

La Mata-Torre Vieja lagoons are the in the county of Vega Baja del Segura, occupying part of the municipal boundaries of Guardamar del Segura, Torre Vieja, the Montesinos and Rojales. Along with El Fondo and the Santa Pola Salt Flats, these form a triangle of wetlands of international importance in the south of Alicante.

La Mata and Torre Vieja Nature Reserve has a surface area of 3,700 hectares. Of these, 2,100 are stretches of water, while the rest is taken up by the surrounding areas (1,400 hectares of the Torre Vieja lagoon and 700 of la Mata).

The two lagoons are separated by an anticline known as "El Chaparral". A channel connects both depressions which also communicate artificially with the sea by means of a further canal known as "El Acequión", by means of which a saltworks unit is formed. La Mata lagoon acts as a heating tank while the salt harvest is taken in the Torre Vieja side.

The soils in the reserve are salty and the climate is semi-arid with annual rainfalls under 300 mm and high temperatures.

There are salt marsh zones, reed and rush beds and hillier woodland.

The salt marsh is present around the lagoons with a high salt level.

The reed and rush beds are located around the edges of the pools with less pronounced salinity and flooded with water.



Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*)



Artemia salina

Fauna

Birds are the fauna group of greatest relevance in the Nature Reserve, consisting of almost a hundred species. Along with El Fondo and Santa Pola, la Mata and Torrevieja Nature Reserve constitutes an enclave of wetlands of crucial importance for the development of the biological cycles of numerous species which use it in both their migrations and in their nesting and wintering.

For example, the flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) feeds and rests in la Mata. There have been concentrations of up to 2.000 individuals of this bird and around 3.000 eared grebes (*Podiceps nigricollis*) during migration.

Among the nesting birds there are the black-winged stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*), the common shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*), Montagu's harrier (*Circus pygargus*) and the avocet

(*Recurvirostra avosetta*), whose numbers are enough to give the zone international importance.

There are also populations of snowy plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), common tern (*Sterna hirundo*), little tern (*Sterna albifrons*) and the stone curlew (*Burhinus oedicanus*) around the lagoons.

Apart from these birds, large numbers of ducks from nearby game reserves come for refuge during the hunting season, taking advantage of the status of National Game Refuge which the lagoon has had since 1989.

The most characteristic invertebrate in the lagoons is *Artemia salina*. This small crustacean, which along with the larvae of the chironomid mosquito, constitutes the fundamental diet of the numerous bird fauna of these damp zones, tend to live in waters with a high level of salinity, which is why it is so common on the edges of la Mata lagoon.



Flora

The really aquatic vegetation is almost non-existent in this type of wetlands due to the high salinity of the waters. Nevertheless in the areas surrounding the lagoons there are the best redoubts of dry and damp salt marsh vegetation in the Valencian Community.

In some parts of the Reserve there is a widespread presence of the order Arthrocnemalia, within which the formations of *Arthrocnemum macrostachyum* and *Juncus subulatus* are important. Also the salt steppes of the Limonietalia and the species *Senecio auricula subsp. auricula* form several associations of European interest in the zone.

The wet salt marsh, made up of formations of reeds and rushes (*Typho Phragmitetum chrysanthi* and *Elymo-Juncetum maritimi*), appears in places where surface water accumulates, such as on the northern edge of la Mata lagoon and in some isolated sections of the Torrevieja pool.

At the southern edge of la Mata lagoon there is hill vegetation, consisting of the Mediterranean kermes oak brushland (*Chamaeropo-Rhamnetum Lycioidis*), Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis*), thyme and mat-weed.



Grapevine culture



Marine salt

History

La Mata and Torrevieja lagoons were used as early as 1321, when they were given by the Crown to the city of Orihuela on condition that they were not disposed of. Later on, in 1389, the Crown itself gave the same city the possibility of transforming Torrevieja lagoon into an albufera pool in order to make a living on the fishing, but the building of “el Acequión” which communicated it with the sea was delayed for almost a century, and Orihuela gave up the real donation in 1482, when this project was finally seen not to be feasible through no fish entering the lagoon due to the high salinity of its waters.

