

## A Foreign Interlude (or Staying in One Place but somewhere else)

We have a more relaxed regime at the monastery than in former years and a chance to go away for a couple of weeks holiday each year. A casual remark after Sunday Mass led to an invitation to visit a retired couple now living in the Algarve in southern Portugal. EasyJet delivered me to Faro airport on the 9<sup>th</sup> May and my host Jerry then took me on a forty-mile drive into the range of hills overlooking the coast. It was an introduction not only to the heat which was to catch up with us later in England but also to a type of land management which we have largely lost: a medieval system in which every inch of the land, and every tree, is owned and cultivated by someone but in an enormous muddle of small plots. It was still possible to see old couples dressed head to toe against the heat and labouring with backs bent to cut the hay by hand or to clear the undergrowth below the many almond, fig or olive trees on the sides of the hills, or travelling together from one plot to the next on the back of a mule.

This way of life is on the wane but no doubt helps to account for the abundance of House Sparrows, Corn Buntings and Larks which are so scarce now in the English countryside. The dawn chorus was indeed dominated by House Sparrows with the occasional support of a Blackbird, a Hoopoe and a Golden Oriole. There was, at first, a distinct lack of birds of prey and a visit to the local bar (for research purposes only!) provided a possible answer – the locals are mad keen hunters and the bar displayed a variety of game including, of all things, an Egyptian Mongoose.

True to my monastic vow of stability (the car wasn't always available) I chose to give the immediate locality a good working over. Since this was very hilly and full of dogs a mountain bike proved very useful. Covering the same ground several times meant that not only was I able to verify several birds which I wasn't too sure of, such as Thelka Lark and Rufous Bush Robin, but also to detect a possible movement of birds of prey from Spain, coming each day just for the hunting. These included both Booted and Short-toed Eagles, Black Kite and Common Buzzard. White storks also came up from the coast to feed. The many streams and ponds were full of life including Marsh Frogs, possible Viperine Snakes and pond Terrapins. Lizards and Moorish Geckos were also frequently seen. The best bird had to be a White-Rumped Swift which was seen from above among a flock of Pallid and Common Swifts. This is a species only recently arrived in southern Spain and now known to breed just a little further north in Portugal.

Br. John

