

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 September – 1 October 2015



Atlantic Spotted Dolphin



American Painted Lady



Blainville's Beaked Whale



Rough-toothed Dolphin

Report & images compiled by Tom Brereton



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Tour Participants: Tom Brereton (leader) with Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Thursday 24th September

Weather: warm and sunny

The mid-afternoon flight from Gatwick was slightly delayed, but by mid-evening we had landed in La Palma in pleasant warm and sunny weather. We picked up the minibus and travelled west across the island to the Hotel Sol de la Palma situated in the low-key resort of Puerto Naos, where a cold buffet meal was waiting for us.

## Day 2

Friday 25th September

Weather: sunny spells and showers, with low cloud in forest areas

After the first of many excellent buffet breakfasts over the week, the plan today was to visit ancient Laurel forest, which occupies much of the higher ground of La Palma, being especially accessible on the eastern side of the island. After breakfast, we headed east towards the Cubo de la Galga, spotting a Monarch butterfly from the minibus en route, before stopping briefly in the capital Santa Cruz to scan the harbour. Here, there were several loafing Atlantic Herring Gulls, whilst brightly coloured Red Rock Crabs were present along the rocky foreshore. At Puntallana we picked up supplies for lunch, the short stop giving the group a chance to stretch their legs.

As we arrived at Cubo de la Galga the weather was overcast, so we focussed on birds rather than butterflies. We followed the tarmac track up through the steep beautiful wooded ravine. Woodland birds were being quite secretive, but eventually we started to pick up a number of the specialities, including Canary Islands Chiffchaff, the endemic subspecies of Chaffinch, Canary Island Goldcrest, White-tailed Laurel Pigeon and Dark-tailed Laurel (Bolle's) Pigeon. Other forest birds seen included Sparrowhawk, Buzzard, Robin, Blackcap and Blackbird. The highlight though was seeing the island's only endemic bird, La Palma Blue Tit, with five individuals detected.

A picnic lunch was taken in the car park by the visitor centre, and with brightening weather our first butterflies were seen. A flowering *Lantana camara* was particularly attractive, with several Indian Red Admirals and a La Canary Large White noted. We explored the rocky open gorge below the car park, with the undoubted highlight being an egg-laying American Painted Lady, which gave excellent views. American Painted Lady has been resident on La Palma at times in the past, but died out some years ago and it is most likely this was a trans-Atlantic vagrant. Also seen were Canary Speckled Wood, Canary Blue, Small White and Meadow Brown, whilst birds in the scrub included several Island Canaries and Sardinian Warblers. Several moths were seen including Maize Moth and Humming-bird Hawk-moth. On our way back to Puerto Naos numerous Choughs and Kestrels were seen from the minibus.

In the evening we followed what was to be our routine for the week, with a log call over drinks by the pool, complete with attendant Collared Dove, followed by a delicious buffet meal in the hotel restaurant. At the log call, there were also large numbers of Plain Swift screeching overhead and a Grey Wagtail flew over.

## Day 3

## Saturday 26th September

Weather: warm and sunny, but windy

The day got off to a good start with a pod of six Bottlenose Dolphins seen from the breakfast balcony area. Our main objective today was to explore the southern part of the island. The visibility was good in the morning, so it seemed sensible to visit St Antony's Volcano first, as fine weather is essential to make the most of time here and experience the spectacular views that can be had walking the trail along the perimeter of the crater. The group walked the volcano and learnt more about the island's volcanic history from the exhibition in the visitor centre. Whilst the group were visiting the volcano, Tom explored the farmland and slopes around the car park, picking up Bath White, several Berthelot's Pipits and numerous Island Canaries. After visiting the volcano, a brief stop was made at the nearby Teneguia vineyard, allowing several members of the group time to buy a bottle of the highly regarded local wine produced on the premises. After this, a brief stop was made in Fuencaliente, so that Tom could get supplies for lunch.

By late morning, we were on our way again, passing through Los Canarios and taking the winding road down through spectacular volcanic scenery to our birding destination, the Faro de Fuencaliente, which forms the most southerly part of the island. In low scrub by the lighthouse, good views were obtained of one the two target species, a Berthelot's Pipit which perched nearby in some rocky scrub. Spectacled Warbler proved more elusive, with just brief views obtained of a single bird. Both Scarlet and Red-veined Darters were present amongst the scrub, perching on bushes and basking on bare ground.

