

Madeira & Desertas Islands - A Seabird Extravaganza

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 19 June 2009



Seawatching on Ventura do Mar



Short-finned Pilot Whale



Bryde's Whale



Warden's hut on Desertas Grande

Report and images compiled by Roy Taylor



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Day 1

Monday 15th June

Our official arrival day in Madeira, however due to favourable flight prices, most of the group had arrived a day earlier, with John and Val arriving this morning and Tim completing the group in the evening. This meant that most of us had the opportunity to enjoy an extra day on the island.

Peter and Rosemary opted to hire a car and explore the islands interior, but discovered that it was shrouded in mist, with strong winds and heavy rain! For those of us who stayed on the south coast, we found these weather conditions hard to believe, as we enjoyed a day of warm sunshine!

Early morning saw us at Ponta de Cruz, before first light waiting to seawatch. Graham was rewarded for his crepuscular wonderings with a Barn Owl on the cliffs.

The seawatch was excellent, with hundreds of Cory's Shearwaters constantly in view, some passing close in-shore. Other seabirds on show included Manx, Shearwater and Great Skua. Highlight however was a superb Bryde's Whale, seen on at least four occasions as it surfaced and blew.

The bulk of the day was spent gently exploring Funchal; its harbour, parks and cafes – Mike even making it up the cable car to Monte.

On the waterfront we had superb views of Roseate Tern's passing close to the breakwater and a tame Little Egret and single Lesser black-backed Gull were noted in the harbour. The day also provided numerous encounters with two of the Macaronesian Endemics – Canary and Plain Swift.

In the evening we returned to Ponta de Cruz, where a similar range of seabirds was noted. Unfortunately, a Bulwer's Petrel was too far out for most to see and several pods of distant Dolphins and Whale 'blows' remained tantalizingly unidentified!

We finished the day in an excellent local restaurant, where many of the group opted for one of the regional specialties – scabbard fish with banana!

Day 2

Tuesday 16th June

It was a challenging day in terms of the weather, with heavy rain and the island's mountainous interior shrouded in thick fog. The order of the day was to stick to the coastline and try to dodge the worst of the conditions.

Heading west, we first stopped at Lugar de Baixi, a small shoreline pool. This is Madeira's only breeding site for Coot and Moorhen – which we duly ticked! Amongst the waterfowl was a much rarer find, a drake Green-winged Teal. This North American vagrant was very approachable for the photographers as it fed on the grass shoreline. House Martin and Turnstone were notable migrants and several Common Waxbills (an introduced but now self-sustaining species) gave great views.

Crossing the plateau at Pau de Serra on-route to the north coast confirmed the wisdom of our tactics, as visibility was down to just a few meters! Indeed, during a brief stop at Fanal to view the ancient Laurel forest, we could only just make out the first line of trees!

As we reached Ribiera da Janela on the coast, the fog had indeed cleared and incredibly we found the day's second Green-winged Teal. More impressive however with the huge waves crashing into the rocks.

Travelling west into the gorges inland of Siaxal, the traditional pigeon site was cloaked in fog. Reversing our steps, we parked by the roadside at some steep, Laurel covered cliffs, right on the edge of the fog line. We were rewarded within minutes, when our main target bird, the endemic Trocaz Pigeon, revealed itself. In the next thirty minutes we saw a total of 13 pigeons, including 'scoped' views of perched bird, with its intricately patterned neck collar. Walking up the road we quickly located the other endemic land bird, Madeiran Firecrest, and enjoyed fine views of a pair of these small, colourful sprites.

Feeling pleased with ourselves, we moved on to the northwest headland at Porto Moniz, where we stopped to enjoy our picnic lunch and some seawatching above the natural rock swimming pools.

There was a steady passage of Cory's Shearwaters, a single Great Skua and Paul saw a single Bulwer's Petrel. Inland, groups of Canary gave really good views.

