

Great Whales of the Azores (São Miguel)

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 14 May 2016

Report by Tom Brereton



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Tour participants: Tom Brereton (leader) together with six Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Saturday 7th May

London to Ponta Delgada

We assembled at Stansted Airport and took an early evening flight to Ponta Delgado, the capital of Sao Miguel. We were a little late leaving, but made good progress and arrived on time just after 10:30pm. We took a short coach transfer to our hotel for the week, the well-equipped Hotel Marina Atlântico, which from the outside balconies of our rooms offers panoramic views over the harbour.

Day 2

Sunday 8th May

A superb buffet breakfast was taken at 8am in the hotel, so setting the pattern for the rest of the week. It was a sunny morning, but unfortunately the predicted windy weather was all too apparent, forcing cancellation of our planned boats trips. On the plus side, with advanced warning of the inclement weather, we had already arranged an attractive alternative 'Plan B' – a day exploring the eastern parts of the island searching for birds and other wildlife. Our guide for the day was Ana Mendonçam who is involved in conservation and educational work on the island's endemic bird, the Azores Bullfinch (Priolo). As we drove across the island, sightings included several Common Buzzards and lots of Common Starlings and House Sparrows, plus road kill in the form of Mole and Rabbit. First stop was the Priolo Environmental Centre set amongst laurel forest of the Serra da Tronqueira at the far eastern of the island, south-west of Nordeste. One of the staff gave a highly informative talk on the bullfinch and other wildlife of the laurel forest, together with the conservation measures being put in place through an EU Special Protection Area (SPA) partnership project.

After this inspiring session, we were fired up to see the Azores Bullfinch and took a slow drive through the forest, stopping several times in the hope of finding this rare bird. In blustery conditions we failed to locate any, but saw a range of typical island birds including Common Blackbird, Common Buzzard, Grey Wagtail, Common Chaffinch, European Robin, Atlantic Canary and House Sparrow, and we heard Goldcrest and Eurasian Blackcap. Ana was not to be beaten by this and had another site up her sleeve. Ana took us to a recently discovered reliable site for the Azores Bullfinch north of Povoação, in a rather unusual habitat – open farmland. Here, we got great views of seven birds, including two of which were feeding out in the open on mosses within short-turf grassland. Atlantic Canary, European Goldfinch, Common Starling and Common Waxbill were seen nearby, as was an impressive large old Holly Tree.

We had a thoroughly enjoyable traditional Sunday lunch in a small restaurant, Banhos Ferreos in Furnas, located within a former thermal ferrous water pool. Lots of locals were eating in this restaurant which is always a good sign. We had the local speciality, Cozida, which is a Portuguese Stew cooked 'volcano style' for six to seven hours buried in the ground in a sealed pot using geothermal heat from the nearby hot springs. It was a delicious mix of beef, pork, chicken, chorizo, potatoes, carrots, kale and white cabbage, accompanied with homemade bread and local wine.

After lunch we visited the nearby volcanic lake and hot springs. Here, there was a reasonable variety of birds and amongst them wetland species such as Eurasian Coot, Little Egret, Grey Heron, Mallard and Common Tern. In the surrounding trees we saw a good number of Atlantic Canaries and Common Chaffinches, the latter sub-

species being much bluer on the head, neck and flanks than British birds, with a striking green patch on the mantle. Our final stop was rocky foreshore habitat on the south coast near Ponta da Galera. This proved productive for coastal and seabirds with sightings of Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone, Cory's Shearwater, a colony of Common Terns and our first Roseate Terns.

In the evening, on the recommendation of our driver, João, we had dinner at the Sem Espinhas close to the hotel within the marina complex. Both the views and the food were excellent, rounding off a superb first day on Sao Miguel.

Day 3

Monday 9th May

Pico

It was windy again today, so the week's itinerary was reshuffled once more, bringing forward our free day. Most of the group spent the day exploring the old town with its many fine buildings, the surrounding coastline and the botanical gardens, all of which received favourable reviews. With its many coffee bars, Ponta Delgada is a lovely place to relax and while away time. Rather bravely, Paul opted to use one of the hotel's bikes to go cycling along the blustery coast road to the west. There was also ample time to use some of the hotels excellent facilities including the indoor pool, sauna, Turkish bath and jacuzzi, which proved popular with some of the group.

