

# Madeira – A Seabird Extravaganza!

Naturetrek Tour Report

20th – 24th June 2022



Bulwer's Petrel



Great Shearwater

Tour report and images by Simon Woolley



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Tour participants: Simon Woolley (leader) with five Naturetrek clients

## Summary

The island of Madeira lies some 850 kilometres south-west of Portugal, and forms part of that country. Madeira was only “officially” discovered and colonised in 1419, although dating of sub-fossil mouse bones and the DNA of extant mice on Madeira suggests that Viking seafarers made at least temporary colonisations well before that. The island measures some 60 kilometres by 20 kilometres, and has two small offshore neighbouring archipelagos: Porto Santo and neighbouring islets to the north-east, and the three Desertas Islands to the south-east. The whole archipelago is volcanic in origin.

Being so remote, Madeira has the typical oceanic island mix of low species diversity, but high endemism. The native laurisilva forest, sadly much-reduced to only about a third of the island’s area, and largely restricted to the very steep and inaccessible uplands, is watered by thick fog and almost daily rain on the mountain tops. The Desertas Islands, by contrast, are utterly arid, being much lower and generating almost no orographic (relief) rainfall from the prevailing north-easterly trade winds.

Our Naturetrek expedition was a targeted five-day “special raid”. We aimed to see all the endemic birds of the archipelago, and as many of the near-endemics (i.e. those shared with the Canaries and/or the Azores) as possible. In addition, we hoped to see a wide range of other wildlife on land at especially at sea, with a strong focus on birds, but enjoying whatever flora and fauna presented itself to us!

## Day 1

## Monday 20th June

A fairly uncivilised departure time from Gatwick at 8am, but the flight was uneventful, and we arrived at Funchal airport before noon. Our local agent Hugo met us very promptly outside the terminal, and within 10 minutes (via our first birds, two Common Kestrels over the airport) we were at our hotel in Machico at the eastern end of the island.

After settling in and a spot of lunch, we headed out for a couple of hours around the breakwater and harbour, and a short distance uphill to an area of weedy gardens and fields. Offshore, some very distant Cory's Shearwaters wheeled past, and a few *atlantis* Yellow-legged Gulls and Common Terns loafed about the rocks. Our first Plain Swifts screeched around the distant cliffs, and a Pallid Swift flew over the town.

On the hill, we saw our first passerines, in the form of Island Canary, Common Waxbills, several Blackcaps (of the form *heineken*), and Blackbirds. A few Monarch butterflies floated past, and we saw scores of Madeiran Wall Lizards .... on an old wall, appropriately enough! Down in the river bed (really a heavily modified storm channel), we found some vaguely convincing Mallards and some highly *unconvincing* Muscovy Ducks, plus a couple of Moorhens (a scarce bird on Madeira) and three Grey Wagtails, one of them a male. The local form, *schmitzi*, is an extremely smart bird, with the males’ upperparts a much darker slate grey than on British birds, and the yellow underneath a lot more intense.

A trip to the supermarket for pelagic snacks was followed by a slap-up dinner, and then we got ourselves ready for our nocturnal adventure in the high peaks of Madeira.

What an experience! We drove up through cloud and heavy rain, and mist swirled around as we arrived at the radar station. Torches lit, we trekked for well over a mile on narrow paths and steep steps, the enveloping fog making all around us invisible and creating the sense that we were underground in some vast cave system, like the Mines of Moria! Finally, we reached the appointed spot, and waited in silence.

Very soon, the first Zino's Petrel called like a ghost in the darkness, and most of us had glimpses of a winged shape passing by just a few feet away. (One tour participant even later found he had brought back some Zino's Petrel DNA on the back of his raincoat!) Over about an hour, we heard upwards of a dozen Zino's Petrels calling: a true privilege and an incredibly memorable wildlife experience. There were even a few Manx Shearwater calls thrown in for good measure, much further down in the valleys. The walk back was freezing cold: it was no more than 3°C with an icy wind and damp air. We gratefully reboarded the bus and descended for a 1am finish, elated at an action-packed first evening.

## Day 2

## Tuesday 21st June

The summer solstice, and we had some endemics to see! Catarina picked us up at 9am, and whisked us not to some primeval laurel forest, but to an unprepossessing lay-by not far from Funchal. With a magnificent ocean overlook, we enjoyed the local form of Buzzard soaring past, and Plain Swifts hurtling overhead. But the star bird was undoubtedly the endemic Trocaz Pigeon, two of which flopped in and landed on a garden pergola! Good, extended views were had of this very smart and desirable bird.

Next it was on to Ponta de São Laurenço, an arid headland at the eastern tip of Madeira. In windy conditions, we searched the dry grassland among the basaltic outcrops. We could hear our quarry, but it took a few minutes to locate a perched Berthelot's Pipit, which eventually showed excellently. This species is shared only with the Canary Islands. Also here were many Desert Locusts and a few Red-winged Grasshoppers.

