

Whales & Dolphins of the Azores

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 - 14 September 2013



Common Dolphin



Shearwaters over a baitball



Sperm Whale fluke



Citrine Forktail

Report & Images compiled by Ed Drewitt



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Day 1

Monday 9th September

London to Pico Island

After a busy day flying from London Heathrow to Lisbon, and then taking the same plane from Lisbon to Horta (on the island of Faial), and transferred by coach to the new ferry terminal in Horta, a port town. After a welcome break and refreshments before the ferry at 3.15pm, we were heading across the water to Pico Island in glorious sunshine, and had wonderful views of both the town of Horta and the stunning volcanic landscape of Pico Island. Azorean Yellow-legged Gulls were covering the exposed rocky parts of a submerged caldera, while some terns were resting along parts of the volcanic coastline. Dani and Enrico, who would be our hosts for the week greeted us at the Madalena ferry terminal. After checking in at the hotel we had a few hours to relax, snooze and explore before meeting for dinner at 7pm in the adjacent restaurant Sabores Dorforno for some local fish and meat dishes.

Day 2

Tuesday 10th September

Pico

Wow! What a first day. After a wholesome breakfast buffet we met Enrico for a briefing all about the whales and dolphins found in the Azores, and interesting facts about their lifestyles and biology. We then headed out to sea in a rigid inflatable boat (RIB) with Nuno as our skipper, Justin as our naturalist, and Marta giving a helping hand. Just half an hour out we found our first dolphins for the morning, a group of Bottlenose Dolphins with a few Common Dolphins swimming amongst them. The Bottlenose Dolphins are pig-size and dark grey, while the Common Dolphins are sheep-size and have various colour markings including yellow on their sides. As both species were rising out of the water together to breathe, the size difference between the two was clearly visible.

As we moved on further we came across a large group of Common Dolphins, many coming close to the boat and surfacing – their pale cream, or almost yellow sides were clearly visible. It was incredible seeing these energetic cetaceans at such close quarters. When the boat was stationary and quiet, the gentle blows of the dolphins breathing were easy to hear.

Further out to see a huge whale breached – a Sperm Whale! As we got closer, the animal, possibly a young male, was blowing and resting on the surface. However, it was restless, and after dipping under water it wasn't long before it breached out of the water again. Once at the surface the whale then did a huge tail slap before showing part of its fluke. Another Sperm Whale suddenly appeared and swam over to join it. It is likely the two whales had separated and the breaching whale was communicating to the other with regards its location so they could meet up again.

As we headed closer to shore the boat passed a huge, black, rug-size Manta Ray, though sadly we passed it too quickly for most to see. Despite stopping we failed to find it again. However, it wasn't long before we came across a group of Risso's Dolphins, some of which were quite dark, young adults which hadn't yet developed the white scarring from the damage caused by the beaks of deep sea squid or the teeth of other dolphins. This dolphin species is big, and lacks the distinctive long beak of other common dolphins. Instead they have a rounded, melon-shaped head, and develop the characteristic, pale or white patterned skin.

Moving further towards land we came across another group of Risso's Dolphins – many of these were whiter, and we were able to follow them under water like white dolphin ghosts before they surfaced for breath and revealed their true form! As we headed further inland towards Pico Island we encountered Common Dolphins surfacing all around the boat including lots of young dolphins swimming along their mothers. There were dolphins everywhere! Our final dolphin experience for the morning trip was watching over 300 Common Dolphins swimming fast and direct through the ocean, moving between feeding sites. They were disinterested in the boat so we kept our distance and moved at their fast speed – they pretty much outpaced us. Everywhere we looked there were dolphins rising out of the water in a rainbow shape before slipping back under. It was like something from a BBC wildlife documentary; hundreds of dolphins streaming through and over the water.