In terms of wildlife sightings, the rocky shore of the inner harbour was attractive to waders with over 40 Ruddy Turnstones counted together with Whimbrel and Little Egret. Further east along the coast, two Roseate Terns were seen at Sao Roque. In farmland habitat to the north, Tom saw Common Wood Pigeon, Atlantic Canary and several species of insect including Clouded Yellow, Large White and Red-veined Darter. In the botanical gardens birds recorded were Atlantic Canary, Grey Wagtail, Common Chaffinch, Common Blackbird, Eurasian Blackcap, House Sparrow and Rose-ringed (Ring-necked) Parakeet. The harbour held a loafing flock of 40 Atlantic Herring Gulls containing a lone juvenile Great Black-backed Gull, whilst later in the day 40 Common Terns came into roost. Offshore, Cory's Shearwaters passed regularly, though were somewhat distant.

For dinner we walked east from the hotel for 10 minutes or so towards the outskirts of the main part of town, to a recently opened and highly regarded restaurant, Gastronomo. The restaurant more than lived up to our high expectations, with the food and service being superb, whilst a large group diners were singing traditional songs creating a lively and fun atmosphere.

Day 4

Tuesday 10th May

With today's forecast again very windy, we once more enlisted the services of Ana for a birdwatching trip to the western side of the island. We boarded a jeep and headed north-west for 30 minutes or so, seeing Common Buzzard and lots of Common Starlings along the way. Our first stop was the beautiful coastal village of Mosteiros where a number of quality Neartic birds had been seen of late including Double-crested Cormorant and Spotted Sandpiper. Alas we did not see either of these two species, though we did have a thoroughly enjoying morning scanning the coastline picking up lots of Ruddy Turnstones, Atlantic Herring Gulls and Cory's Shearwaters, plus a few Whimbrel and Little Egrets. A dead Portuguese Man Of War was found by João on the beach. The sea and light was quite spectacular this morning, with the substantial swell leading to large waves

crashing atmospherically onto the rock shore. A splash of colour was added by flowering Hottentot Fig, whilst several tall Centaury plants were seen.

We then headed south-east to Sete Cidades where we had a pleasant buffet lunch in a restaurant amidst spectacular volcanic scenery. European Goldfinch, Eurasian Blackcap and European Robin were seen in the garden of the restaurant. After lunch we visited the nearby Lagoa Azul, the largest lake on the island, occupying the crater of a dormant volcano. We started at a small marshy area where an American Robin had been seen recently. The robin was absent, but there was ample compensation with a number of interesting resident and migratory species seen. Wetland birds included a long-staying Glossy Ibis, recently arrived Garganey and Black-tailed Godwit, plus Common Tern, Little Egret, Mallard, Eurasian Coot and Common Moorhen. There were plenty of land birds too with Atlantic Canary, Common Chaffinch, Common Blackbird and Eurasian Blackcap being particularly numerous, whilst overhead a migrating Common House Martin was a good pick up.

Next we drove a short distance to the bridge which divides Lagoa Azul from Lagoa Verde. Our target here was the long-staying Pied-billed Grebe. The viewpoint was very windy making birding difficult and at first, all we could see were several coots. Eventually Anna spotted the grebe in a reedy, sheltered corner west of the bridge. Though it was diving frequently and rather elusive, several of the group got brief views. After this we drove around the northern shores of Lagoa Azul, where the scenery was stunning. We stopped in a sheltered wooded area where we had excellent views of Goldcrest and Atlantic Canary, together with a Red Admiral butterfly. On the drive back to the hotel, noteworthy wildlife included Large White and Small White butterflies.

Back at the hotel, before our evening log call, Tom scoped the Common Tern roost from the balcony in his room. It was larger than the previous evening and contained around 80 Common Terns, but more interestingly nine Roseate Terns. The group were quickly informed and David and Peter came up to Tom's room to get good views through the telescope, with Common Terns side by side for comparison. It was great to see such an increasingly rare bird without straying from the room/hotel!

