effort was put into hirundine roosting this year as there were birds around in reasonable numbers, but the results of this aspect of the trip were rather disappointing. The very large numbers of Waxbills getting caught during such sessions does provide teams with superb extraction practise—but given they are not ringed it is a great disincentive. A couple of new sites we tried reduced the Waxbill problem greatly but more work is needed on how best to maximise the

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|--------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| <i>P. collybita</i> | 13 | 10 | 29 | 27 | 7 | 15 | 42 | 24 | 167 |
| <i>M.striata</i> | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 |
| <i>F.hypoleuca</i> | 3 | | | | | 1 | 1 | | 5 |
| <i>P.major</i> | | | 2 | 2 | 1 | | | | 5 |
| <i>R.pendulinus</i> | | | | | | | | 1 | 1 |
| <i>C.brachydactyla*</i> | | | | | | | | 2 | 2 |
| <i>C.cyanus</i> | 6 | | | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | | 13 |
| <i>S.unicolor</i> | | | | | 4 | | | | 4 |
| <i>P.domesticus</i> | | | | | | 1 | | | 1 |
| <i>P.hispaniolensis</i> | 2 | | 1 | 2 | | | 1 | | 6 |
| <i>C.cannabina</i> | | 1 | | | | 2 | | | 3 |
| <i>C.carduelis</i> | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | | | | 3 |
| <i>C.chloris</i> | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | | 7 |
| <i>S.serinus</i> | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | | 1 | 1 | | 9 |
| <i>M.calandra</i> | 3 | | 8 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 2 | | 21 |
| <i>Passer Sp</i> | 2 | | 1 | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | 9 |
| <i>E.astrild</i> | 2 | | | | | | | | 2 |
| <i>Ploceus Sp</i> | 1 | | | | | | 5 | | 6 |
| Day Totals | 189 | 110 | 148 | 143 | 52 | 88 | 122 | 78 | 930 |
| Day Species Total | 32 | 17 | 30 | 26 | 17 | 25 | 23 | 16 | 49 |

To help put this year's results in context, Table 2 shows 2014 totals for selected species against the combined average from previous years.

TABLE 2: 2014 totals against average totals from previous years

| SPECIES | 2014 TOTAL | COMBINED AVERAGE |
|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| A.athis | 34 | 24 |
| E.rubecula | 32 | 20 |
| L.svecica | 19 | 25 |
| T.merula | 67 | 49 |
| S.rubetra | 1 | 10 |
| S.torquata | 11 | 17 |
| S.borin | 10 | 12 |
| S.atricapilla | 89 | 83 |
| S.melanocephala | 36 | 32 |

| | | |
|------------------------|-----|-----|
| S.cantillans | 11 | 18 |
| A.schoenobaenus | 9 | 8 |
| A.scirpaceous | 126 | 132 |
| C.juncidis | 31 | 33 |
| C.cettia | 40 | 60 |
| P.trochilus | 60 | 67 |
| P.collybita | 167 | 121 |
| L.naevia | 13 | 10 |

Analysis:

As Table 2 illustrates very well, 2014 was generally speaking an 'average' year for numbers. Within this there are as always some notable exceptions which are dealt with below.

NON-PASSERINES

No new non-passerine species were added this year and the numbers caught were again very low. New techniques were used and more effort put in, but we hope that the learning from this will help in future years.

Last year we commented on the very low number of Kingfisher (*A.atthis*) caught, but numbers seem to have recovered this year, dispelling our fears of a permanent drop in their numbers.

HIRUNDINES

There were varying numbers of 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 fairly successful, but catching at roosting time was variable. We have not identified a site which combines a lack of Waxbills, with waterside reeds where the birds would naturally roost. Unfortunately such reeds at the edge of water bodies are unsuitable for netting as the land falls steeply and quickly into deep water, making them too dangerous to work near.

CHATS and BLACKBIRD

Only one Whinchat (*S. rubetra*) and eleven Stonechat (*S. torquata*) were caught which are significantly lower than average.

The low number of Bluethroats (*L.svecica*) caught is again difficult to explain. Reports and personal experience suggests that breeding of this species throughout Europe has been good this year. We also noted individuals of both the red-spotted (northern), and white-spotted (southern) races of Bluethroat demonstrating that the Parque hosts this species from all over Europe.

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. Most birds are caught as they appear from roosting in the reeds. However, we did try luring this species when going into roost, which proved very successful, and this will probably become a feature of future trips.

WARBLERS

Of the resident warblers, Sardinian (*S.melanocephala*), appears to have had a good breeding season, but numbers of Cetti's (*C.cettia*) were significantly lower than average. We hope this trend is not permanent, and we will report on this in future.

Zitting Cisticola (*C.juncidis*) numbers appear to have picked up to average after a couple of poor years, and this could well be due to the marked increase in the area covered by substantial growth of rushes (*juncus* spp) around the trapping area.

Most of the migrant warblers were caught in average numbers. On the one hand this is good given the poor numbers in recent years, but also disappointing given the reports from all over Europe that good breeding conditions have resulted in high productivity. There were some signs of this in species such as Chiffchaff (*P.collybita*) and Grasshopper warbler (*L.naevia*), and it may be that prolonged good weather in northern and central Europe has delayed migration in parts of the population of species such as Blackcap (*S.atricapilla*). While on this species it is worth recounting an astonishing event. We caught a Blackcap in the net by the observation hide, and noticed on extraction that it carried a British BTO ring. As we processed the bird DC, who was scribing, immediately recognised the ring sequence as one of his. A quick call home confirmed that we had controlled the same bird which he had ringed less than 3 weeks previously at one of his Staffordshire sites!

To date the rarest birds we have caught were the Common Yellowthroat from North America (first for Portugal) and 2 Common Rosefinches (second and third for Portugal). This year the Paddyfield warbler ranked among these extreme rarities for Portugal. This bird was the fourth record for Portugal—the third record having been seen near Lisbon a short while before our bird. We will probably never know the origin of this bird, but the nearest breeding population is in Bulgaria.

Two Bonelli's warblers (*P.bonelli*), doubled the number of this species ever caught by us in the Parque. It is a local breeder and we wonder if it is increasing in the area.

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 Holland and, for the first time Sweden; plus the British-ringed Blackcap mentioned above.

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 2014

