



THE ALGARVEAN FLYAWAY

**WITH OVER 300 BIRD SPECIES TO BE SEEN
TWITCHERS ARE FLOCKING TO THE ALGARVE**

Photos: Cy Silva

French ornithologist Guillaume Réthoré says that visitors can usually spot 120 different bird species during the one-week birdwatching tours hosted by the international environmental preservation association A Rocha. Suzanne and Robert Taylor, who flew purposely from Canada for a special birdwatching holiday, were lucky: guided by Guillaume through some of the Algarve's hot spots, they've crossed the 120 species mark in just four days. "We've been enjoying the wonderful weather and the delightful setting," says Robert, who's been a birdwatcher for many years along with his wife Suzanne. "And going out with a guide is a real treat."

Like this Canadian couple, more and more birdwatch-

ers (particularly from Northern Europe) are coming to the western Algarve to watch birds. Part of the East-Atlantic Flyway, places such as the Alvor estuary, Monchique and Sagres are hot spots for birds and provide different habitats and, therefore, different species to observe. In the last 25 years, over 300 species of birds have been seen in the Algarve, and according to Marcial Felgueiras, operations manager at A Rocha, it is estimated that 3.5 to 7.2 billion birds per year make their way through the Sagres area alone. Add to these impressive figures great weather conditions and, for the most of it, an unspoilt countryside landscape, and it's easy to understand why birdwatching is gaining a following in the western Algarve.

Christian association A Rocha has been working in Portugal with the goal of preserving the environment since 1983. Following a decrease in donations in 2008, the association decided to use its scientific expertise to organise birdwatching tours, which are highly sought-after. Now, A Rocha hosts affordable birdwatching weeks for a maximum of eight people, where clients from all over the world travel throughout the Algarve (and sometimes to the Alentejo, too) to watch birds in their natural habitat. And the Algarve, says Marcial, offers plenty of choice: there are routes through the wet areas, such as the Alvor estuary; through the Vincentine coast, the best spot in Portugal for watching soaring birds; and also through Monchique, where mountain birds like the woodpecker and the short-toed treecreeper can be seen. "We always try to ensure that the client has a pleasant time and we try to raise awareness of environmental issues whilst showing people that there's more to the Algarve than sun and sand," says Marcial, adding that the best seasons for



birdwatching are spring, when birds are nesting, and autumn, when they come to the Algarve before flying south. Besides the help of a multilingual guide, accommodation in the association's headquarters and food are also included in the package. "The birds that most people want to see are bee-eaters, hoopoes, red-billed choughs and the azure-winged magpie," notes Marcial. With birdwatching weeks taking place at the end of April and starting again in September, Guillaume adds yet another species to the list: "Flamingos." But the association's tours don't just take place on dry land: after establishing a partnership with Luz-based Beach Hut Watersports, clients can also watch sea birds in action. Whilst water sports company Beach Hut provides the boat and its long nautical expertise,





customers are guided by an experienced ornithologist from A Rocha. "We chose to work with Beach Hut Watersports because they have a good environmental ethic. They follow the rules by heart," explains Marcial. The trips last 2h30min and clients can set off early in the morning from Lagos, Luz or even go all the way to Sagres to watch species you wouldn't otherwise see from the shore, such as storm-petrels, shearwaters and gannets. The birds are lured with bait and in just 30 minutes, twitchers may find themselves surrounded by flocks of up to 2,000 birds. "It's an unforgettable experience," says Paulo Sousa, owner of Beach Hut Watersports. Hosting trips for a minimum of 7 people and a maximum of 11, Paulo adds that the sea trips are targeted at a very specific crowd – true bird lovers. That is the reason why, for now, they only host tours by request and preferably for groups.





Another event that is putting the western Algarve on the birdwatchers map is the Sagres Birdwatching Festival. Organised by the Algarvean cultural and environmental association Almargem and promoted by Vila do Bispo Town Hall, the festival is now in its fourth edition, taking place from September 30 to October 7. Amongst the many activities taking place are several workshops and talks at local schools with the festival's partners, regional university students and even town hall workers, alongside the traditional birdwatching tours throughout the council. This year, organisers are expecting over 1,000 visitors and hopefully more foreigners, as part of the festival's programme will be presented in English. Although one of the organisation's biggest concerns is finding sponsors, Anabela Santos, project coordinator at Almargem, says that this year's programme "hopes to improve what was done last year". ■

www.arocha.org
www.beachhutwatersports.com
www.birdwatchingsagres.com

