

Madeira & Desertas Islands - A Seabird Extravaganza!

Naturetrek Tour Report

16 - 20 June 2018



Bulwer's Petrel



Cory's Shearwater



Berthelot's Pipit



Canary

Report & Images compiled by Martin Beaton



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Day 1

Sunday 16th June

We departed Gatwick at 9am and arrived at Madeira ahead of schedule, but unfortunately with very strong winds. After two attempts to land we diverted to the nearby island of Porto Santo, where we spent the night. Unfortunately we therefore missed our planned pelagic trip which would have taken us some ten miles off the Madeiran Coast. The upside was that we recorded Spanish Sparrow, a possible Rock Sparrow, Hoopoe and Moorhen, all birds rarely seen on Madeira.

Day 2

Monday 17th June

We left our hotel, caught our flight and landed on Madeira at 10am, to be met by Filipe. After a short drive to our hotel and an even-shorter time booking in, we set off on our land tour of the island's bird species. Our first stop was at Encumeada at 1,803 metres, where we walked along the Levada das Rabacas through Laurel forest. We soon found Madeira Firecrest and Madeira Chaffinch, the latter a recognised sub species of this familiar European mainland species. The Laurel forest is an internationally important habitat, recognised as a world heritage site, which represents a remnant cloud forest from the Cenozoic period that once surrounded the Tythes Sea, now reduced to the Mediterranean.

After Encumeada we had lunch at a picnic site in the Laurel forest before continuing to a small valley near Rochao, above Sao Vincente. This valley lies in a lower part of the Laurel forest and here we soon found and spent time observing a number of the endemic Trocaz (Madeira Laurel) Pigeons. We also saw a Madeiran Speckled Wood butterfly.

Travelling on to Sao Vincente we found Common and Roseate Terns on the pebble beach, together with a solitary Bar-tailed Godwit. An adult and a juvenile Grey Wagtail were seen following the boulders at the edge of the river as it made its way to the sea. A little further to the east we walked out to the rock stack that the terns were clearly using as a breeding site.

After a coffee to rejuvenate ourselves, we headed to the south coast to the headland above Ribero Quinta Grande, immediately to the west of Cabo Girao, to look for Spectacled Warbler. Alas, despite our searching we were unable to find any birds. As time was pressing we made a final stop at the cliff of Cabo Girao, the highest cliff face in Europe, before returning to our hotel.

This evening we had an excellent meal in the old port area of Funchal at the restaurant Donna Maria, in Rua de Santa Maria.

Day 3

Tuesday 18th June

Today we had a rather leisurely start with Filipe transporting us to the harbour at 10.30am to begin our sail across to the Desertas on the Ventura do Mar with the skipper Marco. The wind was fairly strong at 30 knots, so initially we headed north along the coast before turning south-west which, with the wind behind us, provided a smoother passage during which the wind dropped.

It was not long before we spotted our first Loggerhead Turtle, and then a school of Bottle-nosed Dolphins. Close to the dolphins were numerous Cory's Shearwaters and as we headed further out from the bay we enjoyed close views of these magnificent birds. A Desertas Petrel was seen tracking its typical W flight pattern. Separating it from Zeno's Petrel is challenging. Of three birds seen on this passage Filipe thought that one was Zeno's and two were Desertas, but they were not close enough to be certain. It was surprising that we did not see Bulwer's Petrel until fairly late on this passage as they are often more numerous, but we enjoyed seeing these delicate, all dark birds.

We finally arrived at Desertas Grande and anchored in the small bay in front of the warden's/research station. Once we had settled in we explored the 600-metre route through the breeding area to familiarise ourselves with it, in order that we could explore after dark. Whilst the Ventura crew set up tents and began to prepare the evening meal, we had time to observe both Berthelot's Pipit and Canary, which are very tame and easily observed here.

We were lucky to find Dr Paulo Catry on the island, who is a research fellow of the University of Lisbon. He has been conducting studies of both Bulwer's Petrel and Cory's Shearwater on the Desertas for a number of years. Paulo provided some interesting information on the feeding areas of these birds. Cory's Shearwaters head out, predominately in a north-east direction from the Desertas, travelling as far as the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, Canada and covering some 12,000 kilometres in 12 days. A tracked Bulwer's Petrel covered an almost circular route encompassing the Azores in a few days. Both birds feed from the surface, but the Bulwer's diet is almost exclusively quite deep-water fish.

After our meal, as dusk approached, we began to hear birds approaching with the calls of Cory's Shearwater and Madeira Storm Petrel, along with the barking Bulwer's Petrel. The calls of the birds and their constant activity could be heard at close hand throughout the night.

Day 4

Wednesday 19th June

After breakfast we returned to Ventura do Mar for our return journey to Funchal. The birds had left their breeding colony promptly at dawn. The wind had dropped but there was still significant cloud cover over the islands. We saw fewer Cory's Shearwaters but many more Bulwer's Petrels, perhaps because the Cory's (being larger and heavier birds) are unable to utilise the lighter winds to the same extent. We had a brief view of a Loggerhead Turtle, a single distant Desertas Petrel and a group of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins before arriving back at Funchal, where we had lunch in Marcos' new restaurant.

Our afternoon was free to allow time to rest from the trip to Desertas, before being collected by Filipe at 8.30pm to travel up to Pico Arieiro to search for Zino's Petrel. We arrived at Pico Arieiro as the sun was setting and when it was fully dark, set off along the mountain track, guided by Filipe. Zino's Petrels, during their nocturnal visits to their nests, emit calls that sound like wails, vaguely like Tawny Owl. For many years these sounds were interpreted by the inhabitants of Curral das Freiras as being the calls of the suffering souls of the shepherds who died on those mountains. On a mountain ridge in moonlight we waited for the birds to arrive. We heard the first faint calls about 11pm and then ongoing for about an hour. This was not a raucous cacophony, but the soft calls of a colony widely spaced across precipitous mountain ledges. After about an hour we returned via the mountain route we had taken and headed back to our hotel, ready for a good night's sleep.

Day 5

Thursday 20th June

Today our short trip to Madeira ended. After breakfast we were driven to the airport at 9.30am to catch our return flight to Gatwick.

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Common Tern

Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	June				
			16	17	18	19	20
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>			250	50	
2	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>			15		
3	Desertas Petrel	<i>Pterodroma deserta</i>			3	2	
4	Zino's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma madeira</i>			1		
5	Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>			20	60	
6	Madeira Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanodroma castro</i>			1		
7	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1	1		1	
8	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	3	6		1	
9	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>				1	
10	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	1				
11	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			1		
12	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		1			
13	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	15	20	100	50	
14	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		35	10	10	
15	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>		2			
16	Ferel Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		30	1	1	
17	Trocaz Pigeon	<i>Columba trocaz</i>		10			
18	Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	3	15	5		
19	Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii madeirensis</i>			6	6	
20	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>		3			
21	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		2			
22	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula cabreræ</i>	2	6	6	6	5
23	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>	1	6	1	1	1
24	Madeira Firecrest	<i>Regulus madeirensis</i>		10		5	
25	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	10	20			
26	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia maderensis</i>	poss.				
27	Madeira Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs madeirensis</i>		10		5	
28	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>		10	20	20	2

Reptiles & Amphibians

1	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>			x	x	
2	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Teira dugesii</i>	x			x	

Mammals

1	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>			x	x	
2	Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>				x	
3	Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>				x	

Fish

1	Brown Trout (Introduced)	<i>Salmo trutta forma fario</i>		x			
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Butterflies

1	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		x			
2	Madeiran Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge xiphia</i>		x			
3	Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		x			
4	Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>		x			
5	Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>		x			