After the log call we went for dinner to a highly regarded restaurant, Taverna Acor, situated on the edge of the old town, less than 10 minutes west from the hotel. It is noted both for its extensive tapas menu and rustic decor. Once again the food was excellent and reasonably priced and a great evening was had by all.

Day 5

Wednesday 11th May

What a difference a day makes! It was heartening to open the curtains this morning to relatively calm conditions and the prospects of our first boat trip of the holiday, which we were all excited about. By 8:30am we were at the office of the whale watching company Futurismo, located at the marina, listening to our first safety briefing. By 9am we were first aboard the large and comfy catamaran, with 70 or so other people, heading out to sea. With northerly winds, the inshore waters were nice and calm, with the swell having dropped right down overnight.

It wasn't long before we had seen our first group of cetaceans - a small and playful school of Common Dolphins. About 30 minutes later we spotted our second dolphin species; a group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins. After getting some good views of these animals we headed off. News came through over the ship's radio that further east a Sperm Whale had been spotted. There was a noticeable increase in the speed of the ship as we steamed east for another 15 minutes or so, then slowed right down as the iconic angled bushy blow of our first

Sperm Whale was clearly visible. There followed great views of two different animals over the remainder of the morning, including seeing full tail flukes and associated fluke prints as the animals went on deep dives. There was further excitement when news was radioed through that three Fin Whales were not too far away. We steamed over to this spot, but the whales were quite elusive and only some of the group saw just one of the animals briefly. A great morning was rounded off by sightings of several Loggerhead Turtles swimming close to the boat and equally close views of Cory's Shearwaters which were present in large numbers.

This was an extended boat trip due to the good run of sightings and we just about had time for lunch before we were back on the catamaran for a second trip a little after 2pm. There was an almost repeat performance of our morning adventure on this trip, with great views of Loggerhead Turtle, Common Dolphin, Bottle-nosed Dolphin, Cory's Shearwater and two more Sperm Whales, which gave even better views of their tail flukes as they dived. The three different Sperm Whales we had seen today were all thought to be young males.

After a superb afternoon at sea, events took a turn for the worse on our way back to port, when a loud bang signalled the loss of one of the engines! We had been leaking fuel all day and the captain had made frequent trips to the engine room, so we suspected boat problems. We drifted without power for a short while before two Futurismo 'ribs' (rigid inflatable boats) arrived; one to prevent us from drifting near the rocky coast and the other to tow us slowly back to port, where we arrived rather late at 7:45pm. We had spent around 10 hours at sea that day, inadvertently making up for lost trips on previous days! The major downside we learned back at the Futurismo office was that the catamaran was going to be out of service for some time including for the remainder of our holiday, so further re-scheduling of cetacean watching trips was required, using available zodiacs. Our next morning boat trip was cancelled, but thankfully we were able to find spaces on two back-to-back trips on ribs during the afternoon.

Given the lateness of the hour, we decided to eat at the hotel, enjoying an excellent supper in the bar.

Day 6

Thursday 12th May

Given the re-scheduling of boat trips, we had another free morning to either relax or further explore the town, botanical gardens and harbour; time which went all too quickly. At 1pm we assembled at the Futurismo offices for a safety briefing and to don life jackets and waterproofs. We heard that on the morning trip everyone had fantastic views of Blue Whale which swam under one of the ribs, so expectation and excitement levels were through the roof! By 1:30pm we had boarded the 'Song of the Whale', which is the largest of the Futurismo ribs – a little slower than the others, but with the advantage of offering the opportunity to move around the boat when it was stationary.

The first noteworthy sighting came around 2pm when we spotted a particularly large Loggerhead Turtle, which was likely to be 20 years old or more. It is fascinating to note that these endangered animals are born on beaches along the south-eastern coast of North America and in the Gulf of Mexico centred on Florida, then live a solitary life for 20 years or more out at sea in the north Atlantic before returning to their natal beaches to breed.

