

Great Whales of the Azores (Pico)

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 9th May 2026



Blue Whale



Humpback Whale



Sperm Whale



Fin Whale

Tour report by Tim Melling



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: Tim Melling (leader) with 14 Naturetrek clients

Summary

We had a successful and enjoyable trip to the Azores on a quest to see great whales migrating north. We saw cetaceans on all of our eight half-day trips, and managed to see Blue Whales on six trips. We also found Fin, Humpback and Sperm Whales, and even a Blue x Fin hybrid. In addition, we saw three species of dolphins: Common, Striped and Bottlenose. We also rescued a baby Loggerhead Turtle, plus many deadly but beautiful Portuguese Men 'O War. In addition to thousands of Cory's Shearwaters, we managed to see several Barolo, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters. Another highlight was visiting a Cory's Shearwater colony at dusk, to listen to their peculiar calls. We saw quite a few Canaries, plus the endemic island subspecies of Goldcrest, Grey Wagtail, Starling, Buzzard, Yellow-legged Gull, and Azores Chaffinch, recently promoted to full species status. We had two interesting tours of the island of Pico, and enjoyed great company and food.

Day 1

Friday 1st May

Fourteen group members arrived in Lisbon from various airports, but we all managed to meet up at the hotel and had a meal together before our early start the next morning. The only wildlife seen today were a few Spotless Starlings and Yellow-legged Gulls around Lisbon airport.

Day 2

Saturday 2nd May

We were all up at 5.00am for our early breakfast, and set off to the airport for our early flight to Horta, on the Azores. We arrived after a two-and-a-half-hour flight, but had to wait until 2.15pm for our ferry from Faial to Pico. Most people wandered around the harbour and marina, where we saw Turnstones, Common Terns and Azorean Yellow-legged Gulls. A most surprising sighting was of two Quails chasing each other on the long grassland of the airport. Other birds seen around Horta were Atlantic Canary, Azores Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Starling (ssp. *granti*), Robin, Blackbird, Grey Wagtail, Blackcap, Wood Pigeon (ssp. *azorica*) and Swallow. The ferry trip across to Pico was very windy, but we managed to see lots of Cory's Shearwaters. We had a briefing about whales from local guide Enrico, and after a rest, we headed out to a local restaurant for a meal.

Day 3

Sunday 3rd May

It was a lovely clear morning, with the summit of Mount Pico in view for the first time: yesterday it had been shrouded in mist. The sun rose at 7.05am and breakfast started at 7.30am. We were ready to meet up for whalewatching at 8.15am. We got kitted up and headed straight out, but were delayed when Tim spotted a Brown Booby perched on the big rocks just outside the harbour!

We continued several kilometres south of Faial, where we saw a cow/calf pair of Humpback Whales, which gave good views of their flukes when diving. The area was clearly a good feeding spot, as there were hundreds of Cory's Shearwaters and about twenty Common Dolphins feeding in the area. We then headed west, and nearer to the coast, following a report of several Sperm Whales. There were about nine animals, females and youngsters logging at the surface. They shallow-dived occasionally but did not fluke, and reappeared after a few minutes. Once or twice, some young animals spy-hopped. Another group of six Sperm Whales were about three hundred metres

away, making a stunning total of fifteen Sperm Whales. We enjoyed watching their low, angled blows, showing rainbow colours in the low sun. Eventually, they all deep-dived, showing their tails as they went. This was our cue to head elsewhere, so we sailed past the cliffs and calderas on the south-east corner of Faial, watching the nesting Common Terns. We were also delighted to see two Portuguese Men 'O War floating so close to our rib that we could see all of the deadly tentacles. One or two also managed to see the fin of a Mako Shark. We headed back for lunch and prepared for the afternoon trip.



Common Dolphins and Humpback Whale



Cory's Shearwater



Portuguese Man 'O War



Loggerhead Turtle

After lunch, we set out in much windier conditions, though it was still sunny, with the summit of Mount Pico visible all day. As we headed out, some people spotted a large Loggerhead Turtle. The *vigias* (land-based whale spotters) had sighted a distant baleen whale, but we weren't able to find it, though we did enjoy quite a lot of Common Dolphins, including some leaping clear of the water. Later, we came across our first Bottlenose Dolphins, which were clearly much bigger than the Commons. This group included a mother and calf that leapt clear of the water. Cory's Shearwaters were abundant, as were Common Terns and Azorean Yellow-legged Gulls.