A Royal Order issued in 1759 ordered the ownership of both lagoons to go back to the

State. A few years later the first tests for salt extraction were made in la Mata lagoon.

The organised saltworks business started after the good quality of the product obtained was observed. The first extractions of salt were made in the natural port of La Mata, but after finding out that the conditions for carrying out this task were better in Torrevieja, the works were moved.

In 1950, after a period of intermittent renting out to private people and extraction companies, the industry was taken over by the Nueva Compañía Arrendataria de las Salinas de Torrevieja y la Mata S.A., the present contractor.



"El Acequión"

ROUTE 1 (yellow): on foot

The route on foot has an itinerary including most of the reserve's ecosystems. The route allows the visitor to see an extensive panorama of the whole park, the fauna and flora, the typical plant formations and the birds, the real celebrities in any wetland.

El Acequión is an artificially opened channel to allow sea water in, which constitutes a small representation of the sea habitat. You can see species of sea fauna and flora such as crabs, algae, actinia, possidonia, worms, polychaetes, fish, etc. The water goes into la Mata through gravity, due to the fact that the lagoon is lower than sea level.

From here you can see the salt marsh vegetation, located on the edges of the lagoon. These plants

have internal juices with high concentrations of salt to be able to support the high salt concentration in the soil and the high temperatures, without becoming dehydrated. Some of them eliminate the surplus salt through the leaves, which gives them a whitish colour.

From the observatory you can see the different water fowl in the lagoon. Depending on the time the visitor comes to the Reserve, you can see different types of birds, as some of these stop in this place to rest and feed on their long trip to Africa, while the others spend the winter because where they live, the Arctic tundra, is normally inhabitable at that time. In spring they go back to their customary home. Other birds on the other hand live in the Reserve all year long. These are sedentary.



From the observatory you can see all kinds of birds, from seagulls, snowy plovers, black-winged stilts, avocets and common terns, to flamingos and eared grebes. Silence must be absolute here to prevent the birds from being scared away.

The third stop on the way is in the Pine wood. From a distance you can already see the reed, a typical plant in this type of zones whose presence indicates the existence of fresh water. At this last stop there is a large group of Aleppo pines and stone pines apart from eucalyptus trees, the latter being the result of artificial repopulation.

In the Pine wood you can also see a large salt marsh zone. The visitor can look for the tracks left by animals on their way through, attempting to differentiate the different types of pines or just rest in the shade. Whatever way you choose you can enjoy your stay in the Reserve.

The fourth stop is the Eared Grebe observatory. Concentrations of thousands of eared grebes have been seen in the Nature Reserve, becoming the main wintering spot in the Iberian Peninsula. La Mata is a resting and feeding area for the birds as they migrate.



ROUTE 2 (red): by bicycle

The non-technical route is 5.200 metres in length. It has a rather steep rising section, but it is worth the effort to complete the itinerary to be able to get a full view. The route goes through a zone relatively far from the lagoon to prevent disturbance to water fowl. We recommend not leaving the route marked out and respecting the whole environment.

Starting from the Information Centre along the earth road heading towards the cemetery, you will soon reach the asphalted road, and by continuing straight along until leaving this you will connect up with the earth track which goes up to the doves.

Mata lagoon from the dovescots



General view from “el Altillo” and path that leads to the Information Centre

On the way up you will see the pine wood on the right hand, as well as a good view of la Mata lagoon.

When you go past the seventh dovecot, turn 180 degrees and take a narrow path between pine trees. At roughly 50 metres following the path you come to the highest point in the Reserve. You can enjoy the view of the two lagoons, the Pine wood, the Mediterranean and on fine days, even see as far as the island of Tabarca. From this point the route starts again, downhill this time, and remembering to take the first turnoff on the right. The fast way down makes up for the uphill stretch!