After this excitement and a brilliant finale to the boat trip we headed back in to Madalena where we ate lunch in a local café/restaurant before meeting for our next trip at 2.30pm. Petra was our skipper for this afternoon, with Justin and Marta also on board. It wasn't long before we encountered Common Dolphins again, and we met with a number of other schools of this species several times throughout the trip. There were lots of baby dolphins, adults slapping the water with their tail fins, or jumping almost clear of the water, and many coming to investigate the boat, clearly visible throughout the beautiful, transparent bright blue water.

We headed out to where the whales had been seen in the morning and spent some time watching and waiting. Finally we had a whale! At some speed, Petra sped the boat across the sea, just in time to watch the animal deep dive and show off its fluke. It was probably one of the young males we had seen earlier that day. We then heard that another whale was closer to shore so headed in land to find a female Sperm Whale logging on the surface, giving off a cloud of breath and water from her single blowhole, which is positioned on the left side of the head. Like many females here, she had a distinctive white patch of skin just in front of her dorsal fin. It wasn't long before she decided to deep dive too – this particular female had a distinctive fluke shape, with very deep waves on the leading edge. Females are never normally alone and soon we had found another.

Again after five minutes of blowing and logging she also dived – this female had a much straighter leading edge to her fluke. The different fluke patterns can help identify individual whales. We waited up to 45 minutes for the first female to surface. She did, though slightly further away, and after watching her for a short while she dived again. This was just in time for the second female to appear. We sped over to her, and watched her for a little longer as she blew and slowly moved along before also diving deep looking for squid in the deep-water canyons below. Before arriving back at 5.45pm, we popped over to see some more Common Dolphins swimming around the boat, again with as much energy and curiosity as most of the schools of dolphins we had seen earlier.

After the boat trip we had a short rest before meeting again at 6.40pm. We walked 15 minutes down the road to a restaurant renowned for its local wines, cheeses, and fresh fish. Despite being very busy, we all had delicious meals, mainly fish-based, before finishing off with coffees and some desserts. We walked back along the coastal road to the sound of cicadas, which had begun singing for the evening.

Day 3

Wednesday 11th September

Pico

After breakfast we headed out on the boat at just after 9am and went south of Pico Island to look for whales. After a little searching we suddenly saw a breach – a huge Sperm Whale leapt out of the air and belly-flopped back into the water with a big splash! Two breaches in two days were remarkable. We watched the female surfacing and blowing before taking a shallow dive. She reappeared, again blowing for a short while before deep diving and showing off her fluke. We headed back towards land to look for dolphins without any luck so went back to where the whales would surface after 45 minutes. It took a little time, but we found the whale again before it slipped back under in a deep dive.

We headed back north and suddenly came across a small pod of Short-finned Pilot Whales. They disappeared for a few minutes before re-surfacing behind us. We watched this species of dolphin (not whale) coming up to breathe – like the Risso's Dolphin they have a melon-shaped, rounded head and no beak.

On our way back to Madalena we also saw a particularly special cetacean, a Minke Whale. They are rare here, and not seen every year. This animal was relatively elusive but we could see its fluke prints on the water's surface, and after a short while we watched it come up to breathe a few times in front of the boat before disappearing. Minke Whales are baleen whales – they lack teeth, and instead have hundreds of baleen, strips of coarse fingernail-like material which work as filters and sieves, to separate fish and krill from the water. Sperm Whales on the other hand are toothed whales, with teeth just on their lower jaws, and are ideally suited for catching and eating squid.

After lunch in the nearby café, we set back out at 2.30pm. As we got near to the south-west corner of Pico we came across a small group of six to eight Bottlenose Dolphins. They were quietly and slowly moving through the water, surfacing every so often with a 'psshhh' as they blew air out of their blowhole before disappearing for a few minutes under water together. We headed out to sea south of Pico but the water was quite rough so after some time of searching for whales we headed towards the island of Faial where some dolphins had been spotted. Not far from shore we were suddenly surrounded by hundreds of Atlantic Spotted Dolphins and Common Dolphins. There were lots of baby spotted dolphins, perhaps only a month old. There was also one or two Striped Dolphins surfacing.

