

# Madeira & Desertas Islands - A Seabird Extravaganza

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 – 18 June 2016



Zino's Petrel



Desertas Petrel



White-faced Storm Petrel



Madeira Chaffinch

Report & images compiled by Peter J Dunn



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Tour participants: Peter Dunn (leader) with 10 Naturetrek clients  
Luis Dias, Filipe Silva, Marco and Zofia - local guides and boat crew

## Day 1

**Tuesday 14th June**

Most of the group met early and checked in at a busy Gatwick airport before heading for departures. Whilst our flight was loaded and ready to go, there was industrial action in France so we were a little delayed, however once airborne we made good time and landed just over an hour late. We were met by Luis, our tour agent, in the arrivals area and quickly transported up to our hotel on the hill where we met our final two members who had arrived a few days earlier. After checking in and a quick picnic lunch, Luis and Filipe took us in minibuses to the harbour where we were given a briefing on the programme for the next few days and those who had opted for the extra zodiac trip donned their life vests whilst the remaining members went to explore the town.

The zodiac left the harbour with Marco and Filipe and we were soon seeing a few Manx and many Cory's Shearwaters, and we kept pace with a group of Bottlenose Dolphins. A Loggerhead Turtle popped up close to the boat much to the delight of the passengers and as we headed out to sea we started to see quite a number of distinctive Bulwer's Petrels. Once we were around 13 miles offshore the crew off-loaded the frozen chum consisting of fish, squid and oils. As this melted it was supposed to release the oils and fish bits but after a few minutes it sank! However it must have been thawing in the warm Atlantic waters as the fish oil formed a slick on the surface and a number of Bulwer's Petrels came to investigate. We decided to wait around the slick and suddenly a beautiful White-faced Storm Petrel appeared and 'kangaroo-hopped' across the surface of the water. An excellent sighting and a new species for a few members of the group. Bulwer's Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters continued to visit the slick till, eventually, it was time to head back to the harbour, stopping by some small islets to look for Common and Roseate Terns and also seeing Plain Swift overhead.

Arriving back at the harbour we met up with the onshore contingent and most headed off to eat at Restaurante Combatentes before returning back to the hotel after a full day, which had started quite early for most.

## Day 2

**Wednesday 15th June**

We made alterations to the itinerary to make use of good weather, so today we had a fairly late start with breakfast at 8am and then at 9.30am we were transported to the harbour to board the sailing boat Ventura do Mar, heading for the Desertas Islands.

We headed out to the south and almost immediately found a pod of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins which performed for the photographers for twenty minutes. There were many young ones who were the most curious and came up to the boat, and eventually we had good views of some of the 'spotted' adults. Continuing on, we started to see Cory's Shearwaters and Bulwer's Petrels and a small turtle swam past. With the wind increasing we set the sails and gathered speed for an exhilarating ride out until we were almost level with Bugio, the furthest island of the archipelago. Up to that point we had seen at least three Fea's type petrels which had to be left specifically unidentified. However once we had thrown the chum out and an oil slick covered the surface of the sea, petrels slowly came to investigate. First it was Bulwer's Petrel and then some pterodroma petrels. Photographs showed these to have many of the features of Desertas Petrel. In all we had 10 pterodroma of which only three were confidently identified as Desertas, although probably all were.

Eventually we had to make our way to Deserta Grande Island, passing our only Monk Seal as we moored up and this is where we were to sleep that night. Safely landed, we watched tame Berthelot's Pipits and Atlantic Canaries and were given a brief tour by Filipe whilst our tents were erected and dinner prepared.

After dinner we gathered in the gloom to watch and hear the first Bulwer's Petrels arrive back to their burrows. The diagnostic barking calls could be heard from most of the bolder piles and we could see birds scrabbling along the paths. Down by the harbour, the twisting calls of the Band-rumped (Madeiran) Storm Petrels were heard and one or two were seen flying around us as they headed for their scree nests. One or two Cory's Shearwaters came in early but the majority arrived later as we laid in our tents; the 'space invader' type noises passing over and around the tents with a peak around 4am.

## Day 3

Thursday 16th June

As people started to emerge from their tents and joined those who had slept out in the open, tales were exchanged of Bulwer's Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters brushing past or even trying to bury under sleeping bags or landing on tents and noises of those and Band-rumped Storm Petrels had continued most of the night. We were served a continental breakfast by the crew and made good our camping area before re-boarding the Ventura do Mar for our journey back to Funchal.

The wind and waves were lower than yesterday so seabird action was slow as we sailed along the west coast of Deserta Grande and past the smallest island of the group, Chão, before heading out across the channel towards Madeira.

About halfway across we became aware of many Cory's Shearwaters feeding in a long line ahead of us, indicating there were probably dolphins and sure enough as we approached we found a pod of feeding Atlantic Spotted Dolphins. The seabird activity was intense and we carefully scanned through the flock of Cory's Shearwaters finding at least three Fea's type petrels. One had pale areas in the underwing and appeared smaller with a smaller bill and Filipe called out "Zino's". At least one of the other birds was more like Desertas Petrel with dark underwings and a substantial bill. Comparing the birds, the flight action of the Zino's Petrel seemed quicker with more wing beats, but maybe that was the effect of the wind. Altogether on the return journey we had at least six pterodroma petrels bringing our total for the trip to 16. The majority of those photographed appeared to be Desertas Petrels with a single Zino's. During the return journey we also saw Atlantic Flyingfish

We arrived back into Funchal Harbour around 2pm and were treated to a nice lunch of Black Scabbard fish with banana (a local dish) with starters and sweets, in a seafront restaurant. Following lunch we were driven back to the hotel, stopping briefly to buy some provisions for dinner as some planned to visit a Zino's Petrel nesting site in the mountains later that evening.

