

São Tome and Principe

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 22 September 2019



Black-capped Speirops - Kenny Ross



Principe Kingfisher - Kenny Ross



Sao Tome Caecilian - Andy Smith



Principe Golden Weaver - Kenny Ross

Report by Andy Smith
Images courtesy of Kenny Ross & Andy Smith



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Tour participants: Andy Smith (Tour Leader) plus eight Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Wednesday 11th September

For this inaugural trip to Sao Tomé and Principe, the group members travelled to Lisbon, where they spent the night prior to the onward flight to Sao Tomé.

Day 2

Thursday 12th September

The group landed at Sao Tomé airport in the early evening, met up with Andy who had preceded them by a couple of days and transferred the short distance to the comfortable Omali Lodge hotel. After settling in, we enjoyed a first dinner together and talked over plans for the days ahead.

Day 3

Friday 13th September

Today the weather was sunny and warm with scattered cloud first thing; however, from mid-morning, it became overcast and some rain in the highlands.

Early morning around the grounds of the hotel provided everyone with a first taste of Sao Tomé birding and our first few endemics. In a short space of time we had great views of Newton's Sunbirds, Sao Tome Prinias and a Sao Tome Thrush, plus a supporting cast of Common Waxbills, Blue Waxbills, Yellow-fronted Canaries and Southern Masked Weavers. Palm Swifts and Little Swifts cruised around overhead and Straw-coloured Fruit Bats assembled noisily at their roosting sites in the Coconut Palms.

After an early breakfast, we set off with our local guide, Laudino, to Bom Sucesso on the edge of the Obo National park. The journey was interesting, taking us through bustling Sao Tomé city then up through villages and plantations. At Bom Sucesso, at an altitude of around 800 metres, we set out along a decent track through lush farm bush country with scattered patches of secondary forest.

Soon after we set out the clouds dropped and it began to rain steadily but, nevertheless, we had some good success. As we walked up, we enjoyed good views of Black-capped Speirops, Sao Tome White-eyes, Principe Seedeaters and Sao Tome Paradise Flycatchers, the males quite dazzling with their iridescent blue-black plumage and long tail streamers. Sao Tome Thrushes flew up from the track ahead of us, Sao Tome Spinetails looped around low overhead and Giant Sunbirds put in a couple of brief appearances. A satisfying morning was completed back near the vehicle with splendid views of a pair of Sao Tome Orioles and a bonus in the form of a bright yellow, foot-long Sao Tome Caecilian, a bizarre amphibian and a new class of animal for all of us.

We ate lunch in a restaurant a little lower down in the old plantation of Monte Café and then continued the afternoon with a walk through some cocoa plantations nearby. Here we found several Chestnut-winged Starlings and Giant Weavers and enjoyed excellent views of a Sao Tome Weaver low down on a fallen tree trunk, behaving very much like a nuthatch or small woodpecker, shredding the bark in its pursuit of insects.

Back at our beachside hotel at sunset, the bats were heading off to forage and provided a good finale to a rich and interesting day.

Day 4

Saturday 14th September

Today was overcast, warm and humid, with rain from mid-morning to mid-afternoon. Away before dawn, we drove south along the east coast road through Santana, Ribeiro Alfonso and Sao Joao to the Monte Carmo estate, an extensive oil palm plantation from where we could access the trails up into the forest on the flanks of Monte Carmo itself. We arrived at the edge of the forest an hour or so after first light and ate a packed breakfast whilst enjoying good views of Sao Tome Green Pigeons, Giant Weavers and a lone Sao Tome Olive Pigeon.

The trail took us through some excellent primary forest and we soon found one of our major targets, a Dwarf Olive Ibis which we flushed from the forest floor. It flew up into a nearby tree and perched quite calmly, allowing all of us great views. Walking on, we later found another Ibis and also saw a range of now-familiar birds, including Sao Tome Oriole, Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher, Giant Sunbird, Principe Seed-eater and Sao Tome Weaver.

Our local guide for the day, Mito, constantly whistled the call of the critically endangered and very rarely seen Sao Tome Grosbeak as we walked and, amazingly, all of a sudden, we got a response. The bird was there in the foliage above us calling strongly. Some of us glimpsed it but sadly, it remained largely unseen and, as abruptly as it started calling, it stopped and that was that. A little further on the same thing happened again with a second bird; heard but not seen. Very frustrating but at least they were there!

