

Whales and Dolphins of the Azores

Naturetrek Tour Report

3 - 8 September 2016



Common Dolphin by Terry Goble



Male Risso's Dolphin by Terry Goble



Sperm Whale fluke by Terry Goble



Windmill on Pico by Leslie Carr

Report compiled by Terry Goble
Images by Terry Goble & Leslie Carr



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Terry Goble (leader) with six Naturetrek clients

Summary

Arriving just ahead of hurricane Gaston, the group were apprehensive about what kind of week this was going to be. On the evening before our arrival the storm was downgraded to a 'Tropical Storm', but warnings of heavy swell were still in place.

When our first trip in rough conditions produced no cetaceans at all, our fears began to heighten. The group however were excellent and remained positive and good humoured despite the disappointment. Our next trip produced a sighting of Common Dolphin, which gave us renewed optimism. The day on land was interesting and we managed a first for all in the shape of a Hudsonian Whimbrel.

Encouragingly, the weather began to change after Monday and the winds slowly dropped and the swell lessened. The tour from this point just got better and better. The trips out to sea produce some fantastic sightings of Risso's, Common, Striped and Bottlenose Dolphins with a range of behaviours. We witnessed feeding, mating and what appeared to be just exuberance as we were treated to dolphins leaping around the boat and porpoising through the waves. The Risso's Dolphins were more sedate and graceful, but we spent a magical hour or so with these beautiful creatures.

Perhaps our last day was the highlight of the trip: we saw a large female Sperm Whale heading towards the boat, giving an indication of the size of these creatures, and we had fantastic displays from three species of dolphin. The spirit of the group didn't drop when the conditions were difficult, but they soared now as we had two exhilarating trips on the final day. This was capped off nicely by a sumptuous meal at 'Atmosfera' and a final evening with Cory's Shearwaters, listening to their almost comical cries (males at least!). The group ended the tour on a high having thoroughly enjoyed the Azores experience.

Day 1

Saturday 3rd September

On a lovely bright sunny morning, most of us met at Heathrow airport prior to our flight to Lisbon. The take-off was a little delayed and consequently the connection to Faial was tight. However, we all made it safely on to the connecting flight and were soon on our way to the Azores. Apart from a little turbulence, the flight was largely uneventful. The approach to Faial was, however, quite spectacular as we followed the line of steep cliffs until the runway loomed ahead.

A delay in loading the luggage onto the conveyor belt caused a little apprehension, but everyone's bags eventually appeared and we were able to get taxis to the ferry port at Horta, just in time to board the 6pm ferry to Madalena on Pico Island. Just before we got into the taxi a Common Buzzard flew by and a couple of Clouded Yellow butterflies were also seen.

The ferry ride in warm evening sunshine was delightful. We enjoyed an excellent introduction to the birdlife of the Azores. There were hundreds of Cory's Shearwaters and a mix of terns; mostly Common Tern, but a few Roseate and Sandwich Terns were also around. We also spotted a couple of Great Shearwaters and Sooty Shearwaters. The abundant Azorean sub-species of Yellow-legged Gull was also seen in good numbers.

At Madalena we were met by Dania, who welcomed us and helped load the luggage whilst we walked to a nearby hotel and sorted out our rooms. Everyone dispersed for about an hour in their rooms, then met up again to walk to a local restaurant for our evening meal. At Petisca we relaxed and chatted happily whilst waiting for our meals. They were quite busy and the service a little slow, however most of the short comings were addressed by some complementary blackberry liquor which was delicious, and very strong!

We walked back to the hotel after a long and tiring day to get some much needed rest, and with plans to meet again in the morning for breakfast and our first taste of whale watching.

Day 2

Sunday 4th September

We met a little after 7am for an early buffet breakfast at the hotel. After breakfast we arranged to meet in the lobby for 8.15am to walk to the CW Azores Centre for our briefing. Here Enrico gave an entertaining and informative talk on the ecology and behaviour of the whales found in the waters of the Azores. He discussed the migratory patterns, feeding and social behaviour, and a little on morphology and identification. Enthused, we made our way to the rib to set out to explore the waters.

The sea conditions once out of the sheltered harbour were a little rough, making spotting tricky. Despite extensive efforts we were not able to find any cetaceans, which was highly unusual. We had magnificent views of a cloudless Mount Pico and enjoyed the Cory's Shearwaters 'kissing' the tops of the waves as they effortlessly soared over the water's surface. Spirits remained high as we turned and sped along in the rib back to the harbour.

Back on dry land we all decided coffee and lunch was in order, and most went to Dark's for a snack and drink. This was a pleasant little restaurant and we decided to return for an evening meal one night. The time flew by as we sat chatting and it was soon time to get ready for the afternoon sea safari.