Day 4

Monday 4th May

Today we set out in the knowledge that the *vigias* had already spotted some baleen whales, so we headed out to about five kilometres south of Faial. On the way, Tim spotted a Barolo Shearwater among hundreds of Cory's, but we did not stop, as we were heading out for whales. When we arrived, there were two apparent Fin Whales, although one had a slightly mottled back and a tiny dorsal fin, making us think it was a hybrid Fin x Blue Whale. It was far too rough to get decent photos, as we were being constantly splashed with waves. But a few minutes later, a real Blue Whale was seen: the weather was so rough it was difficult to keep tabs on it, and we soon lost it, but photos confirmed it was a Blue Whale. There were also plenty of Common Dolphins around, and several Portuguese Men 'O War. We then headed south of Pico, where the weather was calmer, and we enjoyed a mother and calf

Humpback. The mother flipper-flopped for us, tail-splashed, and showed some great flukes while diving. All the time, they were accompanied by Common Dolphins. We had one further try to relocate the Blue Whale, but all we found was another Fin Whale: at least it showed well, in calmer seas too. We could even see its diagnostic white lower right lip as it surfaced. It was then time to head back, but we stopped at the caldera rocks by the entrance to Madalena harbour, where we were told that it had existed long before Pico.

After lunch, we headed south of Pico and got some great views of a Fin Whale, which surfaced close, showing its white lower right lip. There were the usual attendant dolphins alongside too. Several more boats arrived, so we decided to try for a very distant large whale that the *vigias* had spotted about thirteen kilometres south of Faial. It was a long way, but we headed off, spotting a single Manx Shearwater en route among the many Cory's. When we arrived, there were in fact two whales: a Fin and an enormous Blue Whale. This was what everyone had wanted to see, and it performed perfectly, right alongside. It was so much better than our elusive Blue Whale this morning in the choppy water! It was great to have the two largest species on the planet alongside each other. What an amazing afternoon it turned out to be: there were lots of smiling faces on the rough ride back.

Day 5

Tuesday 5th May

This morning was overcast, but the wind was much lighter. We headed south, and had some amazing views of two Humpback Whales looking very photogenic against Pico with a backlit blow, the shot that photographers are really after. One showed its tail flukes very well each time it dived. There were a few Common Dolphins as well.

Then we headed west, following a report of a large baleen whale. There weren't too many Cory's Shearwaters around, but amazingly we saw two Barolo, one Sooty and one Manx Shearwater, although later we came across some tuna feeding, and there were thousands of vocal Cory's there too. We arrived at the baleen whale spot, and there was a magnificent Blue Whale, sometimes right alongside the boat so we could see its full length under the water. We could even make out its pectoral fins underwater. Nearby, we also refound the Blue x Fin hybrid that we had seen yesterday. We headed towards Faial, where we had lovely close views of a Fin Whale, our third species of baleen whale on this one outing. As usual, a few Portuguese Men 'O War were seen too.

In the afternoon, we headed south again and encountered a Fin and a Blue Whale in the same area. We had great views of both, and it was good to have the two so close together to make a size comparison. We estimated that the Blue Whale was about twenty-five metres long, more than twice the length of our RIB. We headed east to see two Humpback Whales and about thirty Common Dolphins feeding in the same area. We had great views of the whales' flukes, and one was remarkably white. We spotted a rather tired looking baby Loggerhead Turtle, which we managed to catch. Our guide Marty said it was infested with pelagic crabs, which bite them if they dive deeper than the crabs like. This seriously impacts a turtle's feeding ability, so we removed the crabs and some of the algae on its shell, and released it.

The birds were amazing this afternoon too: five Little Shearwaters were resting on the water, but scattered as we whizzed by on the RIB. We encountered a huge feeding flock of Cory's Shearwaters, and among them we spotted three Sooty and a Manx Shearwater. We also saw a pale-morph Arctic Skua, a new bird for the trip. On the way back, we encountered some Bottlenose Dolphins, which came to bow-ride. They also did a couple of energetic leaps high out of the water.

Day 6

Wednesday 6th May

This morning, the sea was like a mill pond when we set out. We headed north of Faial for a change, and came across a raft of thousands of Cory's Shearwaters, and a Humpback Whale quietly feeding among them. It must have been doing shallow feeding dives, as it never showed its tail flukes. Also, there were many Common Dolphins in this area. We headed north again, to where a *vigia* had spotted an unidentified whale, and after a while we managed to find a Fin Whale. But almost immediately, we spotted a Blue Whale nearby, so we headed off to see that. We watched it breathing and diving several times in calm water. It was time to head back, but after a short time we found a pod of Striped Dolphins. They were much shyer than the other dolphins and were always heading away, but we still managed good views. About ten minutes later, we chanced upon a second pod of Striped Dolphins, but these were even shyer.



