

Madeira - A Seabird Extravaganza!

Naturetrek Tour Report

18th – 22nd June 2025



Bulwer's Petrel



Berthelot's Pipit



Desertas Petrel



Zino's Petrel

Tour report by Jacob Everitt



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Day 1

Wednesday 18th June

We departed London Gatwick at 7.50am after a short delay on take-off; however, we managed to make up most of the time and landed at Funchal at 11.10am local time. The group was soon picked up by our local guide Hugo, and we headed straight to our hotel in Machico. Here, we met the remaining members of the group, leisurely checked into our rooms and got to know the immediate surroundings, before being picked up for an afternoon outing at 4.30pm.

En route to our first destination, we found a Hoopoe feeding on the roadside verge. Surprisingly, considering they are a common breeding species on the mainland, they are seldom seen on the island. After a short drive we arrived at Miradouro da Ponta do Rosto, at the eastern end of the island. This area is dominated by steep coastal cliffs and sparse vegetation when compared to the rest of Madeira. Here, we enjoyed excellent views of a mixed group of swifts, which were mainly Plain Swifts with a handful of Pallids. To our surprise, we also found at least five Alpine Swifts in with the group, which was very unusual; even the local guides had only seen singles on the island in the past. Closer scrutiny of the group also led us to find three House Martins and three Barn Swallows, both species which would normally be expected to be far further north at this time of year.

Near the radar compound we heard and then enjoyed excellent views of several Spectacled Warbler pairs, all of which had young. It was fascinating to watch the parents bring food to the juveniles, which were dotted about in the low scrub. We also had our best views of Atlantic Canary here, with small family groups scattered along the perimeter fence of the compound.

Lastly, we heard several Berthelot's Pipit, and enjoyed good, close views of several juveniles, which were much more conspicuous than their skulking parents. It was great to be able to see the obvious difference between the fresh juvenile plumage and the adults, which were looking pretty tired with very worn feathers after a long breeding season.

We headed back to the hotel for a delicious local fish supper, followed by chocolate mousse. We then donned our warm clothes before being picked up by Hugo and Catarina at 9.00pm for our trip to Pico do Arieiro, where we were to search for Zino's Petrel. On arrival, we were just in time to see the sun dip below the horizon, and we got kitted out in hard hats and headtorches for the walk along the mountain ridge. With plenty of steps both up and down, the walk is always a challenge; but we were distracted by lots of nice plants along the way, including Madeiran Thrift and Pride of Madeira. We eventually arrived at the viewpoint and were instructed to kill the head torches as we began our wait for the Zino's Petrels to return to their nest burrows. After twenty-five minutes, the first bird was heard, followed by up to seven more birds calling. It was an amazing evening under starlit skies, standing and soaking up the atmospheric, ghost-like calls of one of Europe's rarest birds.

Day 2

Thursday 19th June

The day started with an early breakfast, before we were picked up once again by Hugo and Catarina. This morning, our aim was to see more of the island's endemic birds, with a particular focus on the species we had not seen yesterday. Our first stop was east of Funchal, overlooking the city, where we looked for the often-elusive Trocaz

Pigeon. On arrival we could not locate any, but one member of the group did manage to find a Loggerhead Turtle loafing on the water's surface not far from the beach below. Soon enough, we had located several Trocaz Pigeons, much to the delight of the group. Several birds were seen flying around the valley below us, and feeding in a range of trees and shrubs.

We then moved a short distance up the road to Levada Da Serra Do Faial, where we walked the network of paths which took us through the laurel forest (*laurisilva*). Here, we were looking for Madeira Firecrest and Madeira Chaffinch. As soon as we had unloaded the car, we could hear a Firecrest singing, and soon enough the group was ogling over this beautiful little endemic. Over the next hour, we enjoyed point blank views of a number of these forest dwellers, which really showed off their bright orange crests. While watching the Firecrests, one of the group managed to locate a female Madeira Chaffinch feeding recently-fledged young in a nearby oak tree. We crossed the road to explore a different section of the woodland, and there came across a gorgeous male Madeira Chaffinch, which showed well before perching on a high, open perch and singing his head off. There were plenty of excellent plants on offer here too, with Madeira Broom *Genista maderensis*, Madeira Elder *Sambucus lanceolata* and Trailing Abutilon *Callianthe megapotamica* perhaps the highlights.