We met back again at 2.30pm and headed for the smaller rib as it was just our group. The wind had got a little stronger and hopes of finding cetaceans were not high. However, we eventually found a large pod of around 60 Common Dolphins, which were delightful. There were a few mothers with calves and we were able to watch a range of behaviours including tail slapping, leaping and feeding. The tiny calves were adorable as they leapt clear of the water on a few occasions. After we had enjoyed the dolphins, we set off to attempt to find other species, however the wind was picking up speed all the while and the swell was getting very heavy. We did manage some great views of a Sooty Shearwater and rafts of Cory's Shearwaters, but it was prudently decided to head back to the harbour.

The ride back was exhilarating as we bounced across the now heavy swell and were buffeted by strong winds. We arrived in one piece in the harbour but had enjoyed the 'fairground' ride in the rib. Unfortunately, the conditions were not good for spotting cetaceans, but we were optimistic our luck would change. We set off back to the CW centre for a coffee before heading back to the hotel to get ready for our evening meal.

This evening we met at 7.20pm for a taxi to Alma Do Pico. We arrived at the restaurant and were greeted warmly by the owner. The service and food was excellent and everyone enjoyed the experience. Even the surroundings were lovely with sea views and a Laurel forest providing the scenic setting. A replete group then

headed back to the hotel in the taxi and dispersed to their rooms. Despite the lack of cetaceans, it had been an enjoyable day in relaxed company.

Day 3

Monday 5th September

This morning we all enjoyed a lie-in as we met in the lobby at 9.15am; a rare treat! Just before we set off there was a very heavy downpour, which subsided as we were about to leave. However, the day was set to be overcast and frequent showers were expected. We walked down to the CW Azores Centre to meet our guide for the day, as today we were setting out to spend time on the Island looking for wildlife and enjoying some of the cultural and geological interests on Pico.

We first stopped at a nearby vineyard and windmill. The vines were grown directly out of the bare rock, which is volcanic and nutrient rich. Around each set of two or three vines, a wall of volcanic stones created a shelter from the strong winds, protecting the vines; a unique method! Numerous House Sparrows and Atlantic Canaries were flitting around the vineyards.

We next visited an agricultural area with some remnant Laurel and Pine forests. The birds remained elusive due to the strong wind and rain, but we did spot our second mammal of the trip which was a Brown Rat. A warbler, probably a Blackcap, flew through without being firmly identified. We sampled a few figs before we left as some were ripe and juicy.

We then headed up into the clouds to visit a mountain lake. However, the cloud was thick and conditions very wet. Apart from some Muscovy Ducks begging around the vehicle, we saw little wildlife other than a few Blackbirds flying around the forests on the way up and two dead Polecats on the way down. We stopped to have a little lunch before descending back down to the coast for a coffee and comfort stop. Here a few Madeiran Lizards were seen around the lava rocks, and out to sea were the usual suspects of Cory's Shearwater, Common Tern and a few Roseate Terns.

We drove on a little further and had a short walk down the coast at Lajes La Pico. Here the rain had eased a little and we had our best birding. We managed a few new species for the tour and a 'lifer' for all the group. Little Egrets stood out among the dark volcanic rocks and a flock of Turnstone flew out into the open whilst we watched the egrets. Along the furthest rocks Azorean Yellow-legged Gulls were loafing around. One was a classic adult with a 'smudgy' dark head and dark mantle showing very well. There was also a Whimbrel feeding busily amongst the rocks. However, we had a moment of excitement when a second Whimbrel flew in with no white rump, diagnostic of Hudsonian Whimbrel. Our excitement was dampened by the return of heavy rain which meant we didn't have time to enjoy our discovery as we had to take shelter, but it was the highlight of the day.

We then drove on a little way up into the hills and through Laurel Forest to the Vigia's post, where we met Antero Soares, our Vigia (spotter). We were able to glimpse a Cory Shearwater chick in a nest in a crevice and look around the post. The rain had not eased much and we were soon on our way again, this time back to the outskirts of Madalena for a wine tasting of the local wines. Some of the group returned to the hotel, but most stayed to sample the wines of the Island and purchase some bottles of their favourites. We then drove the short distance back to the hotel. We thanked our driver and guide for a very enjoyable day, despite the weather.

Most of the group elected to dry off and get ready for dinner, however, George and Terry decided to try a spot of snorkelling in the harbour. This proved to be a great little excursion and they enjoyed some beautiful fish of all colours, such as Ornate Wrasse, Red-lipped Blenny, Parrotfish and two imposing Sting Rays, and a glimpse of an Octopus tucked away amongst the rocks.

Back at the hotel we all met up and headed to Darks for our evening meal. The meal was a relaxed affair in an informal setting. The food was good and we enjoyed an evening together chatting amicably in a lively good-humoured atmosphere. After the meal a few went to the hotel bar for a nightcap and the rest went to their rooms to get some sleep for the resumption of our whale watching efforts tomorrow. At least the forecast was a little brighter so we retired with some optimism.