A picnic lunch was taken in the lee of the lighthouse. After lunch, we took a walk around the salt pans, which are still worked in a traditional way. This yielded a small selection of passage waders including Turnstone, Ringed Plover, Dunlin and Sanderling. Along the walls lining the salt pans, there were several more Berthelot's Pipits. After visiting the salt pans, we stopped for coffee at the recently opened El Jardín de la Sal restaurant, which offers a panoramic view out to sea.

It was too choppy to seawatch for cetaceans, and on the seabird front only Cory's Shearwaters and Atlantic Herring Gulls were in evidence off the southern tip of the island, so we decided to head back north for some optional sea watching overlooking the more sheltered waters off the hotel. From a prominent position near to one of the outdoor swimming pools in the hotel grounds, we had a highly productive spell, with a large and playful pod of 55 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins seen together with a presumed Blainville's Beaked Whale logged, along with around 700 Cory's Shearwaters.

## Day 4

## Sunday 27th September

Weather: warm, sunny and calm

Today we headed to the port of Tazacorte for the first of our three boat trips in search of seabirds, whales and dolphins. Some of the group had a leisurely coffee in the harbour café, whilst others explored the harbour, following which we boarded the Fancy II in good time to get our preferred seats on the fly bridge. After waiting apprehensively for two days on land, it was a great relief to set out to sea in fantastic conditions – warm and sunny, with the sea like glass.

Small groups of Cory's Shearwaters were resting on the sea as we steamed north, with an early highlight being a single Great Shearwater seen amongst them. Great Shearwater is surprisingly uncommon in these waters, this being the first sighting on one of these holidays.

After just over half an hour, Ralph spotted our first cetaceans several hundred metres away on the port side. We steamed towards the animals, and close inspection confirmed they were Blainville's Beaked Whales – thus our highly prized target species for the holiday had been bagged already! This was a family party of four animals, which gave incredible views as they surfaced regularly beside the boat. After watching them at point blank range for 15 minutes or so, both surfacing and under water (from the boat's glass bottom viewing area), they were suddenly spooked and deep-dived never to be seen again. The reason for this turn in behaviour was clearly due to the appearance of a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins, which had scared the whales. These dolphins also gave superb views, as they played around the boat. The purple patch continued, with a group of Rough-toothed Dolphins appearing less than 30 minutes after we left the Bottlenose Dolphins behind! Once again, we got stunning views of this dolphin species, which is difficult to see in European waters away from a few spots in the Canary Islands. As we have seen on past trips on the *Fancy II*, the Rough-toothed Dolphins were bow-riding the banana boat at times! After all this excitement we were ready for lunch – hearty fish/vegetable soup with crusty garlic bread.

The remainder of the trip produced three more groups of Bottlenose Dolphins, lots of Cory's Shearwaters and two Loggerhead Turtles. We were served some tasty snacks over the course of the journey by the friendly crew, to keep us focussed and our blood sugar levels buoyant, including cold drinks, fruit, ice creams, cake and biscuits. Towards the end of the trip we stopped briefly, allowing time for a swim in the sea, with David having a ride on the banana boat. A Flying Fish in this area rounded off a fantastic run of marine animal sightings and a wonderful first trip out at sea.

After the boat trip, we took the steep road that climbed above the Aridaine Valley, stopping at the Mirador El Time. From the viewpoint there is a magnificent view over the Aridaine Valley, Tazacorte, the Cumbres, the entrance to the Caldera and the coast past Puerto Naos towards Fuencaliente. For the last two years, we have had excellent views of Barbary Falcon at this site, but were out of luck this time. After scanning for birds of prey, we headed down a steep road by the Mirador café in search of other wildlife. In particular, this proved a productive spot for butterflies with Canary Blue, Small Copper, Geranium Bronze and Lang's Short-tailed Blue seen. In the surrounding scrub La Palma Blue Tit, Wall Lizards and Red-veined Darters gave excellent views along the track and a Raven was seen overhead. Back at the Mirador, we had a coffee, admired the spectacular view and scanned the sky once more for raptors, picking up at least four Kestrels along with several Choughs.

On our journey from the hotel today several interesting species were seen including Barn Swallow, Spanish Sparrow and Lesser Emperor dragonfly. Back at the hotel, an early evening walk in the scrub near the hotel produced African Grass Blue, five Monarchs in a likely roost tree, 30 Marmalade Hoverflies and Red-veined and Scarlet Darter dragonflies.

