

Madeira – A Seabird Extravaganza!

Naturetrek Tour Report

13th – 17th June 2023



Red-billed Tropicbird



Desertas Petrel



Wilson's Storm Petrel



Portuguese Man of War

Tour report and images by Jake Everitt



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Day 1

Tuesday 13th June

After a slight delay, the flight from London Gatwick departed at 3.10pm, landing in Funchal, Madeira at 6.50pm. After reconvening with the rest of the group at the luggage collection area we were soon picked up by our local guide Hugo and transported to our accommodation at the Hotel Amparo in Machico.

As some of the group had already travelled under their own steam to the hotel, we had the introductions over dinner before setting off at 9.20pm for the Zino's Petrel experience. After c45mins we arrived at the parking area at Pico do Arreiro. The group then carefully navigated our way to the viewpoint in the darkness to wait patiently, and listening intently for any nighttime sounds. At 9.44pm we heard our first Zino's Petrel calling as it returned in the darkness to its nest burrow. The first bird was a distant male which was identified by its slightly higher pitched call. Soon there were several birds calling around us, frustratingly however, they stayed fairly distant on their breeding cliffs so we did not see any birds arriving. As the clock ticked round to 11.30pm a strange bright light appeared in the sky to the east; after a few minutes we realised it was the satellite Star-link chain from Elon Musk's project in America which launched in the last week. It was incredible to see it move across the wonderfully dark Madeiran sky. After enjoying this the group slowly meandered its way back to the car park adding Brown Rat to the mammal list for the trip. We arrived back at the hotel at 1.05am for a well earned rest.

Day 2

Wednesday 14th June

The morning started with light cloud over Hotel Amparo which had soon cleared when we were picked up by Hugo and Catarina at 9.15am. The aim of the morning was to see all the endemic land bird species found on the island before boarding our first pelagic in the afternoon. The island plays host to several full endemic species as well as several potential sub-species splits so whilst the species diversity on the islands is fairly low the rewards can be great.

Our first stop was at Miradouro Vale de Neves which is a viewpoint to the east of Funchal. From here it is possible to get panoramic views across the bay and surrounding remnants of Laurel Forest the Madeira is famed for. The vista is also one of the easiest places on the island to see the endemic Trocaz Pigeon. The first bird noted from this viewpoint was a male Atlantic Canary which was singing away from a nearby wire. Several Feral Pigeon and Collared Dove caused brief interest before Catarina located our target species flying in from the west before alighting on a garden pagoda! Not quite how one might imagine seeing this forest dwelling *Columba*, but it did mean that good views were had by all of the group. After short wait the bird then flew a short distance down the hill to perch in a Laurel bush which was much more satisfying than the views previously had.

From here we travelled north-west to a well-positioned layby on the ER203 midway to Abrigo do Pastor. As we got out of the minibus another Trocaz Pigeon flew overhead but quickly vanished into the dense Laurel Forest. We picked up one of the trails which headed deep into the forest and soon enough we were amongst some pristine Laurel Forest accompanied by some lovely woodland glades and pools. First bird we noted here was the Madeiran subspecies of European Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs maderensis* with a number of males singing along the trail. This endemic subspecies is only found in Madeira Island and is regarded as a high-altitude species and is not

found on any of the other islands in the archipelago. There is great potential for this to be split in the future by the birding authorities, so it was high on the target list for the group.

The vocalisation of the bird is vaguely similar to that of Britain birds however there is a noticeable difference if you listen carefully. The appearance however is very different, especially in the males. They have a pale orange chest with a bluish crown and greenish-brown back. The female has a cream chest and brownish back and is very similar to the other races.

Hugo then managed to attract a small group of Madeiran Firecrest down from the canopy which showed well at head height. They are very active little birds which are hard to get a good view of as they busily fed, hovering below the leaves looking for aphids and other insects. Whilst watching the Firecrests we also had a cacophony of croaks and bumbles coming from a small pool which turned out to be a small colony of Perez's Frog.

After a slow walk back to the vehicles we had more views of the Firecrests as well as several Atlantic Canary on overhead wires. There were also a number of butterfly species noted here which included Monarch, Lang's Short-tailed Blue as well as the endemic Madeiran Speckled Wood.