When you reach the end of this path, a way turns off to the left between grapevine terraces. A wonderful view of a mass of reeds close by denotes the presence of fresh water. In the background you can see the lagoon.

You finally come to the welcome shade offered by the Pine wood. This is an ideal stop to rest and get your breath back. This repopulated part of the forest is formed of eucalyptus and pines (stone pine and Aleppo). To get back to the starting point you just have to take the path back up to the Information Centre.



Visitas de interés

You can visit the following points of interest at la Mata-Torrevieja Nature Reserve:

- Information Centre: there is well thought-out and detailed information available for the visitor, making use of the latest technology for this purpose. We can see for example the representative *Artemia salina* (a small crustacean abounding in the lagoons and which gives them their particular reddish colouring) through a microscope from a video monitor in real time.

Apart from the explanatory panels which inform about the characteristic flora and fauna, it is possible to observe the lagoons and the fauna which live in them through the remotely controlled cameras from the interior of the centre.

- El Acequión (canal)
- El Altillo (vantage point)
- Pine wood (rest area)
- Remains of old watchtower
- Eared grebe Observatory
- Black-winged stilt Observatory
- Sooty tern Observatory
- Avocet Observatory
- Snowy Plover Observatory



F. Muntada

Avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*)

Torreveija. The origins of the city date back to the early 18th century, in the form of a watchtower, with its keepers, and a castle-fortress on the inlet now occupied by the city. Around 1759 a small village of fishermen from nearby areas gradually grew up around the tower. In 1830 the first Torreveija council was set up.

The present economic driving force in Torreveija is tourism, though salt and fishing have traditionally been the most important trades here. But without a doubt, Torreveija is also internationally well-known for its Habanera song competitions.



B. Albiach

Observatory near la Mata lagoon

Places to visit in Torreveija: the Saltworks, the Sea and Salt Museum, the promenade, the leisure port, the ancient watchtower and its jetty in La Mata, the Torre del Moro, the Casino.

Guardamar del Segura. Its great archaeological wealth makes this a place of reference for scientists and researchers. One of its most important pieces is the bust of the Lady of Guardamar, a limestone sculpture even more ancient than the also famous Lady of Elche, dating back to the 4th century B.C.



Vantage point in the Pine wood

The municipality has numerous nature areas and beaches of great quality, which is what leads to the great development of the tourist sector.

You can visit the Iberian age village-necropolis (Cabezo Lucero), Guardamar Castle, the dunes and mouth of the river Segura, the Reina Sofía park, the Archaeological and Ethnological Museum (Casa de la Cultura) and others.

You can also have a look around the municipalities of La Mata (Roman jetty and ancient watchtowers), Los Montesinos, Rojales, Miguel de Salinas, and in general.

Torre vieja lagoon

Accommodation

There is a wide range of hotel accommodation available in Guardamar del Segura and Torrevieja. There are also a large number of camping sites located in the main tourist centres

Cuisine

In Torrevieja y Santa Pola, the visitor can enjoy a wide range of rice dishes, some of which are the arroz a banda or the paella marinera. Other typical dishes of local cooking are also of interest, such as stew and meatballs. Nevertheless, the great fishing fleet and the richness of its waters make Santa Pola a city with excellent fish. We advise you to try plain and simple fish and seafood, with no need to opt for elaborate dishes.

Accesses

La Mata-Torrevieja lagoons are in the province of Alicante in the county known as Vega Baja del Segura, occupying part of the municipal areas of Guardamar del Segura, Torrevieja, Los Montesinos and Rojales.

The Nature 's Information Centre, located in the former forestry house close to Torrelamata, is 200 metres from road N-332 as it leads through this Alicante town. The Costa Azul bus which links Alicante with Cartagena has a stop 200 metres from the Information Centre.