Our final stop of the morning was up high at the Santo da Serra gardens. In light drizzle and difficult light, we quickly located Madeira Firecrest, plus the endemic and very distinctive *maderensis* form of Chaffinch. (We also saw Greenfinch and Robin here – despite looking hard, we couldn't see anything “different” about them. The evolutionary explanation is (of course) that they are more recent arrivals than the Chaffinch and (especially) the Firecrest, and have not yet diverged from their mainland cousins.)

After a break for lunch, we got ready for the third element of a truly action-packed 24 hours: our first pelagic trip! We met Hugo and Catarina at Machico harbour, and after the all-important safety briefing, hopped on board the *Oceanodroma*, a 12-seat rigid inflatable with heavy-duty shock-absorbing seats. About half an hour out, a whale “blow” was spotted in the distance, and we raced over at full speed, slowing as we approached. Our reward was not one but four Sperm Whales. Two even breached a few times! Once they had dived, we refocused our brains on the main event: pelagic birds.

We soon started seeing the first of many Bulwer's Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters, many within touching distance. Early on, the shout we wanted went up: “*Pterodroma* at 1 o'clock!” The bird was very distant but clearly had a dark underwing (most people got onto it): it was likely a Desertas Petrel (rather than a Zino's) but had to be left as an “either/or”. Twenty nautical miles offshore we reached our chumming spot. Here, we lowered a netted bucket of foul-smelling fish offal into the sea and allowed it to do its work, spreading a slick of fishy oils over

the surface, and attracting seabirds from miles around. The routine was simple: position the boat upwind of the chum bucket, drift downwind past it, then (on a cry of “going up!” from Catarina, return to the original spot and repeat. We had Bulwer’s Petrels and Cory’s Shearwaters with us constantly, but all were scanning for more and better.

At about 6.20pm, from nowhere, at point blank range: a clear Desertas Petrel! It flew right by the boat and then showed well off the stern. The encounter was brief but we were now firmly in the *Pterodroma* club!

We drifted until almost sunset, and just as we were dragging in the chum bucket, another *Pterodroma* came very close and made four passes. This bird looked rather slight, and while the light was poor, it appeared to show an impressively white underwing panel. Luckily, one tour participant had not yet packed his camera away, and his crucial shots later confirmed that this was our first proper look at a Zino’s Petrel, the rarer of the two *Pterodromas*, whose at-sea identification has really only been sorted out in the last few years.

By the last rays of sunlight, a Portuguese Man o’ War drifted by, and we much enjoyed a pod of about 20 Spotted Dolphins playing by the boat and riding the bow wave. Next was the inevitably somewhat bumpy 50-minute ride back to the harbour, into a stiffening wind. We made it, but had no energy left for anything other than crashing into bed!

## Day 3

## Wednesday 22nd June

After breakfast, we took a taxi ride up high into the native laurisilva forests, and beat the crowds at the popular Levada de Balcões site. (Endemic) Madeiran Orchids were abundant and magnificent on the roadsides, and we enjoyed numerous other plants, some indigenous, but many introduced. The Chaffinches here were ridiculously tame, even feeding out of our hands!

From the lookout point at the end of the levada walk, we had magnificent views down into the huge gorge running off to the northern side of the island. We imagined the Zino’s Petrels navigating their way in here through the mist and rain each evening... More prosaically, four or five distant Trocaz Pigeons showed on tree heathers and laurel trees, and the local Kestrels wheeled about. In the rather cool conditions, Madeira Firecrests were not very active, and while we heard several, we didn’t manage to see one.

After coffee and cake (and a roadside Buzzard), we descended once more and returned for lunch at the hotel. And the now familiar afternoon routine began once more: 3pm at the harbour!

Today, we headed to the northern side of Madeira. Our early progress was interrupted by a large group of Short-beaked Common Dolphins just offshore, but we were soon through the rough channel at the end of the Ponta de São Laurenço, and making steady progress north, albeit in a not inconsiderable ocean swell!

Birds were slightly fewer in number today, with notably fewer Bulwer’s Petrels, but we were still constantly entertained by both them and Cory’s Shearwaters, plus a good few Manx Shearwaters for good measure. A gang of Atlantic Yellow-legged Gulls attended us (and the chum bucket!) all afternoon, but this did not put off tube-nosed visitors to the slick.

Today we had no fewer than five encounters with the mystical *Pterodroma* petrels. While we had all “half-ticked” yesterday's photographically confirmed bird, everybody wanted to see a Zino's properly. And we did! No fewer than three made close approaches to the boat, all later in the day as per their timetable, and we were able to note the finer bill structure, more gracile structure and notably lighter, “flickier” flight pattern when compared with the chunkier Desertas seen so well yesterday. Conveniently, a clear Desertas showed for us today as well, not far from shore and early in the afternoon. The fifth *Pterodroma*, briefly before dusk, was a salutary reminder of the extreme difficulty of separating these birds. We had to leave it unidentified!

To add to our cetacean list, a large (30+) pod of Spotted Dolphins joined us for a while before we had to rev the 500-horsepower engines and head (quite smoothly) for home. What a fantastic pelagic once again!