In the middle of the morning we reached a clearing sometimes used as a campsite. Some of the group opted to wait there whilst others continued up a further steeper trail in the hope of seeing the near-mythical Newton's Fiscal. It was a tough walk made more difficult by the heavy rain that set in just before we started. Sadly, we didn't see the Fiscal, but we did see another Giant Sunbird and heard a couple of rare and elusive Sao Tome Shorttails. The weather was really rather against us but that's the way it goes.

Eventually we all reconvened at the vehicles down at the bottom of the trail, ate some lunch and began the journey back to the north of the island. We made a stop at a river bridge a little south of Sao Joao where we saw several Reed Cormorants, a Striated Heron, a fly-over Bronze-naped Pigeon and a smart Sao Tome Kingfisher and then continued on back to the hotel.

Day 5

Sunday 15th September

A leisurely morning around the grounds of our hotel on Sao Tomé produced more encounters with a range of the now-familiar birds including Newton's Sunbirds, Common and Blue Waxbills, Yellow-fronted Canaries and engaging Sao Tome Prinias. We saw a good range of colourful butterflies too and the fine sunshine also brought out a number of very approachable Sao Tome Skinks.

In the late morning we transferred to the airport for our lunchtime flight and by early afternoon we were safely on Principe, where it was overcast, warm and humid. A short transfer introduced us to the lush forested landscape of the island and, after settling in and eating lunch at our lodgings in the very comfortable old plantation house of Roca Sundy, we set off for a late-afternoon walk. We walked along the entrance track through gardens and scrub and then turned off into an area of secondary forest and enjoyed a rapid introduction to the common birds of Principe. In the hour or so before the light faded we saw lots of Principe Weavers and

Timneh Parrots, some Bronze Mannikins, several African Green Pigeons, a Blue-breasted Kingfisher, a few Dohrn's Warblers and a pair of Principe Sunbirds – not bad!

Later, at dinner on the terrace, a middling-size bat with broad wings and a rusty pelage made repeated sorties after the insects attracted to the lights above our heads. A little co-operative research at the table narrowed it down to Noak's Leaf-nosed Bat – a nice conclusion to the day.

Day 6

Monday 16th September

Today was sunny with some cloud and drizzle in the late morning, and very warm and humid. After breakfast we set off in the vehicle down to Santo Antonio town and then up to Nova Estrela, noting a pair of smart Chestnut-breasted Nigritas in a trackside garden en route. We parked at Terreiro Velho a little beyond Nova Estrela and began walking along a trail towards the O Que Pipi waterfall. At first the route took us through lush cocoa plantations before continuing fairly steeply up through some lovely forest with a number of huge buttress-rooted trees. Birds along the way included Dohrn's Warblers, Principe Sunbirds, Principe Speirops, Velvet-mantled Drongo, Principe Glossy Starlings and Blue-breasted Kingfishers. Reptiles were good too and, in the course of the walk, we came across a couple of tiny Guinea Lidless Skinks lurking in the leaf litter, a Principe Blind Worm Snake under a rock and three very handsome Principe Green Snakes, slender and elegant, climbing through the vegetation. The waterfall, when we reached it, was impressive and a few of us took the opportunity for refreshing impromptu swim – lovely!

We ate a picnic lunch back down on the lawns of the derelict estate house at Terreiro Velho with its extensive views down to the spectacular coast far below. A large pack of Sao Tome Spinetails and Little Swifts hawked back and forth around us as we ate, whilst Principe Skinks basked on the rocks and colourful butterflies flitted around the flowers and scrub.

After lunch we returned to Roca Sundry and finished the day with a short local walk where we saw lots of Principe Weavers and Timneh Parrots, as yesterday, plus a few Green Pigeons, some more Principe Glossy Starlings and a lovely close flock of Principe Speirops.

Day 7

Tuesday 17th September

It was an overcast morning, and some early birding from the terrace brought us some good views of the now-familiar Splendid and Principe Glossy Starlings, Principe Weavers, Principe and Olive Sunbirds and Dohrn's Thrush-Babblers (also known as Dohrn's Warblers). With breakfast completed, we set off to walk down through the plantations and forest to Ribeiro Ize beach and Bom-Bom resort. The forest was as impressive as ever with some really marvellous great trees and, as we walked, we flushed a few Lemon Doves and had some great encounters with both Blue-breasted and Principe Kingfishers, the latter a dazzling little jewel of a thing. Unfortunately, rain set in again after an hour or so, but we pushed on. At the beach we found a Striated Heron, a Whimbrel and a couple of Common Sandpipers, whilst a Principe Gecko turned up on Kenny's cap and allowed everyone a good close look.