Beyond the dolphins there was a huge number of Cory's Shearwaters, a few hundred at least. This could mean only one thing, a bait ball! Bait balls, a tight shoal of fish, in this case Horse Mackerel, have been in short supply over the past five years, but this year they have returned. Keeping in such a shoal helps the mackerel reduce predation, but with dolphins below, and Cory's Shearwaters diving from above, many if not most still get eaten. We were watching both the birds and the dolphins attacking in an exciting feeding frenzy. As quickly as it formed, the shoal of fish dispersed and suddenly there were far fewer shearwaters. They had moved away and formed smaller flocks on the water. The dolphins had suddenly disappeared too.

We moved further north along the Faial coastline and stopped to look at the remarkable volcanic geology. We were able to see where younger black lava balls had been catapulted into the older, creamy-coloured volcanic rock. We entered some caves where Feral Pigeons were nesting, and spotted brightly coloured Red Rock Crabs in one. Brenda also spotted an Azorean Noctule Bat. We popped into a bay to see an old Sperm Whale factory which has been closed since 1987. The last commercial whales were killed in 1984, but three were subsequently killed for a documentary film three years later. In the shallow clear water, small jellyfishes were floating. As we headed towards Horta, we admired the rocky, eroded, volcanic coastline which is largely a nature reserve both above and below the water, and only visited by scientific researchers. We crossed the straits towards Madalena, stopping at a caldera, a very extinct volcano crater, and mainly submerged under the sea. Now it is home to hundreds of Yellow-legged Gulls which nest here earlier in the year.

We docked back at 6pm and after the checklist we headed for dinner at the Sabores Dorforno at 7pm, where, after pre-ordering, we received our food almost as soon as we arrived! Outside thousands of House Sparrows were roosting in some nearby plane trees. Their evening chirping was a cacophony! And in a nearby derelict warehouse roosting Starlings were squeaking, whistling and singing away.

Day 4

Thursday 12th September

Pico

Around breakfast time the House Sparrows we had heard roosting last night dispersed in flocks containing up to 100 birds at a time. For our morning boat trip we had bright sunny skies and headed south of Pico, crossing paths with a small school of Common Dolphins which came close by. A little further along we stopped to look for the Minke Whale – it wasn't long before we had found the same individual as yesterday. It has been around for a few weeks. We watched it surface over half a dozen times, revealing the top of its head and slender body. It was feeding in relatively shallow water, probably scooping up Sardines.

We then took off further south into the choppier seas to look for whales. The wind was from the north-east so it was whipping up the sea. With no luck a few miles out from the coastline, we came north and closer to Pico. Another boat was using a hydrophone and could hear at least three whales. We found one, it was the same Sperm Whale we had seen on Monday with the very distinctive wavy leading edge to her tail. We watched her logging and blowing before finally she did a deep dive, showing off her fluke. After waiting 45 minutes some more whales were spotted. They were following the outer edge of a deep canyon below. As we got closer we could see they were a mother Sperm Whale and a calf – the young animal was dipping under water to feed on milk squirted into the sea by the female. This is known as peduncle feeding. The mother did a deep dive and the baby followed suit with shallow dive so we headed back in land, passing some tiny flying fish which looked like big dragonflies gliding across the sea.

We could also smell the fish below us in the water – the huge shoals of Sardines, Horse Mackerel and other fishes give off a distinctive smell which permeates the air. It is also what the Cory's Shearwaters, a bird with a good sense of smell and tubes on their beak to assist, can smell and find the fish. The name for shearwaters and petrels is tubenoses.

After a relaxing lunch we headed back out at 2.30pm and it wasn't long before we were watching a school of eight to 12 Bottlenose Dolphins swimming and feeding around us. We were relatively close to shore, but there was plenty of fish here. We moved along the coastline and came across another school of Bottlenoses, many were mothers with their calves. Behind us, the other group of dolphins came to join them, and in total there must have been between 30 and 35 dolphins. We passed a number of small fishing boats – they had long bamboo poles lowered over the water and were fishing for Skipjack Tuna. To help lure the tuna the men were spraying water on the sea's surface to mimic a shoal of fish in distress. They were throwing in some food to tempt them further too. We watched a few tuna hauled out and quickly taken into the boat.

