

The Canaries – Whales, Dolphins & Other Wildlife of La Palma

Naturetrek Tour Report

27 September - 4 October 2013



Semi-palmated Plover by Robert Buxton



Blainville's Beaked Whale by Tom Brereton



Cory's Shearwaters by Tom Brereton



Indian Red Admiral by Tom Brereton

Report compiled by Tom Brereton

Images courtesy of Robert Buxton and Tom Brereton



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Summary

Highlights: Blainville's Beaked Whale, daily Bottlenose Dolphins, La Palma Blue Tit, Semi-palmated Plover and a wide variety of endemic/range restricted species in Europe including Island Canary, Canary Island Chiffchaff, Berthelot's Pipit, Plain Swift, Barbary Falcon, African Grass Blue, Canary Blue, La Palma Large White, La Palma Brimstone, Canary Red Admiral, Plain Tiger, Monarch, Epaulet Skimmer, Canary Wall Lizard, Canary Gecko, Madeiran Pipistrelle, Atlantic Flying Squid and Loggerhead Turtle

Cultural and Scenic Highlights: The 16th Century church in Tazacorte, and the volcanoes around Los Canarios

Day 1

Friday 27th September

Weather: warm and sunny

Our mid-afternoon flight from Gatwick departed on time, and by early evening we had landed in La Palma in pleasant warm and sunny weather. We drove for just under an hour across the island to our base for the holiday, the Hotel Sol de la Palma situated in the low key resort of Puerto Naos. There was ample time to have dinner and relax before our natural history adventure ahead over the coming week.

Day 2

Saturday 28th September

Weather: variable. Hot and sunny on the west coast, cloudy with rain on the east

We got the timing of our pre-breakfast walk wrong today, not realising how late sunrise was this far south in Europe. Several of the group rendezvoused at 07:15 as planned, but it was still rather dark (!), with 'out of hours' fieldwork aborted and rescheduled for the evening. On the positive side, several Madeiran Pipistrelle bats were seen, before we headed off for breakfast.

Our goal for today was to see ancient laurel forest woodland, which occupies much of the higher ground on the island, being especially accessible on the eastern side of the island. After the first of many excellent buffet breakfasts we headed back east across the island, stopping briefly in Santa Cruz to watch Atlantic Herring Gulls in the harbour. A Clouded Yellow was spotted along the roadside, as we headed north along the coast.

We stopped at Puntandella to pick up supplies for lunch, giving the group chance to stretch their legs. It was soon clear from this stop, that we were fortunate in having a highly skilled and inquisitive group of travellers, who in this short window of opportunity managed to spot Mediterranean Tree Frog, Geranium Bronze and Lang's Short-tailed Blue – all in a tiny garden complete with a tabby cat! Lang's Short-tailed Blue was particularly surprising as its presence has not been described on La Palma before. Following a record earlier in the week by Lyn Fomison of Butterfly Conservation, our sighting may have represented only the second record for the island! Another good sighting was Tenerife Wall Gecko, spotted on a tree trunk by David. This is a globally rare Red Listed species, being confined to Tenerife and La Palma.

At Cubo de la Galga we headed up the trail through beautiful laurel forest. Here we saw a number of specialities including Canary Islands Chiffchaff, Chaffinch, White-tailed Laurel Pigeon and Dark-tailed Laurel (Bolle's) Pigeon, getting particularly good views of the latter. Common forest birds seen included Buzzard, Robin, Blackcap and Blackbird whilst several Canary Island Goldcrests were heard. The highlight though was seeing the islands only endemic bird La Palma Blue Tit, with at least three individuals detected. The weather was cloudy and drizzly, with the only butterfly seen being a Speckled Wood. However, the striking moth *Ascotis fortunata*, which is endemic to Macronesia, was seen roosting on a rock face.

We had a picnic lunch at the entrance to the gorge. The weather closed in thereafter with a drive further north to Los Tilos failing to locate any improved weather conditions in prime laurel forest habitat. Knowing how variable the climate is across the island, we decided to head back early to Puerto Naos in the hope of better weather. Sure enough, the lower altitude areas of the western part of the island were bathed in glorious sunshine and some 11°C warmer, with the temperature reaching 28 °C! On our way back Chough, Spanish Sparrow and numerous Kestrels were collectively seen from the minibuses.