Having rested, five group members met with Filipe and Peter to drive to the top of the mountains above Curral das Freiras, where the plan was to walk out to the nesting colony. Unfortunately the cloud was high and completely blanketed the tops in thick wet fog. It was felt unsafe to wonder out on the path in those conditions. Everyone agreed so we returned to the hotel with a view to revisiting the area if conditions improved on our last night.

## Day 4

Friday 17th June

Today we made an early start with breakfast at 7.30am before departing Residential Pina at 8am to begin our exploration of several typical Madeiran habitats to the north-west to search for the characteristic bird species.

We drove initially via Ribero Brava, Sao Vicente and Seixal on the north coast to Chao da Ribeira, where we stopped at the end of the track to begin our short walk. The slopes of this steep valley were clothed with Laurel forest, the habitat of Trocaz Pigeon. The weather was a bit damp with thick cloud swirling and occasional rain, however we saw our first pigeon from the minibus and as we got out we saw a few flying over the valley. Eventually two birds performed extremely well so we could see all the identification features as they sparred in a dead tree. In this area we also had our first views of the endemic Madeira Firecrest and the Madeiran races of Grey Wagtail and Common Chaffinch.

Under threatening skies we dropped back down into Sao Vicente and after watching some more Grey Wagtails, we had a comfort stop and coffee.

We then went south, up into the mountains and Encumeada where we walked around the Levada das Rabacas. Here we found Madeiran Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs maderensis*) and after a little searching and tantalising calls, we had good views of Madeiran Firecrest. A heavy mist and light rain, typical of these rare Laurel cloud forests, persisted and we headed to the plateau where we had a stroke of luck. The clouds cleared for a short while allowing us to find the Madeiran race of Spectacled Warbler and we also recorded European Robin and Common Linnet.

We ate our packed lunches in the shelter of the bus and used the facilities of the café close by before returning to the cross roads and having a short walk, where we saw Common Buzzard, Berthelot's Pipit, another male Spectacled Warbler and heard Common Quail.

It was time to start heading back to the hotel where the warm sun had brought out Monarch and Long-tailed Blue butterflies. Later we returned to eat at Restaurante Combatentes, joined by Filipe. The weather in the mountains was still not conducive to walking the ridge path for the Zino's colony visit, so alas we had to cancel this again on safety grounds.

## Day 5

Saturday 18th June

We had some spare time around Funchal this morning catching up on a few butterflies and completing the final checklist and housekeeping before the bus arrived at 11am to take those returning home today to the airport, with two of the group staying on the island for a few more days.

It had been a full, packed, short visit to Madeira with the focus on seabirds and had ticked every box on species we had all hoped to see, with some extra icing on the cake with the endemic land birds. The one lasting memory for everyone was spending the night under canvas or in the open on Deserta Grande, listening and seeing the petrels returning to their nesting burrows. Fantastic!

## Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	June				
			14	15	16	17	18
1	Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>				H	
2	White-faced Storm Petrel	<i>Pelagodroma marina</i>	1				
3	Band-rumped Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma castro</i>		10			
4	Zino's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma Madeira</i>			1		
5	Desertas Petrel	<i>Pterodroma deserta</i>		3	2		
	Unidentified Fea's type petrels	<i>pterodroma sp.</i>		7	3		
6	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓		
7	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	4				
8	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulwerii</i>	30	✓	15		
9	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	1				
10	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1			1	
11	Madeiran Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo harterti</i>				1	
12	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	14	8	✓	✓
13	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	2				
14	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	6	6	7	✓	
15	Rock Dove (Feral)	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
16	Trocaz Pigeon	<i>Columba trocaz</i>				10	
17	Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	5		6	15	✓
18	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1		7	
19	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>	4	1	2	2	2
20	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata orbitalis</i>				2	
21	Madeira Firecrest	<i>Regulus madeirensis</i>				20	
22	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	3		✓	✓	✓
23	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>				10	
24	Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii</i>		6	5	5	
25	Madeira Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs maderensis</i>				30	
26	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina guentheri</i>				3	
27	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>				1	
28	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	✓	30	✓	✓	✓

## Mammals

1	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>			5		
2	Mediterranean Monk Seal	<i>Monachus monachus</i>		1			
3	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>		100+	100+		
4	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	30+				

## Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>	1		2		
2	Madeira Wall Lizard	<i>Teira dugesii</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Perez's Frog	<i>Pelophylax perezi</i>	✓			H	

## Other Taxa

Small White, *Pieris rapae*

Long-tailed Blue, *Lampides boeticus*

Atlantic Flyingfish, *Cheilopogon melanurus*

Clouded Yellow, *Colias crocea*

Monarch, *Danaus plexippus*

Mullet sp.

## Some Plants that were noted

Canary Island Laurel (*Laurus azorica*), Pride of Madeira (*Echium candicans*), a geranium (*Geranium palmatum*), Blue Birds-foot Trefoil (*Lotus glaucus*), Downy Sow Thistle (*Andryala glandulosa* spp *glandulosa*), Madeiran Hawkweed (*Tolpis macrorhiza*), Blood-Eyed Chrysanthemum (*Argyranthemum hematoma*), a broomrape (*Orobancha* sp), Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), Hare's Tail Grass (*Lagurus ovatus*), Purple Viper's-bugloss (*Echium plantagineum*), A phagnalon (*Phagnalon bennettii?*), a sedum (*Sedum nudum*), Marigold (*Calendula maderensis*), Fish-stunning Spurge (*Euphorbia piscatoria*)

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Warden's accommodation and research buildings on Deserta Grande