In the evening over our log call, around 80 Plain Swifts were seen overhead.

## Day 5

Monday 28th September

Weather: warm and mostly sunny

In the morning, Tom dropped off the group at the Caldera de Taburiente National Park visitor centre above El Paso. Tom then went to buy picnic lunch items from a large supermarket in El Paso whilst the group explored the visitor centre, enjoying the informative display about the islands history and wildlife.

Afterwards, a circular walk was made through the surrounding scenic farmland. There were impressive numbers of Chough feeding in the heavily horse-grazed fields including over 400 in a single flock! The mixture of cultivated fields, pasture and Tree Lucerne groves proved attractive to birds. Sardinian Warbler, Island Canary, Berthelot's Pipit, Blackcap and Canary Islands Chiffchaff were common, whilst other species noted were Linnet, Goldfinch and Grey Wagtail. Raptors seen in this area included numerous Kestrels, plus Sparrowhawk and Buzzard. Despite plenty of suitable habitat we failed to locate any Stone Curlew, which was a target bird for this area. There were plenty of butterflies around though, including Small Copper, Meadow Brown, Small White, Canary Blue and good numbers of Bath White. Several Emperor dragonflies were seen. We also bumped into local birdwatcher Robert Burton, who was very knowledgeable of the island's bird life and ecology and who gave us some useful tips on additional birding sites to check out over the holiday.

Lunch was taken back at the visitor centre. In the afternoon we returned to the hotel, from where we took a leisurely walk to the fishing village of La Bombilla, hoping to catch up with the Monarchs at their suspected roost site. In scrub near the hotel we had excellent views of an adult Canary Wall Lizard, African Grass Blue butterfly, Scarlet Darter, Red-veined Darter and Maize Moth. The walk was hot and dusty and, at La Bombilla, we had a much-needed cold drink under shade, in the new café overlooking the sea at this picturesque and unspoilt fishing village. On the way back, good views were obtained of three Monarchs at the roost site near the hotel. Back at the hotel a Common Sandpiper and two Turnstones were seen on the rocky shoreline.

In the evening, another excellent dinner was had in the hotel, where the food on offer included roast rabbit – a local speciality. It was a beautiful sunset and in the early hours a stunning blood moon was visible.

## Day 6

Tuesday 29th September

Weather: warm and sunny

Today we headed to the port of Tazacorte to board the Fancy II for our second boat trip in search of seabirds and cetaceans. On the way to the harbour we stopped off at La Martellas, where there is a series of banana plantation irrigation ponds. Though not the most scenic of places, this can be a productive area for wetland birding with a number of rarities having been recorded in recent years. The water levels of the ponds have been very low this year, making them not so attractive to waders, but we had a decent selection including Greenshank, Green Sandpiper and Common Sandpiper, together with Little Egret and Grey Heron. Good views of Marsh Frog were also obtained at a traditional site.

We got to the boat in good time to be in prime position for spotting and photographing sea animals. By 11am we were on our way in fabulous conditions for viewing, with the sea like glass. We headed west, then south, focussing our search effort on finding larger marine animals. It was not long before we picked up our first group of cetaceans – a large and acrobatic group of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins which came to bow-ride. It was a mixed-

age group with some sleek plainly marked juveniles and calves contrasting with more robust and stocky heavily spotted adults.

After watching these animals for half an hour or so, there was further excitement less than ten minutes later when a group of Bottlenose Dolphins was seen. These animals also came to the bow with superb views obtained, both above and below water from the boat's glass bottom viewing area.

We left the dolphins and searched for other species, especially Bryde's Whale which had been seen by local fishermen earlier in the day. After another 30 minutes of steaming, we spotted our only Loggerhead Turtle of the day. In the afternoon we were treated to more excellent views of Atlantic Spotted and Bottlenose Dolphins, though whales eluded us. Bird-wise, other than very large numbers of Cory's Shearwaters, it was fairly quiet. On the way back to the harbour, we spotted a fishing boat catching tuna by traditional pole and line methods. This is regarded as the most socially and environmentally responsible method of fishing possible and was really interesting to watch as the fishermen were spraying the water surface with a hose, which creates the illusion of a large school of small fish near the surface. This sends the tuna into such a frenzy that they will bite at any shiny, moving object in the water, including the fishermen's hooks.