Our final destination for the day was the island's western most point, the lighthouse at Ponto do Pargo. The sun had finally come out but it was incredibly windy. Yet our efforts were rewarded with some fine birds. The final Macaronesian endemic land bird, Berthelot's Pipit, gave cracking views and a family party of Red-legged Partridges was flushed. Also feeding recently fledged young were a pair of Spectacled Warbler's, perched up in the low gorse. Common Buzzard, Common Kestrel, Canary and a migrant Barn Swallow added to the mix. Having beaten the weather and got the birds we celebrated the day in a fine Funchal restaurant!

Day 3

Wednesday 17th June

It was another grey morning, although yesterday's rain had abated and was restricted to the odd heavy shower in the morning. Unfortunately, strong north east winds meant that there was no chance of landing on the Desertas Islands today. So it was over to plan B.

After breakfast we headed east to the dramatic, rocky peninsula of Sao Lourenco, marvelling at both the Monte cable cars and airport (a runway built on concrete stilts) on route. Arriving at the peninsula, the weather had improved and we had an excellent walk with dramatic views along the cliffs. At least three Common Quail were singing from the grasslands and both Common Kestrel and Common Buzzard were frequent overhead. We found a small colony of Common Turn feeding young on a near vertical stone outcrop rising out to the sea, while three Grey Herons perched on a cliff was an unexpected encounter.

Berthelot's Pipit, Canary, Goldfinch, Painted Lady and the endemic Wall Lizard all caught our attention but it was Rock Sparrow which stole the show. A pair of these well patterned Sparrows gave such good views that you could even see the yellow spot on the throat.

Next, we moved onto the former whaling village of Canical. It was here that Gregory Peck went out on the whaling boats before filming Moby Dick. Fortunately whaling is no more on Madeira, but we did buy some lovely carved whale and dolphin souvenirs. The avian attraction here is Spanish Sparrow and with the aid of Ian's sandwiches we were soon watching these dapper little birds at close range.

Back in Funchal we had a couple of spare hours to lunch and explore the town, before at 4pm, we boarded the beautiful yacht, Ventura de Mar, for a pelagic trip along the island's more sheltered southern coast. A Roseate Tern, before we left the harbour, was a good start. Then we turned west and sailed five nautical miles of Ponta da Cruz, the headland from which we had sea-watched previously. We were immediately into large rafts of Cory's Shearwater's, some of which could be heard calling as they reluctantly lifted off the water in front of the boat. A few Manx Shearwaters whizzed past and a Great Skua patrolled the rafts of Cory's.

After passing through the throngs of big shearwaters, we located a band of Bulwer's Petrel's, all heading west back to their breeding grounds on the Desertas Islands. It was a real privilege to watch these energetic petrels, as they jerked their way past the boat in their hundreds!

However, the big finale was left to the end. When a whale 'blow' off Funchal saw us change course and locate a breathtaking Bryde's Whale. This animal gave great views as it surfaced several times close to the boat.

With the weather forecast looking good for Thursday, we enjoyed our evening meal with the prospect of the Desertas in the fore of our minds.

Day 4

Thursday 18th June

The big day and blue skies, high cloud and no wind! 8am saw us steaming out of the harbour for a full day trip to the seabird haven which is the Desertas.

As we had come to expect we were soon seeing large numbers of Cory's Shearwaters and before we left the coastline a small group of 'Manxie's' had flown by. Then a set of fins alerted us to a large pod of Bottle-nosed Dolphins, which came into bow ride along the boat. It was amazing to watch as up to 5 animals at the time joined the bow, where it was possible to watch them at their majestic best a couple of feet under the water.

While enjoying the dolphins, some more dorsal fins veered in our direction – Short-finned Pilot Whales! We saw a group of at least 10 animals, including some small calves. In contrast to the fast moving dolphins, three females ‘logged’ at the surface providing much easier photographic opportunities.

Leaving the cetaceans behind and with the towering cliffs of Deserte Grande coming ever closer, we were encountering large numbers of Bulwer’s Petrel’s and then at last, a single Bugio Fea’s Petrel, which left quickly and was only seen by a few. Feeling sure we would get another chance at this species on the return leg, we moored the boat in the natural harbour, half way along the southern shore of the main island, Deserte Grande. Here we enjoyed a scrumptious lunch and marvelled at the towering cliffs above us.