Our final stop of the morning was at Miradouro da Ponta do Rosto which is positioned at the eastern end of the island. This area is usually a reliable spot for endemic Berthelot's Pipit however on today's visit they proved elusive and a real challenge to see. As did Spectacled Warbler which again is usually found around the military compound in nearby scrub but was absent on our visit. With the heat picking up we headed back into Machico where some of the group headed to the supermarket for some boat snacks whilst others slowly pottered back to the hotel in time for a freshen up before lunch. After an excellent lunch we grabbed our seafaring gear (sun lotion, flip-flops and water!) and headed down to the harbour.

Our boat left at 3.30pm into a light south-westerly wind. Our first bird of the day on the boat was a stonking Desertas Petrel which wheeled in from the west and was well watched as it continued into the eastern horizon. We were then joined by a wonderful group of Short-finned Pilot Whales which gave outstanding views as they surfaced all around us and often at touching distance. The group were full of smiles as we got covered in the whales spray each time, they surfaced to dive down to feed.

We continued onwards in a southerly direction scanning the calm sea for any signs of oceanic life. On several occasions we disturbed groups of Atlantic Flying Fish which showed exactly why they had been named as they flew short distances between the waves. Our next excitement was caused by the blow of a distant whale which eventually turned out to be a Bryde's Whale which showed a couple more times, sadly, always at distance. We gave it a short while for the whale to reappear but to no avail so we moved on in search of more seabirds.

Due to the lack of wind on the sea, the order of the day was drifting and chumming in the hope of attracting more storm petrels into the slick with the outside chance of pulling in a White-faced Storm Petrel. Sadly the White-faced failed to appear in the slick however we did have excellent views of two Madeiran Storm Petrel as well as a single Wilson's Storm Petrel which stayed feeding in the slick for over an hour.

Despite much grilling of Bulwer's Petrels and a handful of Cory's Shearwater we could find nothing more interesting. Although the sea conditions were favourable for viewing the lack of wind had kept the large shearwaters in their rafts and sadly out of our reach for today. At c8.30pm we decided to call it quits and turn the boat in the direction of Machico and a nice cool beer. We arrived back at the harbour at c10.00pm just in time to

quench our thirst!

Day 3

Thursday 15th June

Breakfast was taken in the hotel at 8am before the group split up for the morning session. A couple of members of the group headed for the Tropical Gardens at Monte whereas the rest of us headed to Ponta de São Lourenço. We arrived on site after a short taxi journey and headed off the main path to avoid other tourists.

Our first birds of the morning were a male Common Kestrel and a flyover Berthelot's Pipit. A little further down the path we enjoyed a nice close view of a female Spectacled Warbler.

From here we headed along the quieter northern path seeing several more Spectacled Warbler including several stunning males. Then we saw a bird alight from the Tamarisks on the side of the path and its distinctive flight pattern drew our attention to a stunning Hoopoe. It perched on a small boulder and began to sing its amazing *Hoo-poo-poo* song, much to the delight of the group. A little further along a presumed female Hoopoe flushed to join the male on the same rock, a wonderful encounter for all of us to enjoy.

We pottered a bit further along the rocky track searching for the elusive Rock Sparrows to no avail, so we decided to head towards the drop-off point for a loo break and ice-cream. From here we birded down the road towards Machico before eventually turning back north to bird the ridgeline above us. The habitat here was far more arid with very sparse vegetation. Soon one of the group managed to find a group of freshly fledged Kestrels which entertained us in the valley below. We then heard several calls from below us which were clearly Rock Sparrow but despite an extensive search we could not locate them.

On the ridgeline we finally achieved good views of a pair of Berthelot's Pipit as well as point blank views of a group of Plain Swifts which were more than happy to feed in amongst the group darting all over the hillside looking for insects. On the walk back to the taxi we saw several Red Band-winged Grasshopper *Oedipoda germanica* which pleased the group as they flew exposing their incredible wings.

After taking lunch we headed down to the quay for our next pelagic. Today we headed to the north side of the island which usually has more swell and is often offers the best opportunity of seeing Zino's Petrel out on the open ocean. Bulwer's Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters kept us company as we steamed out to our chumming spot. After c1.5hrs the shout went up of 'Pterodroma' and soon enough the whole boat had located the bird. It wheeled up the port side of the boat in classic fashion allowing us to study the bird and get some decent photographs. The structure of this bird was much more delicate, as was the steep forehead appearance and relatively thin bill. It was a Zino's Petrel much to the relief of all of the group.