After the boat trip there was ample time to have a wander around Tazarcorte, the highlight being the 15th Century church of St. Michael the Archangel, which is the oldest religious building on the island. We all had an enjoyable coffee together on an outside terrace with a panoramic view overlooking banana plantations and the sea. On the way back to Puerto Naos, we made one more stop, to a beach north of La Bombilla, where Barbary Falcon breeds on the cliff face in some years. These birds are under threat locally from illegal killing by sportsmen who race pigeons. We scanned the cliff face and walked the pretty seafront, though unfortunately no Barbary Falcons were seen.

It was Jim's birthday today, so Tom hosted the log call with pre-dinner drinks and nibbles at his hotel room. It was a nice surprise that the hotel staff had kindly provided Jim with a bottle of bubbly (Cava), chocolate and fruit for this occasion. A group of distant Bottlenose Dolphins were visible from Tom's balcony, as was the island of El Hierro.

## Day 7

Wednesday 30th September

Weather: warm with sunny spells

Today the focus was once again the sea, with our final boat trip planned from Tazarcorte on-board the Fancy II. En route we stopped off at La Bombilla lighthouse, where there is a large area of scrub on flat ground that looks promising for Spectacled Warbler. We did not locate any, but did see Island Canary, Sardinian Warbler and Berthelot's Pipit.

We departed Tazarcorte on the Fancy II promptly at 11am taking a northerly course. Once again, the weather was fabulous and ideal for spotting animals. We got off to a good start with Flying Fish seen just past the outer harbour breakwater. After an hour or so, we picked up a group of four Blainville's Beaked Whales, which like on Sunday, gave absolutely stunning views as they swam right beside the boat for more than 10 minutes. We could tell from body markings that this was a different group to those seen on Tuesday and felt both privileged and incredibly fortunate to have had amazing views of these elusive animals twice this week. Shortly after seeing the

Blainville's, remarkably two Cuvier's Beaked Whales surfaced a few times in the distance, but rather frustratingly were not seen again.

Over the remainder of the trip, we had brief views of two Atlantic Spotted Dolphins and two more Blainville's Beaked Whales, together with excellent views of a Loggerhead Turtle. As well as the omnipresent Cory's Shearwaters, bird variety came in the form of a juvenile Arctic Tern; this being the first record on one of these trips.

We arrived back at the hotel late afternoon, giving ample time for the group to both pack for the journey tomorrow and have some relaxing downtime. A search of the scrub near the hotel produced three more Monarch butterflies, but surprisingly no Plain Tigers at all this year which are normally more plentiful here than Monarchs.

In the evening we had another birthday to celebrate – this time Juliet. Once again Tom hosted drinks over the log call, with the bubbly provided by the hotel, which was a nice touch.

## Day 8

Thursday 1st October

Weather: warm, but mostly cloudy

After we had checked out of the hotel, there was time for one final scan of the sea where, bang on cue, a pod of 12 Bottlenose Dolphins were seen, along with Cory's Shearwaters providing a great send-off to an excellent stay at the hotel.

We planned to take a leisurely course to the airport today, making several natural history stops along the way. First, we headed inland passing through Los Llanos and into the Barranco de Las Angustias, which offers stunning views of the Caldera de Taburiente. Here, we took a lovely walk along a broad mountainside trail, which proved attractive to butterflies and dragonflies, with sightings including numerous Epaulet Skimmers, together with Red-veined Darter, Emperor Dragonfly, and Meadow Brown, Canary Blue and Canary Brimstone butterflies. Birds seen included Chough, Island Canary, Chaffinch, Buzzard and several Ravens.

We then headed east, stopping in El Paso where Tom got supplies for lunch and some of the group had a coffee in a local bar. From El Paso, we made a scenic drive along the steep and winding LP301, which links El Paso with Santa Cruz de la Palma, passing through Laurel forest, Pine forest and lava fields. We stopped for a picnic lunch at the El Pilar recreational area, set within Pine forest. A very tame Raven was present here, along with La Palma Blue Tit, 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! En route, we had made brief stops along the roadside to see our only Clouded Yellow and Cardinal butterflies of the holiday.