We spent some time hugging the coastline, admiring Pico Mountain, the volcanic rocks, and the small villages and fields. We then headed out to see where the sea was very choppy – some whales had been spotted, but it was very difficult to see any whale blows as the waves and the breeze quickly dispersed any cloud of water droplets. We rode the waves and gradually headed in land along a diagonal line. We investigated some of the caves and volcanic cliffs – inside we were able to see the shapes and patterns of the solidified volcanic lava, plus nesting Feral Pigeons, Limpets, ferns and a few Red Rock Crabs. Above us a few Azorean Noctule Bats were flying around, though a little too quick for most to spot.

Continuing back we were able to appreciate more of the basalt columns and boulders that are so characteristic of this island. As we got into the straits between Pico and Faial we stopped to see a large group of Common Dolphins, many of which came to visit the boat. Others further away were leaping out of the water and landing with a big splash while others were chasing fishes, some right under the feet of a flock of Cory's Shearwaters! The latter were everywhere across the sea – literally hundreds elegantly turning left and then right above the waves looking for food. A few were seen with small bright red Boar Fish in their beaks. We arrived back at 6pm and had an hour break before eating another delicious dinner at the Sabores Dorforno.

Day 5

Friday 13th September

Pico

On our final day here on Pico we had the opportunity to explore the island and see the different habitats, birdlife, butterflies, culture and buildings. We joined Justin, Marta and Caspar in the two minibuses and ventured along the southern coast. We first stopped at a World Heritage Site – the vineyards of Pico. Their unusual design and current use make them unique and very special. Volcanic rocks have been built up to make small partitioned walls, and in these the seeds of the vines are planted. The rock provides lots of nutrients despite the lack of soil, and with the hot sunshine and rain, plenty of grapes are produced. This year was a drier year but nonetheless, we still saw people out with their large tubs collecting grapes. Canaries and the odd Chaffinch were often perching on the walls when not feeding on the seeds of other plants in between the vines. From here we could also see dolphins splashing around a boat out at sea.

We then headed just beyond the suburbs where basalt boulders line the shore. In gaps between or under many of the rocks the fluffy chicks of Cory's Shearwaters were sheltering, visited by their parents (mainly fathers) only under the cover of darkness. Justin briefly took a large chick out from its nest for a quick view and explanation about their survival. This particular chick was around five weeks old and was already huge. Justin is monitoring many of the nests, including this one, to check on the chicks' survival rates and how much predation is caused by feral cats.

A little further up the road we carefully walked down a narrow path, the crunchy, coarse volcanic stones reminding us of how different this environment is compared to the UK. We passed a few shearwater nest burrows and then explored the ruined walls of 15th Century Pico. Here lay the remains of buildings which date back to some of the first settlers to arrive on the island. In amongst the rocks bright orange lichens, green ferns and other pioneer species were growing and contrasting with the dark black volcanic scree. Up close the rocks revealed shiny minerals such as hornblende. As we walked back, a few lizards scuttled away up the walls.

We moved on to visit Antero Soares, who, based in his hut or watchtower known as a 'vigia', was looking out for whales and dolphins for the various whale and dolphin watching companies. We had been hearing Antero's voice all week on the boat radio so it was good to see him in person. He was looking down big binoculars and directing a boat to some Sperm Whales. His 'office' is a small, basic hide covered in cetacean posters and Antero sitting with his large binoculars fixed to a wooden platform from his chair. Outside the trees were busy with Goldcrests (Azorean subspecies), while a young Cory's Shearwater was quietly resting in its rocky burrow.

