

Madeira & Desertas Islands - A Seabird Extravaganza

Naturetrek Tour Report

27 - 31 July 2009



Cory's Shearwater



Fea's Petrel



Bryde's Whale



Camp Site

Report and images kindly compiled by Tony & Helen Mainwood



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Tour Leaders: Catarina Alves (local tour manager)
 João Nunes (land-based guide & naturalist)
 Filipe Alves (pelagic guide & naturalist)

Tour Participants: Martin Bell
 Paul Gregory
 Andy Merritt
 Tony Mainwood
 Helen Mainwood
 John Dickenson
 Jon Cooper
 Jackie Cooper
 Bob Faulconbridge
 Brenda Faulconbridge
 Stuart Hamilton

Day 1

Monday 27th July

Travel from the UK

Days 2

Tuesday 28th July

We had been monitoring the weather forecast for the area in the days leading up to the trip, and we weren't surprised therefore, and in fact were delighted when Catarina re-arranged the itinerary so that we went to the Desertas first. We had seen the weather was predicted to deteriorate later in the week.

Filipe offered us three choices - to try for the Desertas and if that proved impossible because of the conditions to return east of Funchal, go to Funchal to stay overnight at the hotel, then west the next day, on giving up the attempt head for west of Funchal or to call off the Desertas attempt and go west with an overnight stay off shore.

In discussion with the group it was clear that trying to reach the Desertas was top priority and so we headed out despite the conditions. The somewhat rough conditions meant it was superb for watching Cory's Shearwaters and Bulwer's Petrels as they were in the air, flying low over the waves, rather than on the water. On the return journey when the conditions were much more placid we saw far fewer though it was good to get close to groups of sitting Cory's. We lunched on our packed lunches on the boat before going ashore. We walked round the trail several times and saw two Kestrels, several Berthelot Pipits and lots of Canaries. There was also a Long's Short-tailed Blue Butterfly.

Tony (and others with scopes) did some scanning in the early evening and were impressed by the sheer numbers of Cory's flying just off shore at the edge of the turbulent water. The evening meal was the best meal of the trip! Fresh tuna previously cooked by Filipe's mother with potatoes, salad and bread, not to mention a choice of wine, beer or soft drinks.

Then it was time to look out and listen for incoming birds and the sounds of birds in their burrows. We were able to distinguish between the calls of Cory's Shearwater, Bulwer's and Madeiran Storm Petrels and make out their silhouettes. Most people decided to sleep ashore rather than on the boat. Tony and I decided to sleep out in the open in the low walled enclosure while the others opted for the roofed area. This gave us a memorable experience – lying looking up at the stars, the occasional shooting star among them, with the shapes of birds flying over us, falling asleep to the sounds of their calls, and being woken up later by what seemed like the entire population of shearwaters heading out to sea.

Day 3

Wednesday 29th July

After breakfast we headed back to Funchal in much smoother conditions, the expected worsening weather never materialising. Once ashore Catarina took us to a restaurant where she had booked a table for us, where we enjoyed a scabbard fish lunch. For the afternoon most of the group decided to go cetacean watching. We were rewarded by a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins which came close to the boat and had good views of a Bryde's Whale as well as several Loggerhead Turtles.

Day 4

Thursday 30th July

This involved a whole day's bird watching mainly looking for the various "special" passerines. By a pool area we saw Squacco Heron, Mallard, Moorhen and Waxbill. We searched for the elusive Madeiran Firecrest in a wooded area seeing Robin, Blackcap and Blackbird in the process. What was impressive in this area was the spectacular number of Madeiran Graylings flitting about bramble flowers. Next we went to a prospective Spectacled Warbler area, but without success – hot day, late in the season and time of day - late morning – probably accounting for their invisibility. At another site with a viewpoint there were many Clouded Yellows nectaring on thyme.

We finally caught up with the Firecrest at the lunch stop/Trocaz Pigeon area, or at least Joao did – he located a family party and some of the group had views of an adult, but most of us just saw the young birds. After much waiting and occasional glimpses of the pigeon flying between the trees we retreated to the bus only for one of the party to spot one perched in a relatively nearby tree, staying long enough for everyone to see it clearly through telescopes. On the way back Joao made one final stop as a last ditch attempt to see the Firecrest and we struck lucky with most of the group seeing reasonable glimpses of an adult.

That night we headed along a track to await the arrival of Zino's Petrels and were fortunate to hear quite a number and glimpse them in the moonlight. While waiting Joao provided us with information about them and the work being done to monitor and study them.

Around Funchal itself Yellow-legged Gulls, Blackbirds, Goldfinch, Grey Wagtail, Plain Swift were among those species seen, with Little Egret and Common and Roseate Terns around the harbour area or from the boat.

Day 5

Fri 31st July

Travel back to the UK

Summary: Since the Desertas Islands and the various shearwaters and petrels were the main reasons for our going on this trip we were very satisfied with the results. The fact that the passerines were less prepared to play ball couldn't be helped and in the end we saw most of them.

Leaders

The leaders were excellent, friendly, helpful and informative. Catarina had everything well organised and was willing to meet the various members of the group when it suited us – e.g. on the Wednesday afternoon when some went on the boat trip and others didn't she took us back to the hotel at different times. Filipe, his assistant on the boat and the engineer were terrific at handling the boat and seeing to our comforts and spotting and identifying the birds and mammals. Joao was also knowledgeable and did his best to help us to see the various passerines. He was very attentive to our safety on the Zino's trek, making sure we went at the pace of the slowest member of the group – a pace which suited more than that person!

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	July			
			28	29	30	31
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	1000+	300+		
2	Fea's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma feae</i>	3	2		
3	Zino's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma madeira</i>			c10	
4	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>	200	50		
5	Madeiran Storm-petrel	<i>Oceanodroma castro</i>	200H	c.2 seen		
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1	1	1	
7	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>			1	
8	Mallard	<i>Anus platyrhynchos</i>			1	
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			1	
10	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			4	
11	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2+	2+		1
12	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			1	
13	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			6	
14	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			4	
15	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>		1		
17	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Trocaz Pigeon	<i>Columba trocaz</i>			3	
19	Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	c20	c20	c10	
20	Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii madeirensis</i>	3	3	4	
21	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>		1	3	
22	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			2	
23	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula cabrerae</i>	2	1	c10	
24	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>			c10	
25	Madeiran Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus maderensis</i>			c8	
26	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs madeirensis</i>			c15	
27	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	1		2	
28	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>			2	
29	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	c60	c60	c10	
30	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>			c8	

	Common name	Scientific name	July		
			28	29	30

Reptiles & amphibians

1	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>		5	
2	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>	400+	✓	c4
3	Perez's Frog	<i>Rana perezii</i>			

Mammals

9	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		c20	
12	Bryde's Whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>		1	
15	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			3

Fish

23	Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>	1	1	
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