Day 4

Tuesday 6th September

After our usual buffet breakfast, we met in the lobby at 8.30am to walk down to the CW Centre for our morning whale watching excursion. The weather was clear and bright, but the strong wind was concerning. However, we needn't have worried as we had an excellent trip out, accompanied by Enrico, one of the owners of CW Azores.

We headed south of Pico and after about an hour we encountered our first cetaceans: a mixed group of Common and Striped Dolphins. In particular, the Striped Dolphins put on a spectacular show, leaping several metres clear of the water and giving excellent views of all their identification features. It was exhilarating to watch them.

Then news came through from the spotters of a Sperm Whale that had shallow dived nearby. We were soon hurtling along to see if we could catch up with the whale. We were very fortunate to see a few blows and watch the large male Sperm Whale briefly before it raised its fluke perpendicular indicating a deep dive. This male would be down for over 40 minutes, probably about one kilometre deep, feeding on squid.

Unfortunately, we had to return before the animal resurfaced, but we all thoroughly enjoyed a great trip and were 'buzzing' when we got back to shore. We had a reviving cup of tea and then went to lunch whilst Terry checked out the restaurant for this evening's meal. We all met back at the CW Azores Centre apart from Anne, who had been feeling the effects of the bumpy seas.

We set off just after 2.30pm and again headed south. News came through that the Sperm Whales had moved further out to sea. As the conditions were still pretty rough, we decided to follow the coast line in search of Risso's Dolphins. After about an hour of searching we finally spotted a fin cutting through the water and very soon we were watching a pod of about ten Risso's Dolphins. We stayed and watched them feeding all around us for the next few hours, rather than go further out. These seemed to be a good decision as we watched these beautiful dolphins gracefully feeding and occasionally diving. At one point they swam under the boat and we followed their white silhouettes under the water, waiting for them to pop up again. It was a magical couple of hours which we all thoroughly enjoyed. We were able to distinguish the battle-scarred white males from the darker females and infants as they surfaced around the boat.

Eventually we had to head back to the harbour and mercifully the trip back in the shelter of the island was not so wet, if a little bumpy! We returned very happy and enjoyed a cup of tea before making our way back to the hotel to get ready for dinner.

We met again at 7pm and walked to Anocordura Restaurant. There had been a building on fire earlier in the day, but we were relieved to see that we could get through the taped off street. We arrived in good time to get a seat with a lovely view of the sea and the setting sun. There were even a few birds to challenge us in the poor light. We saw a Sanderling that was positively identified. A Whimbrel was possibly Hudsonian, but it disappeared before any of the face pattern or lack of white rump could be determined. A sandpiper was also not seen clearly to establish a positive identification. It superficially resembled a Common Sandpiper, but leg colouring could not be determined and it flew off before we could analyse it. However, the meal and ambiance of the restaurant soon helped us forget any frustrations and we relaxed and enjoyed a delicious meal and discussed some of the many highlights of the day. After the meal we retired a content and happy group.

Day 5

Wednesday 7th September

After breakfast we met in the lobby and walked to CW Azores for our 8.30am rendezvous with our guides and captain. On this occasion some Sperm Whales had been spotted by the Vigia so it was decided to head straight for them. We set off and went to the south of the Island, not far from the coast of Faial. Here we saw a total of eight Sperm Whales, frequently shallow diving. This included a group of about five animals that had come together to socialise after feeding. They shallow dived to meet and make contact with each other. Due to the frequent shallow diving they were not easy to view so we decided to leave them and concentrate on some of the dolphins in the area.

After another 15-20 minutes we connected with a pod of about 20 Common Dolphins, which were obliging in swimming and porpoising close to the boat. We enjoyed watching these for a while, but were also keen to see Bottlenose Dolphins as they would be new for the trip. When we found them they performed well, frequently swimming by the boat and a couple began bow riding, giving the people at the front fantastic views.

Today's trip had been excellent and we had stayed out longer than usual, but it was now time to head back to the harbour and get some lunch.

Back at Madalena, George opted to go for a walk down to the outskirts of town. It was now a very warm afternoon, but not a lot of wildlife was seen. However, an immature Pale-bellied Brant Goose was an unusual sight. A few Clouded Yellows and a Long-tailed Blue were also seen. The rest of the group had their lunch and met at the CW Azores Centre at 2.30pm for their afternoon excursion.