We moved along the coast to Lajes Harbour where Common Terns, adults and juveniles, were noisily resting on the mud banks and flying past. Two Little Egrets were feeding in the shallow water while a Whimbrel was looking for crabs and shrimps amongst the rocks. A brightly coloured Blood Henry Starfish with thick, red arms was easy to spot half submerged at low tide. As we ate lunch by the harbour a few Buzzards soared above the hillside nearby – one was a young bird constantly calling and begging for food.

After a browse of the small fishing village we ventured up to the higher ground, passing bright yellow flowers of the Ginger Lilies, *Hydrangeas*, and cows, few of which we had seen on the lower ground. We stopped off at a weedy lake and as the strong sun came out life back to reveal itself. After some looking Justin found a very special damselfly, the Citrine Forktail. This tiny insect was hiding amongst the sedges. Only females are found on the island and originate from North America. They reproduce by parthenogenesis whereby the eggs of the damselfly are still able to develop without the need for fertilisation by a male. We managed to see a couple, and a short while later a few Azorean Grayling butterflies flew over the low grassland but were flying quickly away from us. Ann also spotted a Marsh Frog in the nearby ditch. From all around we could hear and see Chaffinches – the males are darker and more blue than the mainland varieties. There were also a few Blackbirds and Canaries. We made our way down to another pool where a Grey Wagtail was feeding by the edge. After a little scanning we spotted Chaffinches dotted across the lily pads, a Common Snipe flying away from us, a Grey Heron, and a Buzzard.

Despite some low cloud we could just see the neighbouring island of Sao Jorge, and as we ventured back along the island we saw hedgerows or wind breaks made from rows of white and blue flowering *Hydrangeas*. The fields were scattered with copses of old, ancient forest of heathers, laurel, and and juniper

We headed back along a straight road taking us right past Pico shrouded in cloud. Before we headed back down to Madalena we stopped at some lava tubes where the ceilings had collapsed. It was amazing being inside something which would have once been so hot and dynamic. At the entrance the greenest of green ferns and bryophytes were carpeting the rough volcanic walls. Under our feet you could make out the lava flows, and see where after settling the flows had dropped further to form an irregular, pleated surface. With a flash of the camera we could make out the rock was in fact iron-red and not black. Meanwhile outside Blackbirds and Chaffinches were feeding in the fields, and some of the group were making friends with the cows and their calves.

It was a downhill drive back to Madalena where we stopped to finish the holiday with some wine, and also present Paul with a cake to celebrate his 30th holiday with Naturetrek! After a few hours rest we met again at Sabores Dorforno for an enjoyable final meal with everyone.

Day 6

Saturday 14th September

Azores to London

We met for an early breakfast and then said our farewells and caught the 8.15am ferry back to Horta before a minibus transfer back to the airport. Cory's Shearwaters were gliding across the straits, while Yellow-legged Gulls and Common Terns were close in by the harbour. Ed was staying an extra day and saw everyone off at Horta. The group changed at Lisbon and arrived back in the UK early evening.

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Species List

Mammals (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			9	10	11	12	13	14
1	Azorean Noctule Bat	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>			1			
2	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>		60+				
3	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		20+	6 to 8	30+		
4	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		400+	50+	50+	✓	
5	Atlantic Spotted Dolphin	<i>Stenella frontalis</i>		1	100+			
6	Short-finned Pilot Whale	<i>Globicephala macrorhynchus</i>			6 to 8			
7	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		4	1	3		
8	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>			1	1		

Birds

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>					2	
3	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>					2	
4	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>					✓	
5	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus phaeopus</i>					1	
6	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					2	
7	Western Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougalli</i>		✓	✓			
10	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>					3+	
12	(Common) Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Goldcrest (Pico)	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>					✓	
14	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>					✓	
17	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>					✓	

Butterflies

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>						✓
2	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea failiae</i>						✓
3	Azores Grayling	<i>Hipparchia azorina</i>						✓

Dragonflies

1	Citrine Forktail	<i>Ischnura hastata</i>						✓ 2+
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