We soon arrived at the chumming spot and the frozen bait bucket was lowered into the sea. Bulwer's Petrels were once again the most numerous with 30-50 birds around for most of the day. A Common Tern dropped in for a quick feed as well as a couple of Manx Shearwaters but generally it seemed a fairly quiet day on the ocean.

That was of course until a stonking adult Red-billed Tropicbird was picked up flying towards our vessel. Unbelievably it flew literally right over the boat to everyone's astonishment! It sadly continued straight on until it became a speck on the horizon. The whole boat was in raptures, Hugo and Catarina included! Ridiculously whilst

celebrating the find it must have turned around because it had come back for a second look. This time it did four or five laps of the boat...what-a-bird! Before we knew it we had run out of time and we made a speedy return to the harbour. Plenty more Cory's Shearwaters were seen on the trip home giving excellent views as the sun set in the wake of the boat!

Day 4

Friday 16th June

With another 8.00am breakfast we decided to head to Porto de recreio de Madeira for a look around the harbour and surrounds at around 9.00am. With no sign of any waders or interesting terns we headed for the hillside of Pico do Facho. As we began along the path, we immediately bumped into a flock of Common Waxbill which fed avidly in a flowering bush, soon being joined by up to five Atlantic Canary. These are an introduced species which add some colour to the islands avifauna and are always a pleasure to watch.

We birded around the lower paths seeing plentiful Monarch butterflies and a range of interesting plants such as Bird of Paradise flower *Strelitzia reginae*, Castor Oil Plant *Ricinus communis* and Prickly Pear *Opuntia ficus-indica*. From here we meandered slowly towards Ribeira de Machico birding the river which runs through the middle of town. After taking in the wide range of feral Muscovy ducks we saw several Moorhen scampering for cover and plenty of the Madeiran race of Grey Wagtail (*spp. schmitzi*) whilst several Plain Swifts fed above us.

After stopping back at the hotel for a delicious kebab lunch we once more headed to the quay to board the Oceanadroma for one last afternoon pelagic. On route we finally bumped into a group of four Turnstone feeding along the strand line which were a welcome addition to the trip list.

Our direction of travel this afternoon took us on a close tour of the eastern end of Madeira looking for the rare Monk Seals which can sometimes be seen in the more secluded bays and beaches. Unfortunately, we couldn't locate any seals here but did get a chance to see some different ages of Yellow-legged Gull which until this point had eluded us. From here we headed towards the Desertas Islands in a south-easterly direction. As we bumped our way across, we had our best views yet of Desertas Petrel as two birds passed close to the boat followed by a single bird which did several laps of the boat giving everyone the chance to see the bulky build, thickset bill, eye markings and darker underwing.

Another slow cruise along the islands of Ilhéu Chão and Deserta Grande again drew a blank on the Monk Seal front however the scenery was breathtaking and we were lucky to get so close to these remote islands.

After a brief cheese sandwich on the boat, we set up to drift and chin once again hoping to draw the birds up the slick for us to study. On travelling to the chumming location, it was immediately obvious that there were a lot of birds around with several large rafts of Cory's Shearwater rafting on the sea and plenty of Bulwer's Petrel zigzagging across the waves.

Once the chum was dropped into the sea we had our closest views of both Bulwer's Petrel and Cory's Shearwater as well as a brief visit from a Manx Shearwater too. The slick by this point had spread and it was no surprise when a Wilson's Storm Petrel was called bouncing its way towards us. It showed ridiculously for over an hour as it skilfully picked tiny pieces of fish off the water, often right alongside the boat.

After some biscuits and a slice of Tuna, Sweetcorn and Broccoli quiche the sea truly became alive with seabirds. Thousands of Cory's Shearwater and Bulwer's Petrel had amassed around us in every direction. It was a breathtaking experience to see the sheer number of birds around us. The main flock were sporadically joined but several more Desertas Petrels which again gave great views around the boat as they wheeled off in looping arches into the distance.