Just five minutes after seeing the turtle, there was much excitement as a group of three large Risso's Dolphins were spotted. These animals are uncommon in Azores waters and there had been few sightings this spring. They were very distinctive with their tall black sickle-shaped dorsal fins, heavily scarred bodies and blunt heads. One, a

male, had an almost pure white body in front of the dorsal fin. We had really good views of the Risso's Dolphins as they swam close to the boat surfacing regularly, though none breached. Our attention turned to a playful group of Bottle-nosed Dolphins which were in the vicinity and gave our best views of this species so far, being on view for over 20 minutes. A group of Common Dolphins and sightings of Loggerhead Turtles completed an excellent trip, but sadly the Blue Whale was not seen by us or any of the other boats and had likely moved north.

We had another short turn around and within 30 minutes of docking, were back out on the 'Song of the Whale' for a late afternoon cetacean watching trip. The sea had smoothed down to mill pond conditions, but visibility was not great and there was light drizzle at times, with a black sky. No whales had been observed by the spotters on land, so we stayed fairly close inshore, seeing more Bottle-nosed and Common Dolphins, and enjoying our best views of the latter species playing around the boat. We circumnavigated the tiny islet of Ilhéu da Vila off Villa Franco do Campo, which has come to prominence in recent times as the location for the Red Bull Cliff Diving world championship. Three Red Rock Crabs and a Ruddy Turnstone were seen amongst the seaweed on the rocky shoreline. After this, we returned to port passing through the middle of a flock of Cory's Shearwater numbering 2,000 or more birds, which took off then tracked the boat, providing a wonderful spectacle.

We arrived back in Ponta Delgada at 7:40pm, just in time to walk back to the hotel and freshen up for our 8:15pm dinner reservation at the hotel. This time we ate in the hotel's restaurant, where an excellent buffet was the offering.

Day 7

Friday 13th May

For our last full day on the island we had two more rib boat trips planned; one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. We opted for places on a smaller zodiac, that would give us a different experience from the 'Song of the Whale' and the opportunity to arrive earlier at sightings should any of the larger migratory whales be found by the spotters from land.

The day was bright and sunny, but visibility was relatively poor on land with low cloud. This was not good for the land-based spotters, on whom we chiefly depend for finding the larger whales, as they scan over an enormous sea area with high magnification binoculars. It was apparent we would need to try and find our own animals! We left port just after 9am, our first sighting being a pod of Bottle-nosed Dolphins just after 9:30am. Several sightings of Short-beaked Dolphins followed. The dolphins were really cooperative today and we had superb views of both species. By 10am there was not much improvement in visibility on land, but the sea had smoothed off further, becoming like glass. This made it easy to spot Loggerhead Turtles of which several were seen during the morning. Over the next hour or so we covered a lot of the sea searching for whales, going a fair way out, but none were found. It was a great trip though, with more sightings of Common Dolphin, lots of Cory's Shearwaters and best of all a tiny Grey Phalarope sat on the sea. We probably only saw this bird due to the 'mill pond' sea conditions. This species is relatively uncommon in Azores waters and it makes one wonder how many must go undetected, given that they must regularly travel north through the region in the spring en route to their Arctic breeding grounds.

Our afternoon boat trip departed at 1:30pm and produced a similar experience to the morning, with lots of Common Dolphins, Cory's Shearwaters, a smaller number of Bottle-nosed Dolphins and a few Loggerhead

Turtles. Large whales again eluded us. However, over the day, we had some impressive totals including about 50 Bottle-nosed Dolphins, 140 Common Dolphins, 1,500 Cory's Shearwaters and six Loggerhead Turtles.

Our final evening saw us trying a different restaurant and one literally just a few yards from the hotel. The Açores Grill was quirky, unique and great fun, involving cooking the food ourselves inside on a barbecue! The menu was a selection of Azorean meats and locally caught fish. For the meats selected, we cooked these on a charcoal grill brought to the table. Surprisingly, there was no smoke due to an efficient hood vent above the grill. With wine and sides at one euro each, good company and good food, it all made for a great evening and a fitting culinary finale.