From Breña Baja, we dropped down to the coast and to a rocky area near the small holiday resort of Los Cancajos south of Santa Cruz. Along the rocky coastline there were large numbers of brightly coloured Red Rock Crabs resting on the tideline and a few Cory's Shearwaters passing offshore.

Our final wildlife stop of the holiday was a small area of disused gravel pits 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 of the pools, a few waders were found including 12 Turnstone, Common Sandpiper and three Ringed Plover. From here it was onto the airport, where it was not long before we were boarding our flight bound for London.

At Heathrow we collected our baggage and said our goodbyes, from what had been a superb holiday with a great group and some special wildlife encounters.

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## Species Lists

Marine Wildlife (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September / October							
			25	26	27	28	29	30	1	
1	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		6	30			40		12
2	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>		55				80	2	
3	Rough-toothed Dolphin	<i>Steno bredanensis</i>		15						
4	Cuvier's Beaked Whale	<i>Ziphius cuvirostris</i>							2	
5	Blainville's Beaked Whale	<i>Mesoplodon densirostris</i>		1	4				6	
6	Beaked Whale sp.							2		
7	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>			2			1	1	
8	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cheilopogon melanurus</i>		1					3	
9	Red Rock Crab	<i>Grapsus grapsus</i>	5					4		20

## Birds

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	50	700	600	10	650	450	50
2	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>			1				
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				1	1	1	
4	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1				9	1	
5	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	10	5	10	15	6	2	6
6	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	3	1		5		1	
7	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	6	1		1			
8	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		3					3
9	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>					1		
10	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>				1	2		1
11	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	6			2			12
12	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	3						
13	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>					1		
14	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	1						
15	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	5	20	200	10	50	70	10
16	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>						1	
17	Rock/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Bolle's (Dark-tailed Laurel) Pigeon	<i>Columba bollii</i>	4						
19	(White-tailed) Laurel Pigeon	<i>Columba junoniae</i>	3						
20	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	10		6	2	2	3	2
21	Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	70		80	80	90	50	80
22	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	5	10	3	450			20
23	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>							5
24	La Palma Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes teneriffae palmensis</i>	10		1				3
25	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		1					
26	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			1				
27	Canary Islands Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus canariensis</i>	30	1	4	15		1	5
28	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	5		5	3	1	1	2
29	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata</i>		1					
30	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	3	1	5	6	1	1	1
31	Goldcrest (La Palma)	<i>Regulus regulus ellenthalerae</i>	5						
32	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	20		3	1	3	2	1
33	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			1				
34	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	1	1	3	3	3	1	4
35	Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii</i>		6		20		4	1
36	Common Chaffinch (La Palma)	<i>Fringilla coelebs palmae</i>	5						

	Common name	Scientific name	September / October							
			25	26	27	28	29	30	1	
37	Atlantic (Island) Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	10	200	20	50			2	5
38	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				3				
39	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				20				

### Butterflies

1	Small White	<i>Pieris (Artogeia) rapae</i>	10		2	1				10
2	Canary Islands Large White	<i>Pieris cheiranthi</i>	2							1
3	Bath White	<i>Pontia daplidice</i>		1		15	1			1
4	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>								1
5	Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas</i>				2				
6	Gearnium Bronze	<i>Cacyreus marshalli</i>			1					
7	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirthous</i>			1					
8	Canary Blue	<i>Cylyrius webbianus</i>	2		2	30	1	1		
9	African Grass Blue	<i>Zizeria knysna</i>			10	15				
10	Cardinal	<i>Pandoriana pandora</i>								1
11	Canary Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa vulcania</i>	3							
12	American Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa virginiensis</i>	1							
13	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>	1		5	3		3		
14	Meadow Brown	<i>Maniola jurtina</i>	1		1	3				1
15	Canary Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge xiphioides</i>	2							1

### Moths

1	Maize Moth	<i>Spoladea recurvalis</i>	1	1		10				
2	Humming-bird Hawk-moth	<i>Macroglossum stellatarum</i>	1							
3	Mint Moth	<i>Pyrausta aurata</i>								5

### Dragonflies

1	Scarlet Dragonfly	<i>Crocothemis erythraea</i>		3	2	1		1		
2	Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombei</i>		1	10	15		2	1	
3	Lesser Emperor	<i>Anax parthenope</i>			2					
4	Emperor	<i>Anax imperator</i>				10				1
5	Epaulet Skimmer	<i>Orthetrum chrysostigma</i>								5