At 8.20pm we turned for home and once again for the next 45mins bounced our way through endless birds until one final Desertas Petrel joined us for a final goodbye. A wonderful evening out on the ocean which will live long in the memory for everyone on the boat.

Day 5

Saturday 17th June

Breakfast was taken at 8.00am before some of the group took a leisurely stroll around Machico Harbour. Good views were had of the Plain Swifts hawking high above the valley and a Kestrel was half-heartedly giving chase.

On the east side of the harbour we once again had good views of Grey Wagtail and a small flock of Common Waxbill. Several Monarch butterflies were seen visiting a range of wildflowers and Maderian Wall Lizards were scuttling along the warm buildings.

In the harbour we spent a little time looking at the wide range of colourful fish such as Turkish Wrasse, Bluefin Damsel and Box-lipped Mullet. We then headed back to the hotel to pack and check out before heading for lunch and eventually the airport.

Sadly, our flight was delayed from Funchal and we eventually left at 6.10pm arriving back at London Gatwick at 9.10pm where we all collected our luggage, said our goodbyes and went our separate ways.

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Species lists

	Common name	Scientific name	13th	14th	15th	16th	17th
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>		50+	250+	4000+	
2	Desertas Petrel	<i>Pterodroma feae deserta</i>		1	1	9	
3	Zino's Petrel	<i>Pterodroma madeira</i>	H		1		
4	Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	H		4	1	
5	Bulwers Petrel	<i>Bulweria bulweria</i>		300+	120+	2500+	
6	Madeiran Storm-petrel	<i>Oceanodroma castro</i>		1			
7	Wilson's Storm Petrel	<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>		1		2	
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>		x			
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		x		x	
10	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	x		x		
11	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	x	x	x	x	x
12	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>			x		
13	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				3	
14	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				4	
15	Red-billed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon aethereus</i>			1		
16	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	x	x	x	x	x
17	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>			x	x	
18	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		x	x	x	x
19	Ferel Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		x	x	x	x
20	Trocaz Pigeon	<i>Columba trocaz</i>		2	4		
21	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>			2		
22	Plain Swift	<i>Apus unicolor</i>	x	x	3	x	10+
23	Berthelot's Pipit	<i>Anthus berthelotii madeirensis</i>		2	3		
24	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i>	x			8	2
25	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>			x		
26	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula cabrerae</i>	x	x	x	x	x
27	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i>		x	x	x	x
28	Spectacled Warbler	<i>Sylvia conspicillata orbitalis</i>			8		
29	Madeiran Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus maderensis</i>		5			
30	Rock Sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia maderensis</i>			H		
31	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs madeirensis</i>		6	x		
32	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		H			
33	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>		5	x	x	
34	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>				30+	5+
35	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	x	x	x	x	
36	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>			2		

Common name	Scientific name	13th	14th	15th	16th	17th
Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>					
Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>	x	x	x	x	x
Perez's Frog	<i>Rana perezii</i>		x		x	
Mediterranean Monk Seal	<i>Monachus monachus</i>					
Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					
Common or Saddleback Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>					
Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>					
Bryde's Whale	<i>Balaenoptera edeni</i>		1			
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>					
Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>		10+			
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	1			1	
Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>					
Fish						
Brown Trout (Introduced)	<i>Salmo trutta forma. Fario</i>					
Rainbow Trout (Introduced)	<i>Oncorhynchus mykiss</i>					
Rock Goby	<i>Gobius paganellus</i>					
Atlantic Flying Fish	<i>Cypselurus heterurus</i>		x		x	
Turkish Wrasse	<i>Thalassoma pavo</i>					
Bluefin Damselfish	<i>Abudefduf luridus</i>					
Box-lipped Mullet	<i>Oedalechilus labeo</i>					
Butterflies			x			
Madeiran Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx maderensis</i>					
Madeiran Grayling	<i>Hipparchia maderensis</i>					
Madeiran Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge xiphia</i>		x			
(Madeiran) Small Copper	<i>Lycaena phlaeas phlaeoides</i>					
Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>		x			
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea</i>		x	x		
Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>					
Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>					
Speckled Wood	<i>Pararge aegeria</i>					
Monarch	<i>Danaus plexippus</i>	x	x	x	x	
Lang's Short-tailed Blue	<i>Leptotes pirithous</i>		x			

Queen of Spain Fritillary	<i>Issoria lathonia</i>					
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