



BirdWatchIreland
protecting birds and biodiversity

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Mr. António Luís Santos da Costa, Prime Minister of the Portuguese Republic.

Mr. Marcelo Nuno Duarte Rebelo de Sousa, President of the Portuguese Republic.

Mr. Miguel de Almeida e Sousa, Portuguese Ambassador to Ireland (sconsular.dublin@mne.pt and dublin@mne.pt)

May 26th 2020

Impact of Montijo airport development on conservation of birds of Irish concern

Your Excellencies,

Prime Minister da Costa,
President Rebelo de Sousa,
Ambassador de Almeida e Sousa,

With this letter we wish to raise our concern with regards to the proposed development of a new international airport serving Lisbon - Montijo Airport – which would be located near the geographical centre of the Tagus Estuary. This matter is of concern to us because this estuary is one of the most important wintering and stopover sites for waterbirds that migrate along the East Atlantic Flyway, including many birds that we consider our very own and that we share with you and all other countries along this migratory route.

The Tagus estuary is the most important wetland in Portugal for waterbirds, and a major stepping stone for migratory species that breed in northern latitudes and migrate south to spend the winter in southern Europe and Africa. Every year, thousands of migratory birds use this estuary for resting and foraging during their migration, and thousands more stay throughout the entire winter period. More than 250 species are known to use this area, many of which are declining and some are already threatened with extinction.

Most birds that use the Tagus estuary feed on the vast intertidal areas during low-tide periods and move to roosting places during the high-tide. The suggested position of the airport will cause substantial disturbance to thousands of birds. Moreover, the constant movement of birds in the areas surrounding the proposed new airport, including large species like cormorants, flamingos, ducks and geese, overlaps with take-off and landing routes. This will lead to substantial risks to aircraft operations and safety because of the possibility of bird strikes, which in turn may be used to justify additional measures such as bird culls at a later time and once the airport is operational.

The Tagus estuary is classified as a Nature Reserve under the Portuguese network of protected areas, and as a Special Protection Area, Site of Community Interest, and RAMSAR Site under national law, European Union directives and international treaties. It serves a similar purpose as our very own **Dublin Bay which is also a Ramsar Site, Special Protected Area, Important Bird & Biodiversity Area, and a Unesco Biosphere.**

- The Tagus Estuary is a major wintering ground for migratory waterbirds. Indeed, it has been cited as one of the most important wetlands for wading birds in the East Atlantic Flyway [1]. Impacts upon these birds will not only affect those birds wintering at the Tagus, but may also affect their survival and migration, and ultimately their ability to return to breeding grounds in good enough physical condition to breed successfully. This would therefore be a **population level impact** in that the effects would be seen at the population level in terms of declines. A declining flyway/global population means that the effects would then be seen at every wetland site along a species' migratory route, including Ireland. Good examples here are the Icelandic Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa islandica*) or Greenland breeding Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) which rely heavily on



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wintering grounds in the UK, Ireland, Spain and Portugal - hence impacts upon one of their main wintering grounds such as the Tagus Estuary has great potential to affect the entire flyway population and hence impact upon Ireland's over-wintering numbers.

- The Tagus Estuary also supports important numbers of the Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa limosa*) which is near threatened on the IUCN Red List. The Tagus is important both as a wintering ground and as a stopover site for birds that migrate onwards to West Africa for winter. This population is highly vulnerable and an impact to such an important site as the Tagus, could be critical.
- The Tagus Estuary is a major stopover or passage site for a large number of northerly-breeding wading birds such as Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) [2]. Scientific research has shown that impacts along migratory routes can **limit populations**. Long-distance migratory waterbirds can travel vast distances, often over inhospitable terrain such as deserts and oceans and staging/stopover sites are vital for feeding, resting and the regaining of energy reserves for the onward journey. Hence staging or passage sites are vitally important to the conservation of a species – not just in a Portuguese context, but in a global context, and any population declines resulting from impacts to a staging ground will be felt in any country that plays host to the species at some point in their life cycle. For many species, this could mean that our numbers of wintering birds in Ireland decline.
- The Tagus Estuary has been the site of a great amount of scientific research concerning migratory waterbirds (e.g. University of Aveiro/University of East Anglia, UK) especially wading birds. Researchers in Portugal and Ireland have regularly collaborated, especially through the International Wader Study Group. The Tagus-based research has served to educate and inform waterbird science at a global level and is especially important in terms of wading bird ecology. The threat to this important site, and the species which rely on it, is therefore magnified.

The effort and resources we devote into safeguarding important sites in our country for the benefit of migratory birds, often in challenging circumstances, will be severely affected if a key site like the Tagus is destroyed – the birds need the entire chain of sites to survive, and it is extremely worrying and disappointing for us to conserve birds in Ireland if they will not be well taken care of in Portugal.

We therefore urge you to reconsider this decision and to suspend this damaging development, which will result in high levels of disturbance on this very fragile ecosystem.

Yours sincerely,

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[1] Catry, T., Alves, J., Andrade, J., Costa, H., Dias, M., Fernandes, P., . . . Granadeiro, J. (2011). Long-term declines of wader populations at the Tagus estuary, Portugal: A response to global or local factors? *Bird Conservation International*, 21(4), 438-453. doi:10.1017/S0959270910000626

[2] Martins, R.C., Catry, T., Santos, C.D., Palmeirim, J.M., Granadeiro, J.P. (2013) Seasonal variations in the diet and foraging behaviour of dunlins *Calidris alpina* in a south European estuary: improved feeding conditions for northward migrants. *PLoS One*. 2013;8(12):e81174. Published 2013 Dec 3. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0081174