Whilst some took opportunity to either relax in the hotel or go for a swim in one of the hotel pools, several of the group opted for another natural history excursion with Tom and Marcus. A walk was made along the coast to the pretty and staunchly traditional tiny fishing village of La Bombilla. Along the way, we saw good numbers of the endemic La Palma Lizard, African Grass Blue butterflies and Red-veined Darter dragonflies, together with a stunning male Scarlet Darter, whilst a Sardinian Warbler was heard. In the evening we followed what was to be our routine for the week, with a log call over a beer by the pool, followed by a delicious buffet meal in the hotel restaurant.

Day 3

Sunday 29th September

Weather: Warm and sunny

Today we headed to the port of Tazacorte for the first of our boat trips in search of whales and dolphins. After a leisurely coffee in the harbour cafe we boarded the Fancy II. We had timed this trip really well, as the weather was fantastic - hot and sunny, with the sea smooth.

Kim was delighted to see and photograph a Flying Fish soon after leaving the outer harbour, as this was his main target species for the trip. Good numbers of Cory's Shearwaters were seen once we got into deeper offshore waters, with some really excellent views obtained. We began steaming north, but were diverted by a call from a fisherman who had seen a pod of dolphins. It was not long before we located the pod. There were about 30 animals in the group including several calves and juveniles and we were able to watch them for about an hour. The dolphins were in playful mood, and we had fantastic views both above water as they breached the water surface right in front of the boat just metres away and in bow-riding mode underwater, viewable from the boat's glass-bottom viewing area. It was a simply stunning encounter! After the dolphin activity, tasty fish/vegetable soup with crusty bread and garlic butter was served, which was well received by all.

In the afternoon we saw more Cory's Shearwaters, a Flying Squid was seen briefly, but the highlight was a group of three Blainville's Beaked Whales - a top target for the trip. The animals surfaced a few times several hundred metres ahead of the ship allowing the entire group to get on to them, but alas did not reappear as the boat got closer to where we first spotted them. Following more scanning whilst being served ice creams and fresh fruit by the friendly boat crew, we arrived back in port late afternoon.

With a bit of spare time, we headed into Tazacorte giving the group opportunity to stroll around this lovely old town, go for a drink or see the 15th Century church which is the oldest religious building on the island. Karen and Martin explored the town's periphery spotting several more La Palma Lizards and a small flock of Spanish Sparrows, whilst six Canaries, a second Lang's Short-tailed Blue and a Clouded Yellow were seen by others. Back at the hotel, it was a lovely warm evening and land birds were active with Island Canary, Sardinian Warbler and Canary Islands Chiffchaff seen in and around the hotel grounds, and large numbers of Plain Swifts overhead.

Day 4

Monday 30th September

Weather: variable. Warm and sunny on the west coast, foggy in the south

A pre-breakfast seawatch produced a light passage of Cory's Shearwaters. Our plan today was to explore the southern part of the island. After passing through Los Canarios, we took the winding road down to the Faro de Fuencaliente through spectacular volcanic scenery. Several brief stops along this road yielded small numbers of Choughs, Canaries, Kestrels, Berthelot's Pipits, a Dappled White and an exotic-looking Plain Tiger butterfly. In low scrub by the Faro de Fuencaliente (lighthouse) we had excellent views of Spectacled Warbler, Sardinian Warbler and Berthelot's Pipit. A walk around the salt pans, which are still worked in a traditional way, yielded a selection of passage waders including Ringed Plover, Turnstone, Sanderling and Dunlin. Out to sea, small numbers of Cory's Shearwaters were passing and Mary alerted us to some whales swimming north that were surprisingly close inshore. Views through the telescope revealed the animals had sharply sloping forehead's and short beaks confirming them as our second sighting of rare Blainville's Beaked Whale in just two days! A pod of three Bottlenose Dolphins were also seen.

After visiting the salt pans we headed north from Los Canarios to take a rather fog bound picnic lunch near Las Caletas. Here in the gloom, Kim spotted a very obliging and photogenic Robber Fly. After lunch we visited the St Antonys Volcano, with the majority of the group opting for a walk around the spectacular circular crater.