At Bom-Bom we dried out a bit, enjoyed a beer and ate some lunch and then, in the afternoon, in improved conditions, we walked up through the forest from Bom-Bom to Santa Rita. This was a lovely walk and we

enjoyed good views of most of the now-familiar birds including more Kingfishers, a couple of Velvet-mantled Drogos and a few more Green Pigeons. The overall highlight, though, was a prolonged encounter with a group of handsome and engaging Mona Monkeys.

Day 8

Wednesday 18th September

Today was sunny, with scattered cloud until mid-morning, then overcast with some rain from mid-afternoon; it was warm, humid and variably breezy. After breakfast we transferred to Bom-Bom and, shortly after 8am, we were out on the water in a sturdy and powerful boat. We cruised down the west coast of Principe, past the scenic Baia das Agulhas (Bay of Spires) and enjoyed the views from the water of the dramatic forest-clad and cloud-enshrouded mountains of the southern part of the island. Then, leaving Principe behind, we headed on in a southerly direction towards the Islas Tinhosas. The sea was rougher than we expected, but the boat was able for the job and, although viewing conditions were difficult, we saw a couple of distant Humpback Whales (we thought a mother with well-grown calf) and had some thrilling close encounters with Dolphins. First we saw a group of Bottlenose, then what appeared to be some Atlantic Spotted Dolphins and finally with a small pod of what we thought from their small size, blunt snouts and pinkish bellies were Fraser's Dolphins – very nice!

Reaching Pequena Tinhosa Island, we found ourselves suddenly immersed in the noise, smell and bustle of a busy seabird colony. Birds filled the sky and crammed the ledges. Most numerous were Black Noddies but there were also good numbers of Brown Noddies, Sooty Terns and Brown Boobies plus a few Bridled Terns and graceful White-tailed Tropicbirds. At one stage, a Yellow-billed Kite appeared (from goodness knows where) and huge numbers of birds erupted into the sky in panic - a dramatic few seconds!

From Pequena Tinhosa we made our way back to the southern end of Principe and completed our journey by going back up along the relatively sheltered eastern coast of the island. We stopped by the dramatic island of Jockey's Cap where we had wonderful views of more White-tailed Tropicbirds plus some glimpses of the endemic race of Principe Seedeater, as a couple of birds flicked through the dense vegetation of the lower slopes of the island.

Back at Roca Sundy at the end of the afternoon, some of us took a walk out to the O Que Daniel viewpoint where we enjoyed the sunset and had some great views of flocks of Timneh Parrots flying to their roosting sites and a trio of Lemon Doves on the ground, before the rain became heavy.

Day 9

Thursday 19th September

Today was overcast and wet at first after the heavy overnight rain, but it became sunny with scattered cloud and a variable breeze; it was, as ever, warm and humid. After breakfast we set off in the vehicle through Santo Antonio to a trail head that led up to the Santo Joaquina mirador. The walk took us up through some very fine forest and some excellent habitat for the elusive, endangered and near-mythical Principe Thrush. It was an enjoyable walk and we saw a good range of the local birds including a couple of Principe Seedeaters (so much scarcer on Principe than on Sao Tomé) and a small group of handsome little Principe White-eyes. Sadly however, the Thrush eluded us despite our best efforts.

Day 10

Friday 20th September

This morning, it was sunny at first, and we headed back over to Bom-Bom and boarded the boat again. We cruised down the east side of the island admiring the scenery and put in at a beautiful and remote beach called Maria Correia. From here we walked up to an old trackway that led deep into undisturbed forest. It was a superb area and looked good for the Thrush but sadly the rain set in again with a vengeance and we were forced to return to the beach, the boat and Bom-Bom.

After a brief turnaround at Roca Sundy we drove down to nearby Praia Sundy for lunch and then in the afternoon enjoyed a leisurely drive back up to Roca during which we had some great sightings of Green Pigeons and Lemon Doves, Principe Starlings and both species of Kingfishers, in showery conditions.