Day 8

Saturday 14th May

The original plan for this morning was to have some leisure time before leaving the hotel around lunchtime for our early afternoon flight. Having missed out in the early part of the week, and with a shared love of being out at sea, we were all up for another boat trip. Tom enquired about the possibility of doing this and managed to get complimentary places on an early morning trip that would allow adequate time for last minute packing back at the hotel.

After an early breakfast, we departed from the harbour a little after 8am, with all fingers crossed for more whale sightings. We were on a different rib - our fourth boat of the holiday! The weather was beautiful and within ten minutes of setting off we were getting fabulous views of Bottle-nosed Dolphins in perfect light. We watched the animals for around 20 minutes before moving on to look for something different. After 20 minutes or so we found a group of Common Dolphins, but did not watch them for long as news came over the radio that whales had been spotted. The animals were a long way away, so we headed directly there. After travelling at full speed for nearly an hour we were 'in the zone', with confirmation that the animals were indeed three Fin Whales. This was great news as less than half the group had seen the single Fin Whale seen briefly on our first day out to sea. There were quite a few whale watching boats in the area, given the lack of whale sightings in recent days, but the whales were proving mobile and elusive, with just brief blows and body rolls being seen. We had caught glimpses of the body, but the views had been unsatisfactory and worryingly we were moving towards 'extra time'. The armada of whale watching boats scattered, to try and pin down the whales. Then, as luck would have it, the whales surfaced near to our boat and we were in pole position to get some excellent views of these mighty animals to mixed emotions of relief, excitement and joy! We watched them surface a few times and also saw the blows really well. All too soon it was time to leave the animals behind to make the lengthy journey back to port. We were so pleased that we had made the effort to do an extra trip and catch another sighting of migrating large whales, which was the focus of the tour. A great way to end the holiday!

We left the hotel at 12:30pm and were soon on our way back to England. At the baggage reclaim at Stansted we said our goodbyes and headed home from what had been an excellent holiday among great company.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May						
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1	Risso's Dolphin	<i>Grampus griseus</i>					3		
2	Bottle-nosed Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>				20	20	50	10
3	Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>				25	30	140	70
4	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>				3			
5	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>				1			2
6	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	1						
7	Common Mole	<i>Talpa europaea</i>	1						

Birds

1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2						
2	Garganey	<i>Anas querquedula</i>			1				
3	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	30	10	50	2000	2500	1500	800
4	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	3	2	2				
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	3						
6	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>			1				
7	Pied-billed Grebe	<i>Podilymbus podiceps</i>			1				
8	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>	12	1	1				
9	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	25	5	10		5	4	
10	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus phaeopus</i>	4	1	4				
11	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	4		6				
12	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			4				
13	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			2				
14	Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>						1	
15	Atlantic Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	10	50	230	50	50	70	50
16	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		1					
17	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	20	20	80	10	20	10	5
18	Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	1	3	9	2			
19	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>	4	1	1				
21	Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>		2					
22	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>			1				
23	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>	20	2	30		1	1	
24	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	10	6	50		✓	2	
25	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>	5	10	20				
26	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>	3	1	6				
27	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓		✓				
28	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	✓						
29	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	200+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs moreletti</i>	30	2	30				
32	Azores Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula murina</i>	7						
33	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	1		2				
34	Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	3	2	2				

Amphibians & Reptiles:

1	Madeiran Wall Lizard	<i>Lacerta (Teira) dugesii</i>		1			30		
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	Common name	Scientific name	May						
			8	9	10	11	12	13	14
2	Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>				4	4	6	2
3	Marsh Frog	<i>Pelophylax ridibundus</i>			✓	✓			

Butterflies and Dragonflies:

1	Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea failiae</i>		10					
2	Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>		1	1				
3	Small White	<i>Pieris rapae</i>	1	1	3				
4	European Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>			1				
5	Red-veined Darter	<i>Sympetrum fonscolombii</i>		1					

Marine:

1	Red Rock Crab	<i>Grapsus adscensionis</i>	1	1			3		
2	Portuguese Man o War	<i>Physalia physalis</i>			1				

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