As an alternative, Karen, Martin, Kim and Gillian joined Marcus and Tom to explore the volcanic slopes, where there were small numbers of Canaries and Berthelot's Pipits and of note a juvenile Northern Wheatear, which is a scarce visitor to the island.

On the way back to Puerto Naos, we made a brief stop to check out a scrubby and flowery area along the road near a La Laguna where eagle-eyed Kim spotted our first Canary Blue butterfly of the holiday resting in one of the trees. Back at the hotel Mary, Karen, Martin, Kim and Gillian joined Marcus and Tom for a short wander over some waste ground nearby, where Red-veined Darters were basking, Field Crickets were chirping and good numbers of African Grass Blues and three Plain Tiger butterflies were seen. Whilst running through the wildlife log in the warm evening sun, large numbers of Plain Swifts were screaming overhead, whilst a Grey Wagtail flew over.

Day 5

Tuesday 1st October

Weather: Warm and sunny

Today we headed to the port of Tazacorte to board the Fancy II for our second pelagic in search of whales and dolphins. This time our sea journey took us in a southerly direction towards the southern tip of the island. Once again it was warm and sunny, with temperatures reaching 26°C. As with our previous sea trip we were treated to regular sightings of Cory's Shearwaters and marvellous views of Bottlenose Dolphins, comprising a pod of a dozen animals which were watched for over an hour playing all around the boat. As we returned towards Tazacorte mid-afternoon, a Loggerhead Turtle and several Flying Fish were seen close to the boat near the harbour mouth rounding off another exciting boat trip.

On leaving Tazacorte we travelled north along winding roads to the Mirador El Time, which affords panoramic views over the central part of the island out towards Los Llanos de Aridane and El Paso. The cafe at the mirador proved popular for some who enjoyed a refreshing drink, whilst Tom, Marcus, Kim, Gillian, Martin and Karen headed down a steep road in search of wildlife. This proved a productive spot for butterflies with Canary Grass Blue, Canary Blue, Small Copper, Long-tailed Blue and two more Lang's Short-tailed Blues all logged. In the surrounding scrub Sardinian Warbler, Canary Island Chiffchaff and Island Canary were seen, whilst numerous Canary Wall Lizards and Red-veined Darters gave excellent views along the track. Back at the cafe we reconvened and all the group members got onto a fly-over Barbary Falcon.

On our drive back to the hotel near Todoque, Martin spotted a Monarch from the minibus, which necessitated a rapid stop! Both buses soon emptied and we were treated to excellent views of two individuals flitting between flowery bushes along the roadside. At the hotel, sightings included a flyover Grey Heron and Rabbit.

Day 6

Wednesday 2nd October

Weather: variable. Hot and sunny on the west coast, cloudy with rain in the centre

After an early morning seawatch, which produced large numbers of Cory's Shearwaters, we headed inland to El Paso located in the middle of the island. This is a fascinating area of mixed farmland bordered by Canary Pine Forest which supports a distinct bird community. Unfortunately, the weather was poor when we arrived and

with low cloud and drizzle so we retreated into the nearby National Park visitor centre enjoying the informative display and film about the islands history and wildlife.

After visiting the centre, thankfully the weather had improved and we undertook a circular walk through the farmland. There were impressive numbers of Chough feeding in the heavily horse grazed fields including around 300 in a single flock! Scrubby areas held Sardinian Warbler, Berthelot's Pipit, Blackcap and Canary Island Chiffchaff, whilst six Linnets and 60 Island Canaries were seen in weedy fields. The weather wasn't great, so it was perhaps not surprising that we failed to locate any Stone Curlews, which was a target bird. It was just about warm enough for butterfly activity, with our first Meadows Browns of the holiday seen.

With drizzle returning, we headed through high altitude Pine Forest to the El Pilar recreational area, where we were able to picnic in a purpose built shelter out of the rain. It was chilly, but group spirits were high and the picnic was enthusiastically received once more. The only birds detected in the vicinity of the picnic area were Chaffinch and Canary Goldcrest.