Day 11

Saturday 21st September

This morning was sunny with scattered cloud and showers and, after a leisurely breakfast, we left Roca Sundy and headed to Principe airport. All went smoothly and to schedule and at the end of the morning we landed on Sao Tomé again and met up with Laudino. We headed off to the north west of the island along the coast road. A Sao Tome Green Pigeon in a shore-side tree was a bit unexpected and other avian interest as we travelled along the shore included good numbers of Western Reef Herons and Yellow-billed Kites. Our destination was a plantation called Monte Forte a little beyond the port town of Neves. The country here was dry and scrubby and, after a spot of lunch, we set out to explore along a track that led through scrubby open forest and harvested crop fields, in the hot, sunny conditions. This open country was good for seed-eating birds and in a short time we had views of White-winged Widowbirds, Pin-tailed Whydahs, Black-winged Red Bishops and even a few Golden-backed Bishops. None were in full breeding plumage but it was nice to see them all the same and some of us also saw a couple of brief Bronze-naped Pigeons and a pair of pretty little Red-headed Lovebirds.

Back at Omali Lodge we prepared for our overnight flight and then we transferred to the airport in good time. The check-in went smoothly, the flight was on time and we all arrived safely back at our destination a few hours later.

Day 12

Sunday 22nd September

We landed in Lisbon and took our onward flights home.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the guides, drivers and hotel staff who did their best to ensure that we had an enjoyable and productive time on Sao Tomé and Principe. A big thank you also to all the members of the group for their camaraderie and good humour. It was a memorable trip!

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Species Lists

Birds (h = heard only; E = endemic; N = near endemic)

	Common name	Scientific name	September								
			13	14	15	16	17	19	19	20	21
1	Sao Tome Spinetail - E	<i>Zoonavena thomensis</i>	15	15		25	6			1	
2	African Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus parvus brachypterus</i>	30		40	10	5	5	20	25	20
3	Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	12	6	4	150	30	10	15	50	20
4	African Emerald Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx cupreus</i>	2h				1h				
5	Sao Tome Olive Pigeon - E	<i>Columba thomensis</i>		1							
6	Island Bronze-naped Pigeon - N	<i>Columba malherbii</i>		1	1				1	1	2
7	Lemon Dove	<i>Columba larvata</i>	2	4	4	10	15	5	20	40	
8	Laughing Dove	<i>Spilopelia senegalensis</i>	4	2	5	6	3	5	3	10	10
9	Sao Tome Green Pigeon - E	<i>Treron sanctithomae</i>	2	6							1
10	African Green Pigeon	<i>Treron calvus</i>			6	12	15	4	5	6	
11	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus meridionalis</i>		1							
12	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				1	1			1	
13	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						1			
14	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1		1	2	2		2	
15	Brown Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>						100+			
16	Black Noddy	<i>Anous minutus atlanticus</i>						500+			
17	Bridled Tern	<i>Onychoprion anaethetus melanopterus</i>						25+			
18	Sooty Tern	<i>Onychoprion fuscatus</i>						75+			
19	White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus ascensionis</i>	3		1			60			5
20	Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>						100			
21	Reed Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo africanus</i>		8							
22	Sao Tome Ibis - E	<i>Bostrychia bocagei</i>		4							
23	Striated Heron	<i>Butorides striata atricapilla</i>		1			1			1	
24	Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	1	5	2	6	5	5	1	15	5
25	Western Reef Heron	<i>Egretta gularis</i>	2	2		2	1	4		1	40
26	Yellow-billed Kite	<i>Milvus aegyptius parasitus</i>	3	20	15	5	3	5	3	10	50
27	Blue-breasted Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon malimbica dryas</i>			2	4	12	3	5	5	1
28	Principe Kingfisher E	<i>Corythornis cristatus nais</i>			1	3	10	2	5	5	1