It was now time to board the small zodiac for an easy landing on the pebble beach below the wooden buildings, which house the Natural Park wardens. Walking around this area we were privileged to enjoy a Bulwer’s Petrel sat on its single egg in the boulder crevice on the edge of the path. Berthelot’s Pipit and Canary were very approachable and Painted Lady butterflies were everywhere.

Having enjoyed our time ashore we resumed our quest for Fea’s Petrel. Frustratingly a bird picked up in a huge raft of shearwater’s flew straight away from the boat, but a few minutes later, and to everyone’s relief, another bird flew so close past the boat that you did not need binoculars to identify it!

Soon after this, cetacean’s again put on a show...an acrobatic pod of 30 Atlantic Spotted Dolphins swimming alongside of the boat and repeatedly leaping out of the water.

Arriving back at Funchal after 11 hours at sea there was time for a quick meal in town before leaving for a nocturnal avian foray that no one would forget! An hour after dark the group was perched on top of Pico Areeiro, listening to the eerie screams of one of the world’s rarest and most mysterious seabirds – the Zino’s Petrel. The total world population of just 70 pairs nests on this mountain and we marvelled at the calls, once thought to be the screams of local nuns murdered by pirates. Occasionally we would see the dark silhouette of a *Pterodroma* whizzing over our heads. It was an incredible and privileged way to end a superb stay on Madeira.

Day 5

Friday 19th June

A leisurely breakfast after yesterday excursions, before a mid morning transfer back to Funchal airport followed by a smooth check-in, and a last chance to look across Madeiran waters before a four hour flight to London Gatwick.

If you like seabirds, get a thrill from cetacean’s or are interested in island endemism, then Madeira is a trip not to be missed!

Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	June				
			15	16	17	18	19
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectras diomedea</i>	1000	180	1000	1500	
2	Bugio Fea's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma feae deserta</i>				3	
3	Zino's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma madeira</i>				2+H	
4	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	16	7	5	5	
5	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>	3	1	400	600	
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	3		1	1	
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardeacinerea</i>			3		
8	Mallard	<i>Anus platyrhynchos</i>		1			
9	Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>		2			
10	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	1	2		
11	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	5	10	10	2	2
12	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufer</i>		5			
13	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>			3H		
14	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		6			
15	Moorhen	<i>Gallinule chloropus</i>		3			
16	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		4			
17	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	500	500	1000	500	500
18	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1				
19	Common Turn	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	10	15	10	15	
20	Roseate Turn	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	5		1	1	
21	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	3	1			
22	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Trocaz Pigeon	<i>Columba trocaz</i>	3	13			
24	Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba schmitza</i>	1				
25	Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	100	200	100	✓	✓
26	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		1	2		
27	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>		3	2		
28	Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii</i>		4	10	5	
29	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cineren schmitza</i>	5	10	2		
30	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		1			
31	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula cabrerae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla Heineken</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata orbitalis</i>		3			
34	Madieran Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>		4			
35	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>			10		
36	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia maderensis</i>			2		
37	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs maderensis</i>		2			
38	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	10		15		
39	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	10	50	20	15	4
40	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrid</i>		20			

Mammals

Bottled-nosed Dolphin

- 3 on 15th of Ponta de Cruz and 20 on 18th from Desertas pelagic.

Atlantic Spotted Dolphin

- A pod of 30 animals seen from Desertas pelagic on the 18th.

Short-finned Pilot Whale

- 5 with the Bottled-nosed pod on the 18th.

Bryde's Whale

- One seen of Ponta de Cruz on 15th and close views of an individual from the Ventura de Mar on the 17th.

Rabbit

- 2 at Pico Areeiro on the 18th

Amphibians and Reptiles

Madieran Wall Lizard

Perez's Frog

Butterflies

Monarch

Painted Lady

Small White

Madeiran Wall Brown

Long-tailed Blue

Miscellaneous

Atlantic Flying Fish

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