

Calling international rescue

Portugal's Ria de Alvor is a hugely important habitat that is being destroyed by neglect and vandalism. It's time to make a stand, says Gerry Rawcliffe.

The Algarve has been a popular destination for British holidaymakers and birders in recent years, and many of the latter and some of the former will be familiar with the Ria de Alvor wetlands.

The Ria de Alvor, situated halfway between Portimão and Lagos, is the most important coastal wetland for wildlife in the western Algarve. It is made up of a lagoon formed by the confluence of four rivers and is protected from the sea by two sand spits. Its 1,700 hectares also comprise dunes, marshes and old salt pans, together with the peninsulas of

Quinta da Rocha and Abicada, with their mix of scrubland, woodland and agricultural habitats. The site is one of the best studied in the Algarve, indeed the whole of Portugal, having been home to the A Rocha Bird Observatory and Field Studies Centre (A Rocha) since 1985.

The wetlands are facing a huge potential threat: a tourist development that would largely destroy the area's wildlife value. What is particularly saddening about this is that the importance of the Ria de Alvor has been fully recognised at local, regional, national and international level. The site

was added to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands' List of Internationally Important Wetlands in 1996 and is part of the Natura 2000 network of protected areas under the EC Habitats Directive.

The Ramsar convention recognises the Ria de Alvor as an "important stopover site for many trans-Saharan passerines", some of which are undoubtedly en route from Britain. Since its earliest days, A Rocha has been running a ringing programme; at present the database contains around 61,000 records of almost 180 species, several of which have British rings. It is not only passerines that benefit from the area – the marshes, mudflats and old salt pans are an important refuelling point for Dunlin, Knot, Sanderling and several other wader species. The site is also important for wintering ducks, Avocet and Greenshank.

All told, more than 150 species regularly use the wetlands for wintering, breeding or passage, 30 of which are European priorities (Annex 1 of the Birds Directive), and the site holds nationally significant breeding populations of Little Tern, Kentish Plover and Black-winged Stilt, as well as such iconic Mediterranean species as European Bee-eater and Red-necked Nightjar. Raptors are well-served too, with 24 species having been recorded, including Eleanor's Falcon and Black-shouldered Kite.

A rarity place in the sun

The Ria de Alvor has turned up more than its fair share of exciting rarities, including White-crowned Black Wheatear, Olive-backed Pipit, Terek Sandpiper, Royal Tern, Paddyfield Warbler, Rustic Bunting and Buff-breasted Sandpiper – all firsts for Portugal. This is not surprising when you consider the variety of habitats, its location just 30 miles from the south-westernmost tip of the European landmass and its being so intensively watched. The Ria de Alvor's total bird list stands at 297, and if all this makes it sound like a warmer, sunnier cross between Fair Isle and Minsmere, maybe that notion isn't so far fetched.

It is not only birds that contribute to the area's remarkable diversity, however; over 600 species of butterfly and moth have been recorded. Plant life is equally important, with several European priority species such as Camphor Thyme and Algarvian Toadflax to be found in this



One of the world's rarest larids, Audouin's Gull is a scarce but regular passage migrant at the Alvor Estuary.

FRAY TIPPER

small corner of the Algarve. Otter and Stripe-necked Terrapin add mammalian and reptilian interest respectively. This rich biodiversity forms the background to an environmental education programme that has seen around 2,000 young people from a variety of groups and schools visit the Ria de Alvor each year.

How can all this be lost? Despite its

well-established status, the majority of the land making up the site has not, in recent times, been under sympathetic ownership. A succession of owners have seen it as just another potential money-spinning golf complex, marina or holiday village, like so much of the rest of the Algarve. That this has not yet come to pass is largely down to the resilient



FRAY TIPPER

The estuary of the Ria de Alvor (main picture) hosts Greater Flamingos (above) and other wetland species in significant numbers.

MEL AND DAN TAY



RICHARD BROOKS

"The wetlands are facing a potential threat – a development that would largely destroy the wildlife value"



The wetlands are home to nationally important breeding colonies of several species, including Kentish Plover.



The Quinta da Rocha peninsula has a mix of scrub, woodland and agricultural habitats.

CHRIS BOYES

for it has been an unprecedented step – it initiated legal proceedings against the owner. The recent news is that the courts have granted an injunction forbidding any further destruction of the protected area, and have also comprehensively rejected the owner's counter-allegations of harassment by named A Rocha staff. However, further legal actions are ongoing to force the owner to mend the harm already done.

Winning these battles would be a major step forward, but this is far from the end of the story. A Rocha has drawn on its long-term studies to produce a proposed management plan for the area. Not only would this safeguard the Ria de Alvor for the future, but it would start to reverse both recent deliberate damage and also the longer-term gradual decline that the site has suffered as a result of some traditional Mediterranean agricultural practices becoming increasingly neglected in recent years.

For this plan to be fully achieved, the land will eventually have to pass into more sympathetic ownership. Although there is no immediate prospect of this happening, the aim is to keep this hope alive by preventing further wilful destruction in the short term. ■

For more on the work of A Rocha International and its affiliates, see www.arocha.org.



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endeavours of the staff at A Rocha, who have worked tirelessly with other wildlife groups in Portugal and with the local community, for whom the estuary is a valuable source of food and income from the shellfishery and fish nursery.

Illegal destruction

This coalition is now facing its toughest challenge yet – the current owner of the property is illegally degrading the area. In 2006, this real estate company bulldozed 36 hectares of priority saltmarsh, in the process destroying one-third of the habitat of Camphor Thyme. Despite the launch of an official investigation and an embargo on harmful activities, further damage was caused in 2007, sometimes under the cover of darkness. Faced with this escalating threat, A Rocha took what



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European Bee-eaters are among the many colourful Mediterranean species to be found in the Ria de Alvor area.

Inset, top and above: disabled students from Lagos benefit from environmental education at the A Rocha centre, where a mural features (from left to right) Serin, Western Bonelli's Warbler, Red-necked Nightjar and Firecrest.

RICHARD BROOKS