	Common name	Scientific name	September									
			13	14	15	16	17	19	19	20	21	
29	Sao Tome Kingfisher E	<i>Corythornis thomensis</i>		1								
30	Timneh Parrot	<i>Psittacus timneh princeps</i>			30	20	20	60	15	10	5	
31	Red-headed Lovebird	<i>Agapornis pullarius</i>	2	3								2
32	Sao Tome Oriole - E	<i>Oriolus crassirostris</i>	2	7								
33	Velvet-mantled Drongo	<i>Dicrurus modestus modestus</i>				3	3	1	1			2
34	Sao Tome Paradise Flycatcher - E	<i>Terpsiphone atrochalybeia</i>	15	10	1							4
35	Sao Tome Prinia - E	<i>Prinia mollerii</i>	20	5	5							5
36	Dohrn's Thrush-Babbler - E	<i>Horizorhinus dohrni</i>			15	20	15	7	20	7	5	
37	Principe White-eye - E	<i>Zosterops ficedulinus</i>				2			5			
38	Sao Tome White-eye - E	<i>Zosterops feae</i>	9									
39	Black-capped Speirops - E	<i>Zosterops lugubris</i>	50	7	1							8
40	Principe Speirops - E	<i>Zosterops leucophaeus</i>			5	15	5	3	8	10	6	
41	Splendid Starling	<i>Lamprotornis splendidus splendidus</i>			10	5	10	5	5	5	2	
42	Principe Starling - E	<i>Lamprotornis ornatus</i>			10	5	5	10	5	5	1	
43	Splendid/Principe Starling	<i>Lamprotornis splendidus/ornatus</i>			30	30	30	30	30	20	10	
44	Chestnut-winged Starling - E	<i>Onychognathus fulgidus fulgidus</i>	10	8								
45	Sao Tome Thrush - E	<i>Turdus olivaceofuscus</i>	20	25	2							1
46	Principe Sunbird - E	<i>Anabathmis hartlaubii</i>			2	8	3	1	6	4	2	
47	Newton's Sunbird - E	<i>Anabathmis newtonii</i>	20	10	4							3
48	Giant Sunbird - E	<i>Dreptes thomensis</i>	4	3								
49	Olive Sunbird	<i>Cyanomitra olivacea obscura</i>			1	1	1	1	2	1	1	
50	Principe Weaver E	<i>Ploceus princeps</i>			50	100	100	50	100	50	25	
51	Southern Masked Weaver	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>	25		5							7
52	Village Weaver	<i>Ploceus cucullatus nigriceps</i>										5
53	Giant Weaver - E	<i>Ploceus grandis</i>	10	10								
54	Sao Tome Weaver - E	<i>Ploceus sanctithomae</i>	5	15								4
55	Black-winged Red Bishop	<i>Euplectes hordeaceus hordeaceus</i>										20
56	Golden-backed Bishop - N	<i>Euplectes aureus</i>										3
57	White-winged Widowbird	<i>Euplectes albonotatus asymmetrurus</i>			12							30
58	Chestnut-breasted Nigrita	<i>Nigrita bicolor brunnescens</i>				2			1			
59	Blue Waxbill	<i>Uraeginthus angolensis angolensis</i>		6		5						5

	Common name	Scientific name	September								
			13	14	15	16	17	19	19	20	21
60	Common Waxbill	<i>Estrilda astrild jagoensis</i>	50	15	20	2			5	6	20
61	Bronze Mannikin	<i>Lonchura cucullata cucullata</i>	10		5	100	20	60	25	30	10
62	Pin-tailed Whydah	<i>Vidua macroura</i>									5
63	Sao Tome Shorttail - E	<i>Motacilla bocagii</i>		2h							
64	Principe Seedeater - E	<i>Crithagra rufobrunnea</i>	30	8	2			3	2		5
65	Sao Tome Grosbeak - E	<i>Crithagra concolor</i>		2h							
66	Yellow-fronted Canary	<i>Crithagra mozambica tando</i>	8		2						1

Mammals

Noak's Leaf-nosed Bat, *Hipposideros ruber*
 Least Weasel, *Mustela nivalis*
 Fraser's Dolphin, *Lagenodelphis hosei*
 Ship Rat, *Rattus rattus*

Straw-coloured Fruit-Bat, *Eidolon helvum*
 Atlantic Spotted Dolphin, *Stenella frontalis*
 Humpback Whale, *Megaptera novaeangliae*

Mona Monkey, *Cercopithecus mona*
 Common Bottlenose Dolphin, *Tursiops truncatus*
 Brown Rat, *Rattus norvegicus*

Reptiles

House Gecko, *Hemidactylus mabouia*
 Principe Skink, *Trachylepsis principensis*
 Principe Green Snake, *Hapsidophrys principensis*

Principe Gecko, *Hemidactylus principensis*
 Guinea Lidless Skink, *Panapsis africanus*

Sao Tome Skink, *Trachylepsis thomensis*
 Principe Worm Snake, *Letheobia feae*

Amphibians

Sao Tome Caecilian, *Schistometopum thomense*

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