After lunch, we continued in an easterly direction, descending first through laurel forest, then small scale cultivated farmland in the suburbs of Breña Baja. Our objective here was to see the famous 'Dragos Gemeleos' Dragon Tree situated between Breña Baja and Breña Alta. This tree lived up to our expectations - towering high above the surrounding farmland it was simply stunning! In the surrounding farmland we saw Island Canary and the butterflies Small White and Canary Speckled Wood. We now had our eye in and several smaller Dragon Trees were seen on our drive through Breña Baja down to the coast.

Our final stop of the day was the coastline near the small holiday resort of Los Cancajos south of Santa Cruz. With smooth seas, scanning for dolphins and whales seemed too good an opportunity to miss. Almost immediately we picked up a feeding group of three Bottlenose Dolphins, which stayed on view for the remainder of our visit. Along the rocky coastline Common Sandpiper and Plain Tiger were seen briefly, along with large numbers of brightly coloured Red Rock Crabs roosting on the tideline.

On our way back to Puerto Naos, we watched the thermometer on the car rise from a low of 14.5°C at the top of the mountain pass near El Paso, to 26 °C near the bottom. The difference of 11.5°C in the space of just 10km as the crow flies, highlighting the extraordinary range in microclimates found on the island over such a small area.

Back at the hotel we met up with David and Gina who had spent the day celebrating Gina's birthday, and letting nature come to them, with a Common Sandpiper seen on the edge of one of the hotel swimming pools! In the early evening sunshine, Tom, Marcus, Mary, Karen, Martin, Kim and Gillian searched the waste ground near the hotel, which was proving to be an excellent location for observing and photographing basking insects. Sightings included Emperor Dragonfly, Red-veined Darter, Canary Blues and Plain Tiger. Rather unusually, a dead Plain Swift was found by Martin. At the log call, we toasted Gina's birthday with a chilled bottle of Cava.

Day 7

Thursday 3rd October

Weather: variable. Warm with sunny spells but windy

This morning we left the hotel earlier as we needed to undertake a longer drive, as the departure port of our third and final boat trip had been moved from Tazacorte to Santa Cruz owing to the windy weather on the west coast.

On the plus side, this gave us the opportunity to cover new ground exploring waters on the east side of the island.

The drive across the island produced our only Ravens of the trip. We embarked the Fancy II at 11:00 and took a southerly course. Sea conditions were far better than on the west coast, but still rather choppy, restricting us to coastal waters. As on other days at sea, good numbers of Cory's Shearwaters and Atlantic Herring Gulls were seen. We switched back north, finding yet another pod of Bottlenose Dolphins totalling seven animals, which once again performed extremely well in front of and underneath the boat. One of the animals had really distinct dorsal markings, recognisable as one of the animals we had seen off Tazacorte earlier in the week, whilst a juvenile in the group was breaching fully clear of the water on a regular basis in spectacular fashion. We headed north beyond Santa Cruz, but eventually had to turn around with worsening sea conditions, though an Atlantic Flying Squid was seen. Back at the port we met up with Martin and Karen who had spent the day wildlife watching around Santa Cruz, seeing amongst other things our only Epaulet Skimmer dragonfly of the trip.

Late afternoon we visited the banana plantation irrigation ponds at Las Martellas. Though not the most scenic of places, this can be a productive area for birding with a number of rarities having been recorded in recent years. Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper and three Little Egrets were amongst the waterbirds found, whilst in one of the basins there were large numbers of Iberian Water Frogs. Red-veined Darters were common in this area and a Plain Tiger was seen.

Day 8

Friday 4th October

Weather: Mostly warm and sunny

We checked out of the hotel this morning and in sunny weather returned to the Cuba de la Galga, where our plan was to try and connect with more butterflies which had eluded us on our previous visit which has been made in cool and cloudy weather. We had an excellent morning at the gorge, spending much of our time in the dry valley south of the main road, where we saw Canary Island Large White, Canary Brimstone, Canary Red Admiral, Canary Blue, Plain Tiger, Geranium Bronze and good numbers of Canary Speckled Wood. Amongst birds seen were Sparrowhawk, La Palma Blue and Canary Island Goldcrest.