Brown Booby



Humpback Whales and Mount Pico



Humpback Whale



Barolo Shearwater

In the afternoon, we headed south and encountered the Blue Whale we had seen yesterday, about fifteen kilometres south of Faial. We also saw a single Barolo Shearwater among the many Cory's. We moved east off the south coast of Pico, where we enjoyed two Humpback Whales tail-slapping and flipper-flopping. We were also surrounded by some really close Common Dolphins before it was time to head back.

After dinner, we were taken a few miles down the road to a Cory's Shearwater breeding colony. Alas, it was raining quite heavily, but it did not put the shearwaters off. They started arriving as it started to get dark, and their calls were amazing. The males made an "oww-a oww-a oww-a" call, rather like Mr Punch from a seaside show! The females had a lower growl, and called far less frequently than the males. Everyone agreed that it was a magical experience, even the non-birders.

Day 7

Thursday 7th May

This morning, we set off straight after breakfast for an island tour. First, we visited the volcanic lava flows on the shore at Pochino Bay, and then we visited the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site of the basalt-walled vineyards. We visited an abandoned village in the basalt landscape, before stopping for a picnic lunch further along the south coast. The weather was quite bad at this point, with heavy squally rain, but fortunately our picnic area was covered.

We then drove to the former capital at Lajes do Pico, where we visited the whaling museum and watched a 1970 film about the whaling tradition on Pico. A tidal lagoon on the edge of town had ten Turnstones and a Whimbrel. We headed over the high ground, where the landscape changed dramatically. We stopped at a small lake, and had great views of Azores Chaffinches, plus a Common Snipe. Then we headed back down into Madalena.

Day 8

Friday 8th May

This morning was free, so most people took the opportunity for a longer walk. Some walked to the viewpoints on the hill south of Madalena. The 'usual' birds were about, including Goldcrest, Azores Chaffinch and Canary. A Little Egret was also seen in a coastal pool. At 2.00pm, we met up for our next island tour, and started off by visiting a *vigia* who showed us his 20x binoculars, with a compass so that he can radio directions. Then we visited the village of Cachorro, named after a puppy-shaped rock formation. There were also lots of caves and arches here, formed after a volcanic eruption in 1718.

We continued along the north coast, then headed back inland, spotting several Buzzards en route. We tried for the day-flying bats in a wonderful garden, but it was too cool and windy for flying insects, so we didn't see any bats: we did see a few Iberian Water Frogs. Then we headed back: half the group went for a wine-tasting event. Later, we met up for our last meal together.

Day 9

Saturday 9th May

We took our bags across to the terminal ready for our 8.15am ferry departure, but left time for a quick breakfast. We were taken to the airport on Horta, where we checked in and started our journey home. There was a short delay in setting off from Horta, but everyone managed to make the connecting flight to Lisbon, and journeyed on back to the UK.

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Species lists

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	May 2026							
		2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		2	2	2	2			
Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>			5	3	1			
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>			2	2	2			
Blue x Fin Whale hybrid	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i> x <i>physalus</i>			1	1				
Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		15						
Common Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>		20		20				
Striped Dolphin	<i>Stenella coeruleoalba</i>					30			
Short-beaked Common Dolphin	<i>Delphinus delphis</i>		30	20	30	50			

Birds

E = endemic		May 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Common Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix conturbans</i>	2							
Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus azorica</i>	10	10	5	10	10	20	✓	
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	5		1	1	1	10	1	
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus phaeopus</i>		1		1		1		
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>						1		
Azorean Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis atlantis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris borealis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Barolo Shearwater	<i>Puffinus baroli</i>			1	7	1			
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>			1	1				
Sooty Shearwater	<i>Ardenna griseus</i>				4				
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>							1	
Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>		1						
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo rothschildi</i>	3						6	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla gularis</i>	✓	5	2	2	5	10	10	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus inermis</i>			1		1		2	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris granti</i>	10	10	10	10	10	10	20	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula azorensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula rubecula</i>	✓				1		5	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea patriciae</i>	1	3	2	2	2	4	2	
Azores Chaffinch - E	<i>Fringilla moreletti</i>	10	3	2	2	5	40	30	
European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	5	1						
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	10	5		5	5	2	5	
Atlantic Canary	<i>Serinus canaria</i>	20	10	10	10	10	10	20	

Amphibians & reptiles

Common name	Scientific name	May 2026							
		2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Iberian Water Frog	<i>Pelophylax perezi</i>	✓						✓	
Madeiran Rock Lizard	<i>Teira dugesii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Loggerhead Turtle	<i>Caretta caretta</i>		✓		✓				

Butterflies

		May 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Large White	<i>Pieris brassicae</i>	✓							
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias crocea faillae</i>				✓			✓	

Dragonflies

		May 2026							
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Emperor Dragonfly	<i>Anax imperator</i>							✓	