We returned to Hotel Amparo for lunch, before making our way down to Machico Harbour for the first of our three pelagics. Captained by Caterina and ably assisted by Hugo, we donned our lifejackets and boarded the *Oceanodroma*. Once aboard, we settled into our seats and headed south-east towards the Desertas Islands due to the lack of wind. En route, we stopped for what was initially called as a probable Pilot Whale; we waited patiently for the animal to resurface, and once it did it was obvious that we actually had two beaked whales. After another couple of looks as they gently rolled, filling their lungs for more feeding, we were able to ascertain that they were Blainville's Beaked Whales, which was a very good sighting indeed. Buoyed by the experience, we continued, seeing our first Bulwer's Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters, which were ever-present for the rest of the pelagic.

Some twenty-seven kilometres from the harbour, we drew to a halt, and Hugo lowered the chum bucket to begin the drifting exercise. Bulwer's Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters were immediately drawn in for a look at the oily slick the bucket had created, and we enjoyed good views of both species in wonderful light. Just as we were about to turn to go back up the slick, our first *Pterodroma* petrel arrived at a rate of knots. It swung around the stern of the boat with infinite ease, and all of the group managed excellent views of the bird as it travelled down the port side of the boat. The chunky bill and dark underwing made this an easy identification: it was our first Desertas Petrel, and what a view it gave, allowing everyone to see the I.D. features at very close range.

Over the next four hours, we were entertained by Yellow-legged Gulls and a single Lesser Black-backed Gull which constantly fought over scraps from the chum bucket, as well as a further three Desertas Petrels. Bulwer's Petrels gave the keen photographers plenty of practice as they dipped and swooped past the boat, and hundreds of tiny By-the-wind-Sailor jellyfish were also noted, aimlessly bobbing past.

Before we knew it, the sun had begun to set in the western sky, and we collected the chum bucket and made our way back to Machico. On retrieving the bucket, Hugo noticed a tiny stowaway, which turned out to be a Columbus Crab, much to the delight of all in the boat. We arrived back at the harbour just before 10.00pm.

Day 3

Friday 20th June

Breakfast was once again taken at 7.30am, and we left the hotel for the morning outing. Today, we headed for Palheiro Gardens, situated on the hillside east of Funchal. After paying our entrance fee, we started to explore the estate, which was built in the early nineteenth century. Its original owner was the first Conde de Carvalhal, who planted a wide range of trees and developed to the collection of camellias that can still be seen here today. We enjoyed excellent views of Monarchs, as well as later finding some caterpillars and pupae of this wonderful butterfly.

On the bird front, we were serenaded by Madeira Chaffinches as we potted around the network of pathways criss-crossing the impressive gardens. Plain Swift and the endemic form of Common Kestrel were seen overhead, both of which were making the use of the thermals developing over the hillside. We also saw several Madeira Firecrests, though none of them came as close as yesterday's encounter; but it was nice to see a fresh juvenile without a crest at all!

Whilst enjoying a coffee at the tea rooms, we also had our best views of Trocaz Pigeon, feeding in a laurel tree. Several more were seen as we wandered around the garden, allowing for some excellent views to be had of this enigmatic species. Lastly, at one of the gardens well-manicured ponds, we managed to find a single male Island Darter, an endemic dragonfly with a very restricted range. It was great to be able to watch it hunting and returning to various perches around the garden.

Lunch was taken at 1.00pm and was followed by a short break before we set off for our second pelagic trip at 3.00pm. With a little more wind forecast today, we decided to head towards the north-east of the island, in the vague direction of Porto Santo. This is often the best area for Zino's Petrel, as the birds returning to their nest burrows on the top of the mountains (when dusk descends) often follow valleys on the north side of the island.

We used the shelter of the island as we headed east, checking all of the nooks and crannies for the ever-elusive Monk Seal, which we failed to locate. We did see a summer-plumaged Grey Plover, which is a very unusual bird to see on this trip. Once past the headland, the sea rapidly changed and we were soon being splashed and bounced around as we went through the narrow gap between Ilhéu da Cevada and Ilhéu do Farol. Soon enough, the sea flattened off a little, and the journey became more comfortable. The chum bucket was once again dispatched, and the wait for the birds to appear began. There were long periods during the evening with little activity around the slick, other than the constant company of Cory's Shearwater and Bulwer's Petrels. The lack of birds was unusual, as the weather conditions were the best we had seen so far this trip. A *Pterodroma* whizzed into the slick at the far end, but did not come to investigate the chum, and as a result remained unidentified, which added to the frustration. Yellow-legged Gulls did their best to keep us entertained, as did the very showy Bulwer's Petrels, but we were missing a star of the show.