After a picnic lunch at the gorge, we headed north east to the pretty coastal village of San Andrés. Here Marcus had brief views of a distant Beaked Whale sp., whilst for the sixth day in a row we saw Bottlenose Dolphins. Thereafter we drove to the foothills above Santa Cruz to visit the Juan Martin Nature Reserve. Though it was not possible to gain access, we got a good feel for the habitat, seeing numerous Juniper trees which are now scarce on the island.

Our final wildlife stop of the holiday was a small area of disused gravel pits conveniently located immediately adjacent to the airport. Our first impressions were that the pools were devoid of birds. However, as we started to scan the muddy margins a few waders were spotted including Turnstone, Whimbrel, Curlew and a small flock of Ringed Plover. Amongst the Ringed Plovers, one of the birds was noticeably smaller and paler and an immediate cause of much interest. Marcus managed to locate the bird in the telescope and a number of features were noted, including a narrow pale eye ring and distinct webbing between both outer and inner toes, which raised our suspicions that further that rather amazingly this was a Semi-palmated Plover. With only 45 minutes to go before check-in (!), we decided to flush the bird and heard the diagnostic Spotted Redshank like call, confirming this beyond any reasonable doubt as a Semi-palmated Plover!! A remarkable record, a fifth for Spain,

a first for the Canary Islands and a superb way to end the holiday in extra time! We alerted local birder Robert Burton, who took some excellent photographs of the bird the next and subsequent days.

At Heathrow we collected our baggage and said our goodbyes. This had been a great holiday with much wildlife interest. Furthermore, given the number of interesting discoveries in what is an area little visited by naturalists, this felt as much a research expedition as a holiday at times!

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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September/October						
			28	29	30	1	2	3	4
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>		100	90	150	125	70	200
2	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				1	2	2	
3	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>						3	
4	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	20	10	25	12	8	16	6
5	Barbary Falcon	<i>Falco pelegrinoides</i>				1			
6	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>							1
7	Eurasian Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	6			1	2	1	1
8	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			1				4
9	Semi-palmated Plover	<i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>							1
10	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>							2
11	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>							1
12	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>						1	
13	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					2	1	
14	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>						1	
15	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			11				9
16	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			2				
17	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			1				
18	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	12	170	12	50	20	77	30
19	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				1			
20	Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Dark-tailed Laurel Pigeon	<i>Columba bollii</i>	5						
22	White-tailed Laurel Pigeon	<i>Columba junoniae</i>	10						
23	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	2	60	70	25	120	50	20
25	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	6		15	2	350	28	20
26	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>						2	
27	La Palma Blue Tit	<i>Parus palmensis</i>	3						1
28	Canary Islands Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus canariensis</i>	20	5	6	6	5	1	10
29	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	3	3	6	2	3	2	5
30	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>			2				
31	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	5	1	5	3	2	2	4
32	Canary Islands Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	4				1		5
33	Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	3	2	4	6	6	4	4
34	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	2						
35	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			1				
36	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	10	5					
37	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1	3	1	3	2	6	4
38	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1	2	2				
39	Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii</i>			10		10		1
40	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	10				1		2
41	Island Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	7	12	50	20	60	7	20
42	Common Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	1				6		

Butterflies

1	Small White	<i>Artogeia (Pieris) rapae</i>	3		1		4	6	10
2	Canary Islands Large White	<i>Pieris cheiranthi</i>						1	5
3	Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>			1			1	

	Common name	Scientific name	September/October						
			28	29	30	1	2	3	4
4	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>	1	1				1	
5	Canary Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx cleobule</i>							1
6	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>				2	1	5	
7	Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>				2			
8	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Syntarucus pirithous</i>	1	1		2			
9	Canary Blue	<i>Cyclurius webbianus</i>			1	5			1
10	African Grass Blue	<i>Zizeria knysna</i>	12		10	5	3	10	2
11	Canary Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa vulcania</i>							2
12	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>				2		1	
13	African Monarch (Plain Tiger)	<i>Danaus chrysippus</i>			3		2	3	1
14	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>					3		1
15	Canary Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge xiphioides</i>	1				1	3	10

Cetaceans

1	Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		30	3	12	8	7	2
2	Blainville's Beaked Whale	<i>Mesoplodon densirostris</i>		3	2				