## Day 4

Thursday 23rd June

Up and away by taxi once more, this time back to Ponto de São Lourenço, which was thankfully much less windy than last time! An early surprise came in the form of two Peregrines, a bird virtually unknown on Madeira until about 20 years ago, but now with a very few birds apparently resident. This apparent pair might just represent the colonisation of the island .... but we'll have to wait several thousand years before they become a tickable endemic!

Our main targets were found fairly quickly: about eight or nine wheezing Rock Sparrows of the Macaronesian endemic form *madeirensis*, and a rather tricky but ultimately very satisfactory Spectacled Warbler, of the Macaronesian endemic form *orbitalis*. Back for ice creams and lunch, and reports of both Long-tailed Blue and Lang's Short-tailed Blue butterflies from close to the hotel from a tour participant who had skipped this morning's excursion.

And 3pm rolled around again: time for our third and final pelagic adventure. We set out south-west once more, initially in very calm seas, and soon found a Sperm Whale lolling about on the surface and blowing frequently. As we suspected, it was “filling the tanks”, and it soon sounded spectacularly with a great display of tail flukes.

The first of no fewer than 12 *Pterodromas* quickly followed, a very showy Desertas Petrel. We saw seven more, plus a super close, very satisfactory Zino's Petrel, and three birds too distant to ID firmly. As well as the now-familiar Cory's Shearwaters and Bulwer's Petrels, we had several Manx Shearwaters once more, and two significant surprises: a third-calendar-year Arctic Skua and a stunning Great Shearwater, both very close to the boat and making repeated passes. We didn't know where to look when the latter appeared, as it showed up at the same time as a substantial Great Hammerhead Shark scavenging from the chum bucket!

The ride back was bumpy to say the least, but who said wildlife adventures were always perfectly comfortable? We arrived back at Machico harbour in darkness, feeling a mixture of elation and relief, and crashed out for a final night's sleep in our lovely hotel.

## Day 5

Friday 24th June

Mission accomplished, with 20 at-sea *Pterodroma* encounters and the only ‘missed’ endemic bird being the very-hard-to-find *granti* form of Sparrowhawk, we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and were picked up by Hugo at

9.15am for the short drive to the airport. Thankfully, there were no delays, either wind-derived or airline-related, and we enjoyed a straightforward return to the UK.

What an amazing, brief but action-packed adventure! We shall all take home excellent memories of the beautiful island of Madeira, and its very special birds. Many thanks to Hugo and Catarina for getting us to the right places at the right times, by land and sea, and to our hosts at the hotel for such good food and comfy beds.

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## Species lists

Common name	Scientific name	June				
		20	21	22	23	24
<b>Birds</b>						
Muscovy Duck (recently introduced)	<i>Cairina moschata</i>		✓		✓	✓
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		4		3	
Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	3	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	1	☞	•	•	•
Feral Pigeon (Rock Dove)	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trocaz Pigeon	<i>Columba trocaz</i>		2	5		
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	2				
Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	10	10	15	10+	2
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		1	2		
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	10	1	1	2	
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>				1	
Zino's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma madeira</i>		1	3	1	
Desertas Petrel ("Bugio Fea's Petrel")	<i>Pterodroma (feae) deserta</i>		1	1	8	

Common name	Scientific name	June				
		20	21	22	23	24
<i>Pterodroma</i> sp.	<i>Pterodroma</i> sp.		1	1	3	
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	5	150	50	50	
Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>				1	
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>			25	5	
Bulwer's Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>		250	100	100	
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		1	1	1	
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		1	2	1	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	2+	✓	✓	2	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				2	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>	5	✓	2	✓	
Spectacled Warbler	<i>Curruca conspicillata orbitalis</i>				2	
Madeira Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus maderensis</i>		4+	h		
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula cabreræ</i>	5	✓	✓	1	
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓		
Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia maderensis</i>				4+	
Common Waxbill (recently introduced)	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	15			✓	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>	3		2	1	
Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii madeirensis</i>		2		10	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs maderensis</i>		✓	✓		
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		6			
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			2		
Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	12	✓	✓	✓	3
<b>Herptiles</b>						
Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Perez's Frog	<i>Rana perezii</i>	•	✓	✓	✓	•
<b>Mammals</b>						
(Short-beaked) Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>			15		
Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>		15	30+		
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		4		1	
<b>Fish</b>						
Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>				2	
Great Hammerhead Shark	<i>Sphyrna mokarran</i>				1	
<b>Butterflies</b>						
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	1	1			
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>		2		2	
Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>				✓	
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>		10			
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>	4	✓	✓	4	

Common name	Scientific name	June				
		20	21	22	23	24
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>				✓	
<b>Other insects</b>						
Desert Locust	<i>Schistocerca gregaria</i>		5		✓	
Red Band-winged Grasshopper	<i>Oedipoda germanica</i>		1		✓	
<b>Selected plants</b>						
Madeiran Groundsel	<i>Pericallis aurita</i>			✓		
Pride of Madeira	<i>Echium candicans</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Madeiran Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza foliosa</i>		.	✓		