

AQUATIC BIRD CENSUSES IN THE PARQUE NATURAL DA RIA FORMOSA

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Parque Natural da Ria Formosa, Quinte de Marim - Quelfes 8700 Olhao, Portugal

Situated in the south coast of Portugal, the "Parque Natural da Ria Formosa", is the second most important wintering area for the aquatic birds in country. It is a 60 km long lagoon system, stretching between the peninsulas of Ancao and Cacela. It consists of a barrier of five narrow, sandy islands, lying parallel to the coast and protecting the lagoon from the ocean.

The study area includes channels, salt marshes, salinas, tidal flats, islets, dunes, beaches, grassland, agricultural area and freshwater ponds, a total area of 18.400 ha. Like most wetlands, it is a natural area which is characterized by a high degree of ecological diversity and for this reason it is included in the list of sites recognized under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance.

The study area has been visited since 1991, 10 days a month, during the high tide, by car and by boat, covering approximately 95 % of the whole area. During the survey 67 bird species were recorded. According to the IWRB criteria, the area is of international importance, because it supports more than 1 % of the European total population for 6 species during the breeding season: *Egretta garzetta*, *Himantopus himantopus*, *Charadrius alexandrinus*, *Glareola pratincola*, *Porphyrio porphyrio* and *Sterna labifrons*.

It is an important wintering area, with particular emphasis to 13 species of birds from northern and central Europe: *Platalea leucorodia*, *Himantopus himantopus*, *Recurvirostra avosetta*, *Charadrius hiaticula*, *Charadrius alexandrinus*, *Pluvialis squatarola*, *Calidris alpina*, *Limosa limosa*, *Limosa lapponica*, *Tringa erythropus*, *Tringa totanus*, *Tringa nebularia*, *Arenaria interpres* and some species of *Anatidae*. It is also an important resting place for migrants flying from northern Europe to Africa.

If we take the total national data of 1993 January as a reference, the more abundant species are: *Platalea leucorodia* (78 %), *Anas penelope* (55 %), *Anas strepera* (25 %), *Aythya fuligula* (48 %), *Aythya ferina* (33 %), *Fulica atra* (17 %), *Porphyrio porphyrio* (90 %), *Haematopus ostralegus* (62 %), *Himantopus himantopus* (58 %), *Charadrius alexandrinus* (70 %), *Calidris alba* (78 %), *Limosa lapponica* (76 %).

One of the most important part of the Nature park is undoubtedly the Nature Reserve of Ludo, which includes a great diversity of habitats in a small area; forest, agricultural areas, freshwater and salt-water ponds, salinas and salt-marshes, representing an important resting and feeding place for migrant or wintering birds. It also gives shelter to species which rare in Portugal, as *Porphyrio porphyrio*, that has there the only confirmed breeding place in the country. The community of breeding species also includes *Egretta garzetta*, *Ixobrychus minutus*, *Ardea purpurea*, *Ciconia ciconia*, *Gallinula chloropus*, *Fulica atra*, *Porzana pusilla*, *Tachybaptus ruficollis*, *Rallus aquaticus*, *Anas platyrhynchos* and *Anas strepera*.