Unfortunately, we had to head back to the harbour in Machico, so we pulled up the chum bucket and started motoring back. However, after ten minutes we spotted a *Pterodroma* on the starboard side, easily identified by its looping flight action. Catarina expertly slowed the boat, and the bird drifted towards us, eventually looping several times around the boat before drifting off east. In the field it looked a very slim-profiled, small bird with a steep forehead and small beak. It looked very good for a Zino's Petrel, and some managed to see some pale in the underwing. A quick check of the photos confirmed that, sure enough, we had had our first daylight views of one

of the most endangered seabirds in Europe. What a change of fortune, right at the last knockings of the second pelagic! We arrived back at the quay shortly after 10.00pm.

Day 4

Saturday 21st June

After a slightly earlier breakfast, we headed to the east of the island, our destination for this morning's birding being Ponta de São Lourenço. This volcanic peninsula is nine kilometres long and is a very popular walking destination, as it offers breathtaking views of the eastern part of Madeira. Despite the large numbers of tourists, we took a path off the main drag and were soon in the peace and quiet of one of the sparsely-vegetated valleys. A pair of Spectacled Warblers entertained us as they busily fed young a variety of insect prey, and a family of recently-fledged Common Kestrels were also buzzing around the hillside.

In the scrubby path edges, we found plenty of Banded Garden Spiders *Argiope trifasciata*, a close relative of the Wasp Spider which we encounter in the UK. Their impressive webs, used for catching grasshoppers and crickets, were common along the valley once we got our eyes in for the tell-tale zig-zag pattern.

Frustratingly, we heard the wheezy call of Rock Sparrow a number of times, but despite a concerted effort we could not locate the birds. On the rocky outcrops, we did however see several more Berthelot's Pipits, as well as a small number of Plain Swifts. With time ticking on, we headed back to our hotel for lunch before our afternoon excursion.

Once again, we met Catarina and Hugo on the quay for our last pelagic of the trip. This afternoon saw much better sea conditions, as we finally had a stiff 13kt wind. With this in mind, we headed in a southerly direction, full of hope. It was obvious that there were more birds over the sea today, with plenty of Bulwer's Petrels and Cory's Shearwaters to keep us company along the way.

We stopped to put the first chum bucket out at just over 27km from the quay. A bumpy ride had generated lots of laughs, and we were in high spirits for a better mix of birds. To begin with, the slick was quiet; the wind was swirling, which made positioning the boat awkward. Soon, however, the shout went up: "*Pterodroma*!". We enjoyed good views of a bird which swooped close past the boat, but which had a mix of attributes and could not be identified to species. Frustrating, yes, but it shows how difficult seabird identification can be. The next bird of interest made up for the earlier frustrations: a stonking and classic Desertas Petrel spent some time around the boat, allowing the main features to be noted.

The wind suddenly picked up a bit more and we had a 17kt+ wind from the north-east. With it came the birds, and soon we had several European Storm Petrels feeding in the slick. An all too brief Wilson's Storm Petrel was also seen, but it vanished before most of the group could see it.

Our best, however, was saved for the end, when a sumptuous Zino's Petrel arrived and spent a prolonged period working its way up and down the slick, often making hooping surges across the stern of the boat and giving the group a demonstration of how the species is a true master of the wind. This was the last action for this evening, and we headed back on a very wet and bumpy journey, which the whole group enjoyed. We arrived back on the quay at 10.00pm after a detour to the west to try and limit the sea action for a more comfortable ride!

Day 5

Sunday 22nd June

There having been overnight rain, we woke to a slightly damp Machico, and reconvened at 9.00am after breakfast to check out. This morning, we headed on foot around Porto de Recreio de Machico, having one last look for the island's specialities. On the beach, several summer-plumaged Turnstones were feeding among the Muscovy Ducks and Collared Doves, and as usual Madeiran Wall Lizards were out in force, basking on any suitable surface.

We scaled the slopes on the edge of the harbour to view some rough grassland, and the first of our targets for the morning was seen, in the form of Common Waxbill. These tiny birds were first detected by their cheerful three-syllable song, before being seen feeding on the grass seed heads. These were the best views we had enjoyed during the trip, and gave us the chance to see their beautiful, vermiculated pattern. The waxbills were mixed in among a large roving flock of birds, including several Blackcaps and a large throng of Atlantic Canaries, which seemed to have had a good breeding season since plenty of young birds were noted.