On this occasion we headed north of Faial after hearing that some Sperm Whales had been sighted in this area. On the way we encountered a pod of Bottlenose Dolphins which were displaying mating behaviour, swimming upside down to encourage and facilitate copulation. They swam around and very close to the boat, giving fantastic views. We left the dolphins to continue on towards where the Sperm Whales had been sighted. Once we reached the area we quickly found a lone female that swam towards the boat giving some perspective on how big these whales are! She then raised her fluke to begin a deep dive, signalling the end of the viewing. We moved on and enjoyed a delightful encounter with a mother and calf. The calf was suckling for a while as they both

stayed on the surface. Eventually the mother dived to feed leaving the calf on its own. It was explained that this was only done by the mother as there were no predators around. We did not want to stress the calf so we decided to leave. On the way back we saw some Common Dolphins feeding. They frequently leapt out the water close to the boat. One leapt spectacularly out the water, clearing three or four metres. After enjoying this exhilarating display, it was time to head back to Madelana.

Back at the harbour, most of us relaxed at Dark's café or returned to get ready for the evening meal. George elected to go for a snorkel around the 'natural pool'. The visibility was surprisingly poor despite more settled weather, but a few colourful fish including a large Parrotfish were seen.

The group met just after 7pm for a taxi to Atmosfera restaurant. We had a warm welcome from the owner and enjoyed a lively and fun evening, and even managed to squeeze in some more wildlife watching when George spotted a bat out of the window. At 9pm our driver arrived to take us to the Cory Shearwater nesting and roosting grounds. We dropped Anna back at the hotel before driving south for a while and parking at the base of a gnarly basalt cliff. As we stepped out of the car we heard the Cory's Shearwaters overhead, the males making their peculiar cries sounding something like a cross between a cat and a didgeridoo! The females made a lower grumbling noise. The shearwaters were great to listen to and see in the moonlight, but the whole ambiance was magical with the Milky Way and constellations standing out in the dark night sky with very little light pollution. Lesley, Juliette and Denis in particular seemed to enjoy the evening sky and the multitude of stars.

It was now time to set off back to our hotel as some had to finish off packing and others needed to get some sleep prior to an early start as, sadly, this was our last evening, but a great one to end on.

Day 6

Thursday 8th September

We had an early start, meeting for breakfast at 7am before catching the 8.15am ferry. We enjoyed a smooth crossing as the early rain dissipated and we landed on a sunny Faial. Boarding the flight to Lisbon was slow and we ended up delayed by half an hour.

The flight to Lisbon banked over the sea and followed the volcanic cliffs, giving superb views of Faial. After a flight of a little over two hours, we landed in Lisbon and this time had a much longer time between connections. We relaxed and enjoyed a coffee before heading towards departures.

We then boarded the flight to Heathrow and enjoyed a smooth flight back home. We said our farewells at the Heathrow baggage reclaim after a very enjoyable and successful trip.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; D= dead; * indicates a species is endemic)

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Azores Noctule Bat*	<i>Nyctalus azoreum</i>					2	
2	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>				14		
3	Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>					45	
4	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		60		✓	50	
5	Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>				✓		
6	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>				1	11	
7	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>			1			
8	Polecat	<i>Mustela putorius</i>			2D			

Birds

1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Sooty Shearwater	<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	3	1		1		
3	Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i>	5				1	
4	Pale-bellied Brant Goose	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>					1J	
5	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			3			
6	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>	1	1				
7	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				1		
8	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			10	10	8	
9	European Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus phaeopus</i>			1			
10	American (Hudsonian) Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus</i>			1			
11	Whimbrel sp.	<i>Numenius sp.</i>				1		
12	Sandpiper sp	<i>Actitis typ</i>				1		
13	Azorean Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	10	1	2	1		
16	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>		3	20	10	10	10
18	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	1	1	2	1	1	
19	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>		1	3	2	2	
20	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>					2	
22	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
23	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>						
25	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓

In Lisbon:

1	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>						✓
2	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>						✓
3	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus Unicolour</i>						✓

Butterflies (L/O = leader only)

1	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>			✓	✓	✓	
2	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea faillae</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Long-tailed Blue	<i>Lampides boeticus</i>					1	
4	American Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa virginiensis</i>				L/O		

	Common name	Scientific name	September					
			3	4	5	6	7	8
5	Painted Lady	<i>Vanessa cardui</i>			1			

Amphibians & Reptiles

Loggerhead Turtle, *Caretta caretta*
 Wall Lizard, *Podarcis sp.*
 Marsh Frog, *Rana ridibunda*

Madeiran Wall Lizard, *Lacerta (Teira) dugesii*
 Perez's Frog, *Rana perezi*

Marine

Marbled Shore Crab, *Eriphia verrucosa*
 Limpet, *Patella piperata*
 Rock Goby, *Gobius paganellus*

Rockpool Prawn, *Palaemon elegans*
 Portuguese Man O'War, *Physalia physalia*
 Atlantic Flying Fish, *Cypselurus heterurus*

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Cory's Shearwater by Terry Goble