



Little Grebe

Portugal

Birds & Culture

Tour Leader: Whitney Lanfranco

February 6-19, 2026

A Note on the Weather

I feel that a disclaimer is necessary for this trip report. Portugal was experiencing a severe weather event, with a series of storms lasting about a month. These storms brought high winds and heavy rain, resulting in flooding, washed-out roads, and property damage. Our tour took place at the tail end of this cycle, but we had to deal with daily rain and make adjustments to our itinerary due to flooding and closed areas. Despite these challenges, we still managed to have an amazing tour and to see almost every target species. However, if you are considering a trip to Portugal, please note that this experience was highly unusual; we usually enjoy sunny weather.

February 6: Arrival in Lisbon

Everyone arrived safely and checked into the hotel, the comfortable Hotel Lisboa Plaza, located in the heart of downtown. After gathering in the lobby, we walked a short distance to Quermesse, a local restaurant known for its traditional food and wine options. Following a wonderful dinner, we returned to the hotel to rest up for our journey ahead.

February 7: Tagus Estuary Natural Reserve

Due to a severe storm in and around Lisbon, we delayed our starting time until mid-morning. Once the storm had passed and the roads were clear, our Portuguese guide, Helder, picked us up in front of the hotel, and we headed for the estuary. Unfortunately, it began to rain heavily as soon as we arrived, so we decided to go for an early lunch and attempt birding again in the afternoon.

After enjoying a delicious lunch in Alcochete, the rain continued, but finally there was a break in the clouds. We hurried back to the Tagus Estuary Natural Reserve, the largest estuary in Portugal, to begin our birding adventure! The tide was out, and we had excellent binocular and scope views of many species, including Common Ringed Plover, Curlew Sandpiper, Common Redshank, and Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

After finishing our time at the estuary, we proceeded to our next birding location; however, the rain had other plans. Checking the radar, we ultimately decided to call it a day and checked into our hotel, Praia do Sol Resort, a comfortable waterfront hotel where we would be staying for the next three nights.

February 8: Peniche

After checking the radar and considering the flooding conditions in the area where we usually go birding, we decided to deviate from our itinerary and head to Peniche, a seaside municipality with a promising weather forecast. Just outside our hotel, we pulled over when Helder spotted a pair of Black-winged Kites. Our group all enjoyed excellent views of the birds kiting and hunting before

getting back into the van to continue our journey.

As we drove through the beautiful landscape, Helder explained the history and lifestyle of the region, especially since we passed right by the village where his family has lived for generations. Our first stop was the cliffs of Papo, where we saw both Great Cormorants and European Shags, as well as a Eurasian Curlew in the grass. Next, we found a comfortable pull-off for some sea watching. The rock formations were stunning, and we were even treated to a rainbow over the ocean, brightening our day.

Using our scopes, we observed several Black-legged Kittiwakes, Balearic Shearwaters, and Northern Gannets. We then headed to a nearby sewage treatment pond where Helder had previously noted the arrival of Little Gulls due to the storms. Indeed, there were around sixty Little Gulls flying around the pond, a very good number for Portugal! We also spotted White Wagtails, Spotless Starlings, and Common Chiffchaffs in the brush by the ponds. The weather held up, and we continued birding, stopping at a canal in town where we saw Ruddy Turnstones, Dunlin, Black-bellied Plovers, and a Eurasian Oystercatcher.



Little Gull

Our final stop before lunch was at the cliffs next to the historic Peniche Fortress, where we scanned for additional species. While we didn't add any new seabird species to our list, we did enjoy a close view of a perched Eurasian Kestrel and even spotted a pod of dolphins! We then had lunch at a restaurant on Lagoa de Óbidos. After lunch, we birded along the road nearby, where we had great looks at several Long-tailed Tits, Crested Tits, and Common Firecrests. We then explored the other side of the lake, where we added Great Crested Grebe, Eared Grebe, and Eurasian Coot to our list before heading back to the hotel.

February 9: Tagus Estuary and Wine Tasting at Companhia das Lezírias

We began our day just outside the hotel, where a lovely garden is often alive with birds. We spotted many species including European Greenfinches, European Serins, and Common Wood-Pigeons before loading up into the van to head to a local shopping mall, where the large trees offered good views of birds. The mall turned out to be a great birding spot, providing highlights such as a Western Marsh Harrier flying low over a nearby field, our first Eurasian Jays hopping in and out of the trees, and a cooperative Black Redstart.

Next, we returned to Quinta da Atalaya, a private farm that the owners generously allow us to access. The farm features impressive cork oaks and several ponds. Unfortunately, the weather turned against us again, but even while sheltering under the cork oaks, we managed to get good views of Meadow Pipits, Eurasian Siskins, Green Sandpipers, and our first Wryneck.

After lunch, we explored the saltpans directly behind the hotel, which consistently impress with their bird diversity. We found a remarkable number of Little Gulls, along with Northern Shovelers, Black-winged Stilts, a perched Common Kingfisher, and a solitary Greater Flamingo.

Our final stop was at the estuary, where we encountered Pied Avocets, Kentish Plovers, Common Redshanks, and Little Stints among many other species. We then wrapped up our day at Companhia das Lezírias, a nearby sustainable vineyard, where we enjoyed a wine and olive oil tasting. We all appreciated learning more about the winemaking process and sampling their products. Finally, we returned to the hotel for another delicious local dinner.

February 10: Évora and Castro Verde Plains

We packed up the van, waved goodbye to the estuary, and headed toward Mértola, our home for the next four days. Along the way, we stopped in Évora, a UNESCO World Heritage site, for a cultural experience. The medieval walls still surround the well-preserved old town, which features the ruins of a Roman temple at its center. Our cultural guide took us to several historical sites, including a monastery and a chapel adorned with bones.

After lunch, we enjoyed some free time to explore the downtown area and shop for local pottery and cork souvenirs. We then continued our journey, making a brief stop in Castro Verde, where a known Long-eared Owl was roosting. As we scanned the plains on our way into Mértola, we were rewarded with our first sightings of two Great Bustards, visible from the road.

The van was quiet and tired as we neared the town, but everyone suddenly came to life when Whitney shouted, "Lynx!" An Iberian Lynx had just crossed the road, and Helder skillfully maneuvered the van so that everyone could get great views and photos as it slinked back into the trees.



Iberian Lynx

After all the excitement, we arrived at our hotel, Hotel Museu, which is built over a 12th-century house and features visible Roman bath ruins in the lobby.

February 11: Guadiana Valley Natural Park

After breakfast at the hotel, we walked a short distance down the street to enjoy a view of the river below. We observed a large number of Western House-Martins overhead and spotted our first Lesser Kestrel perched in a nearby church steeple. A bare tree by the river offered us excellent views of a Spanish Sparrow, a Eurasian Blackcap, and a Sardinian Warbler.

We then boarded the bus to begin our journey through the rolling hills of the Guadiana Valley Natural Park. While driving through the park, we sighted Spanish Eagles, Red-legged Partridges, Corn Buntings, and Red Kites. We made a quick stop at “Nossa Senhora de Aracelis,” a chapel perched on a rocky hill that was once utilized as a lookout by the Romans and Moors. The large porch and 360-degree view of the park provided an ideal spot for scanning the skies.

We searched for birds of prey, but the wind was strong and rain was approaching. After catching distant glimpses of a few species, including a Peregrine Falcon, we headed to lunch in a nearby village.

In the afternoon, we birded at the Vale Gonçalves Environmental Education Centre, a treeless steppe designed for the conservation of Great Bustards and other grassland species. There, we spotted our first pair of Little Owls, a flock of over sixty Northern Lapwings, as well as Eurasian Jackdaws and Crested Larks.

We returned for another delicious dinner at a traditional restaurant overlooking the river and Mértola Castle.

February 12: Complexo Mineiro da Mina de São Domingo

We spent our morning birdwatching in a local park, where the large trees provide excellent habitat for birds and make viewing easy for birders. We had fantastic views of many passerines, including Hawfinch, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Short-toed Treecreeper, Iberian Magpies, and Blue Rock-Thrush.



Iberian Magpie

After lunch, we explored another area of the mine, where we spotted a Short-toed Snake-Eagle, a Golden Eagle, and several Common Hoopoes. On our way back to the hotel, we made one last stop in hopes of getting better views of the Iberian Green Woodpecker, and we were fortunate to enjoy extended views of both a male and a female. We also added Cinereous Vulture and Eurasian Griffon to our list before returning to savor another authentic Portuguese dinner paired with local wine.

February 13: Mértola

The history of Mértola dates back to the Neolithic period, when it served as an important trading post for the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, and later for the Romans. In the 10th century, the Moors built a castle that still overlooks the small village today.

We began our morning birdwatching by the river and then jumped in the van to search along a road

for better looks at Greater Spotted Woodpecker before meeting up with a cultural guide to explore the castle, church, and ruins of this enchanting village. In the afternoon, we returned to Guadiana Valley Natural Park in search of Black-bellied Sandgrouse and saw at least thirty along with Calandra Larks, Eurasian Linnets, Eurasian Skylarks, and Iberian Gray Shrikes.

We concluded our day with a final dinner in Mértola at our favorite restaurant, which offered wonderful views of the castle.

February 14: Transfer to Tavira

Leaving Mértola, we encountered a flooded field with close-up views of Little Ringed Plovers, Northern Lapwings, and a Green Sandpiper from the van. We then visited a conservation area dedicated to the Iberian Lynx, which featured benches, a lookout, and informational posters. Unfortunately, the wind was quite strong, so we didn't stay long, but we did catch sight of a Golden Eagle and a Red Kite.



Northern Lapwing

We still needed to spot Bonelli's Eagle for our trip, so thanks to Helder's excellent local knowledge, he took us to a nearby vineyard, where we were fortunate enough to see one appear on the horizon! Next, we drove to Faro, arriving in the mid-afternoon. We went birding at a local freshwater pond near the coast, where we spotted several passerines, including Eurasian Wryneck, Crested Tit, and Great Tit. We also enjoyed close-up views of Ferruginous Duck, Red-Crested Pochard, and Common Pochard.

Finally, we headed to our home for the next three nights, Hotel Vila Gale Albacora. This former tuna

fishing camp feels more like a village, with the original chapel and school preserved. It is located in the natural park of Rio Formosa and boasts lovely views of the water.

February 15: Rio Formosa Natural Park

Today's agenda included visits to two parks. The first park, Rio Formosa, features a freshwater lake situated in an upscale residential community, surrounded by walking trails and mudflats. From the observation blind, we enjoyed views and photo opportunities of various species, including Audouin's Gull, Garganey, Tufted Duck, and Eurasian Wigeons. Along the path to the pond, we spotted Zitting Cisticolas, Sardinian Warblers, and Eurasian Blackcaps.

After having lunch in town and doing a little souvenir shopping, we continued to Parque Ambiental de Vilamoura. This park boasts several ponds, observation blinds, and pleasant walking trails. On our way to the blinds, we saw Black-headed Weavers, Gray Wagtails, Meadow Pipits, European Goldfinches, and even a bat flying around during the daytime.

In the blinds, we had close-up views of ducks and spotted two Common Snipe. On our way back to the hotel, we explored the brackish ponds and observed several species, including Eurasian Whimbrel, Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Common Shelduck, and Eurasian Thick-knee. As the sun began to set over the water, we headed back to the hotel to rest and enjoy dinner.

February 16: Sagres and the Cape St. Vincent Region

We loaded up in the morning and headed to the coast! While at the top of the cliffs in Sagres, dominated by a 15th-century fortress, we spent the morning scanning for seabirds. We were thrilled to spot a Northern Gannet, a Yellow-legged Gull, a Black-legged Kittiwake, and a Great Skua.

Next, we drove through nearby fields, adding a flock of Red-billed Choughs, another Little Owl, and a Eurasian Kestrel to our list for the day. After lunch, we birded in a park overlooking the water, where we enjoyed great views of Eurasian Linnets, European Stonechats, Black Redstarts, and several butterfly species.

Before heading back to the hotel, we stopped to take in the view and toast to the sunshine with a famous Sagres beer. Cheers!

February 17: Transfer to Lisbon

It's hard to believe it was time to head back to Lisbon already! However, we weren't done birding yet. We started the morning at the salt marshes nestled within the Ria Formosa Natural Park, where there were two exciting additions of up-close views of Water Rail and Bluethroat! We continued birding the area and had better looks at Greater Flamingo and added Ruff to the trip list.

We visited one more lagoon before leaving town, teeming with birds including large numbers of Northern Pintails, Eurasian Moorhens, Western Swamphe, Mediterranean Gulls, and Reed Buntings. A report of a Common Gull had us take a slight detour, but it was an easy bird to see and add to our trip list!

On our way into Lisbon we had one last special stop at a known area for Eurasian Eagle-Owls and were lucky enough to see the female perched on a cliff. We arrived back at Hotel Lisboa Plaza and headed to dinner out in town.

February 18: Lisbon City Tour

Our final day focused on the rich history of Lisbon and Portugal. Our cultural guide joined us in the van and pointed out various landmarks as we drove around the city. We visited several sites, including the Lisbon Castle area, the Alfama neighborhood, Belém Tower, and the Belém Monastery. We also had the opportunity to taste the famous Pastéis de Belém.

Although the weather was not on our side, we still managed to make the most of our day, with plenty of time for souvenir shopping and enjoying the local sights. We concluded our journey where it began, at a lovely restaurant called Quermesse, where we savored local wine and reflected on the highlights of our adventure.

February 19: Departure

Our tour ended with 160 species and countless other highlights!