A gentle wander up the Ribeira de Machico gave us our last birding of the trip, before we made tracks to the airport. Here, we saw a couple more Common Waxbills as well as Grey Wagtail and several Blackcaps. Finally, we turned back to collect our bags from the hotel, but not before one last Monarch fluttered across the road in front of us.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

| I = introduced | | June 2025 | | | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|----|
| Common name | Scientific name | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 |
| Muscovy Duck - I | <i>Cairina moschata</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Red-legged Partridge | <i>Alectoris rufa</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| Alpine Swift | <i>Tachymarptis melba</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| Plain Swift | <i>Apus unicolor</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Pallid Swift | <i>Apus pallidus</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| Feral Pigeon - I | <i>Columba livia</i> 'domestica' | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Trocaz Pigeon | <i>Columba trocaz</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Eurasian Collared Dove | <i>Streptopelia decaocto</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Common Moorhen | <i>Gallinula chloropus</i> | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Grey Plover | <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i> | | | ✓ | | |
| Ruddy Turnstone | <i>Arenaria interpres</i> | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Common Tern | <i>Sterna hirundo</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Yellow-legged Gull | <i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Lesser Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus fuscus</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Arctic Skua | <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> | | | | ✓ | |
| Wilson's Storm Petrel | <i>Oceanites oceanicus</i> | | | | ✓ | |
| European Storm Petrel | <i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i> | | | | ✓ | |
| Zino's Petrel | <i>Pterodroma madeira</i> | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Desertas Petrel | <i>Pterodroma deserta</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Cory's Shearwater | <i>Calonectris borealis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Manx Shearwater | <i>Puffinus puffinus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Bulwer's Petrel | <i>Bulweria bulwerii</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Little Egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| Grey Heron | <i>Ardea cinerea</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| Common Buzzard | <i>Buteo buteo</i> | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Eurasian Hoopoe | <i>Upupa epops</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| Common Kestrel | <i>Falco tinnunculus canariensis</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Peregrine Falcon | <i>Falco peregrinus</i> | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Barn Swallow | <i>Hirundo rustica</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| Western House Martin | <i>Delichon urbicum</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| Blackcap | <i>Sylvia atricapilla heineken</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| Spectacled Warbler | <i>Sylvia conspicillata orbitalis</i> | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| Madeira Firecrest | <i>Regulus madeirensis</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Common Blackbird | <i>Turdus merula cabrerae</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| European Robin | <i>Erithacus rubecula</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Common Waxbill | <i>Estrilda astrild</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| Grey Wagtail | <i>Motacilla cinerea schmitzi</i> | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Berthelot's Pipit | <i>Anthus berthelotii madeirensis</i> | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Madeira Chaffinch | <i>Fringilla maderensis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| European Greenfinch | <i>Chloris chloris</i> | | | ✓ | | |
| Atlantic Canary | <i>Serinus canaria</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |

Mammals

| I = introduced | | June 2025 | | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|----|
| Common name | Scientific name | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 |
| Blainville's Beaked Whale | <i>Mesoplodon densirostris</i> | | ✓ | | | |
| Brown Rat - I | <i>Rattus norvegicus</i> | ✓ | | | | |
| European Rabbit - I | <i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i> | ✓ | | | | |

Reptiles & amphibians

| | | June 2025 | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|----|
| Common name | Scientific name | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 |
| Loggerhead Turtle | <i>Caretta caretta</i> | | ✓ | | | |
| Madeiran Wall Lizard | <i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Perez's Frog | <i>Rana perezi</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |

Fishes

| | | June 2025 | | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|----|
| Common name | Scientific name | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 |
| European Eel | <i>Anguilla anguilla</i> | ✓ | ✓ | | | |
| Atlantic Flying Fish | <i>Cypselurus heterurus</i> | | | ✓ | ✓ | |
| Canary Damselfish | <i>Similiparma lurida</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Grey Mullet | <i>Mugil cephalus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | | | |

Butterflies

| | | June 2025 | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|----|
| Common name | Scientific name | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 |
| Clouded Yellow | <i>Colias croceus</i> | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Small White | <i>Pieris rapae</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| Lang's Short-tailed Blue | <i>Leptotes pirthous</i> | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| Monarch | <i>Danaus plexippus</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Speckled Wood | <i>Pararge aegeria</i> | | | ✓ | | |

Damselflies & dragonflies

| | | June 2025 | | | | |
|---------------|-----------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|----|
| Common name | Scientific name | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 |
| Island Darter | <i>Sympetrum nigrifemur</i> | | | ✓ | | |
| Blue Emperor | <i>Anax imperator</i> | | | ✓ | | |

Other invertebrates

| | | June 2025 | | | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|----|
| Common name | Scientific name | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 |
| Banded Garden Spider | <i>Argiope trifasciata</i> | | | | ✓ | |
| Tropical Tent-web Spider | <i>Cyrtophora citricola</i> | | | ✓ | | |
| By-the-Wind-Sailor | <i>Velella velella</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | |
| East Atlantic Sally Lightfoot Crab | <i>Grapsus adscensionis</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Columbus Crab | <i>Planes minutus</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | |