

Winter trip to Madeira, 24 February – 10 March 2015, John Bowler

john.bowler@rspb.org.uk

We spent 2 weeks on Madeira, flying with Easyjet from Edinburgh. We spent 7 nights in the centre of the island at Pousada dos Vinhaticos on the edge of Serra de Agua and then 7 nights at Penha de Franca Hotel in Funchal. We took the return ferry for a day-trip to Porto Santo (47 Euros each) and did a dolphin-watching trip with the boat "Sea Best" out of Funchal for 30 Euros each for 3 hours.

We took it slowly and aimed to get good views of all the specialities. The weather in the mountains was distinctly cooler than at Funchal at about 10-14 degrees although still very pleasant on mostly sunny days, whilst Funchal hotted up to 23 degrees on our last day, with just one day of misty cloud. We saw 60 species and had great views of all the target species: **Fea's / Zino's Petrel, Trocaz Pigeon, Plain Swift, Madeiran Firecrest, Canary, Berthelot's Pipit, Chaffinch** (race *maderensis*) and **Rock Sparrow**, plus a good range of seabirds including close views of **Macaronesian Shearwater**. We saw quite a few migrants including **Blue-winged Teal, Glaucous Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Roseate Tern, Ruff, Green Sandpiper, Black-tailed Godwit, Red-rumped Swallow** and **Chiffchaff**.

Itinerary

- 24 Feb: Flew Edinburgh to Madeira, drove to Serra de Agua
- 25 Feb: Birded valley Serra de Agua valley and west of Boca da Encumeada
- 26 Feb: Drove to Lugar de Baixo and west along the south coast to Ponta de Pargo
- 27 Feb: Birded the plateau of Paul de Serra
- 28 Feb: Birded Sao Vicente and late pm sea-watch at Porto Moniz
- 1 Mar: Birded levadas east of Boca da Encumeada
- 2 Mar: Birded trail east of Boca da Encumeada to "grass bridge"
- 3 Mar: Visited Cabo Girao and walked levada "norte" east of Cabo Girau
- 4 Mar: Birded Funchal Harbour area
- 5 Mar: Took cable car to Monte and the Botanic Gardens
- 6 Mar: Birded levada trail at Santa Rita and Funchal Harbour
- 7 Mar: Return ferry trip to Porto Santo, birded Ponta, Golf Club and Tanque
- 8 Mar: Birded Funchal Harbour area, including sea-watches in SW winds
- 9 Mar: Took 3 hour dolphin watching trip out of Funchal, lazy pm
- 10 Mar: Birded Ponta de Sao Lourenco and Machico before late pm flight back to Edinburgh

Principal sites

The main sites we visited are listed below, which are mostly included on the excellent Birding Madeira web-site.

1) Pousada dos Vinhaticos area (just uphill from Serra de Agua):

This excellent accommodation was perfectly located on the edge of the mountains with well-wooded gardens bringing a wide range of birds and within walking distance of good laurel forest at Boca da Encumeada.

a) The well-vegetated valley immediately around **Pousada dos Vinhaticos** held large numbers of **Canary, Chaffinch (race *maderensis*) Goldfinch, Blackcap, Blackbird,** and **Robin**, plus regular **Kestrel** and **Buzzard** overhead and Feral Pigeon. A pair of

Barn Owls called most nights and were visible on occasion, and we saw one **Woodcock** here. Parties of **Plain Swifts** frequented the valley in the morning, often feeding around the adjacent peaks, and whilst watching these we picked up a **Sparrowhawk** on several occasions plus groups of up to 6 **Trocaz Pigeons** that flew daily around the peaks from 0830-1030 hours, often perching on conspicuous boulders along the ridge opposite.

b) **Boca da Encumeada** area – easy walks both east and west from the car parks around the valley produced more **Chaffinches, Canaries, Robins, Blackcaps** etc, plus several pairs of often confiding **Madeiran Firecrests** in the Tree Heath and laurel patches (listen for the calls) and daily **Trocaz Pigeons** including one perched on overhead wires and others visiting Eucalyptus trees (these birds are not hard to find!)

c) **Lugar de Baixo** – a glorified duck pond with a captive pack of Muscovy ducks was rather disappointing but also held **16 Coot, 5 Moorhen, 4 Turnstone** and **Grey Wagtail**. A motley group of **80 Yellow-legged Gulls** gathered on the stony beach to the east.

e) **Ponta de Pargo** – reached after a bit of a drive but felt “birdy”. The cultivations held large mixed flocks of **Goldfinches** and **Canaries** with a handful of **Linnets**, whilst the grassy/rocky area behind the lighthouse had several **Berthelot’s Pipits**, plus **Spectacled Warblers** in the gorse and calling **Red-legged Partridges**. We had a fly-over **Rock Sparrow** here plus a fly-through **Barn Swallow**. Note: most of this area has recently been bull-dozed to make way for a golf course.

f) **Paul de Serra** – This unusual high altitude plain was worth visiting for the views alone. It can hold Lapwing and Starling in winter but proved rather birdless. The broom-filled edges were full of **Robins** and **Blackbirds**, whilst the low heathy/grassy areas had more **Berthelot’s Pipits** and **Red-legged Partridges**, plus the ubiquitous **Buzzard, Kestrel** and **Canary**. Note: the road between Boca da Encumeada and Paul de Serra is blocked (unlikely to open soon), so you have to drive up via Calheta or Canhas.

g) **Sao Vicente** – An unexpectedly good spot visited on a wet day. The lawns next to the river held **Whimbrels** and **Turnstones**, whilst the river itself was full of **Grey Wagtails**. The cliffs on the east side of the river held large flocks of **Rock Doves** but also at least **12 Trocaz Pigeons** – flying around and perching brazenly on low laurel trees and rocks at almost sea level. The shrubs along the river produced more **Madeiran Firecrests**, as did a roadside pull-in at Seixal.

h) **Porto Moniz** – Sea-watching here in NE5-6 with drizzle felt more like the UK! Birds were mostly further out than expected with a steady stream west of **Cory’s Shearwaters** and smaller numbers of both **Manx** and **Macaronesian Shearwaters**, plus inshore movements of **Yellow-legged Gulls**. The highlight was a **Fea’s / Zino’s Petrel** that passed west fairly close inshore watched from the sea-front restaurant of the Hotel Cachalote at 17.30hrs.

2) Funchal

a) **Penha de Franca Hotel** area. This quaint hotel has leafy gardens and overlooks the sea just west of the main harbour. Sea-watching was often productive here both in the morning and late afternoon, especially on days when the wind turned to the SW. The gardens themselves held several **Canaries, Blackcaps, Goldfinches** and **Blackbirds**, plus at least 4 bonus **Ring-necked Parakeets**, which were seen/heard daily. Sea-watching produced large numbers of **Yellow-legged Gulls** (feeding aggregations of 600+ over pods of dolphins) and **Cory’s Shearwaters** plus smaller numbers of **Macaronesian Shearwaters** and **Black-headed Gulls**, as well as **2 Sandwich Terns**

on two dates, a **1w Glaucous Gull**, a **1w Great Black-backed Gull** and fly-by **Grey Herons, Little Egret** and **Turnstone**.

b) **Funchal Harbour** – The gull flocks moved about daily with the bulk of the **Yellow-legged Gulls** (1,200+) often roosting unreachably on the outer edge of the harbour wall. Fortunately, the smaller gulls preferred to hang around in the harbour itself including a regular flock of up to **30 Black-headed Gulls**, which included a **1w Mediterranean Gull** on one occasion. Up to three **1w Ring-billed Gulls** and up to **4 Lesser Black-backed Gulls** favoured the concrete area just west of the marina as did a lone **Little Egret** and several **Turnstones**. A fine adult **Roseate Tern** graced the harbour with a **Common Tern** early on the day we set off for Porto Santo. Santa Catarina park pond inland from the harbour held a (presumably captive?) Mute Swan, plus more **Ring-necked Parakeets**.

c) **Monte** – reached by a pleasant cable car ride from the east end of the harbour. We heard more **Ring-necked Parakeets** as we travelled over Funchal and glided close to a couple of **Kestrels**, whilst **Chaffinches** were common at Monte (apparently so are Madeiran Firecrests although we didn't see/hear them here). The forested gully between Monte and the Botanic Garden is an easy place to see **Trocaz Pigeon**. We saw 7 in flight from the balcony of the cafe overlooking this and 3 more from the cable car to the Botanic Gardens – all at midday / the afternoon so no need for early starts to see these! We saw the usual common birds at the Botanic Gardens plus some very confiding Perez's Frogs.

d) **Dolphin-watching trip** – we took a 3 hour catamaran trip to see cetaceans and seabirds out of Funchal. These boats mostly head straight out for the dolphins and then head west ca 4 miles off shore for Cabo Girao before returning east closer to the coast. We had good views of large pods of Common Dolphins as well as large numbers of **Cory's Shearwaters** and several very close groups of **Macaronesian Shearwaters** (although no-one else on the boat seemed interested in these!). The closer run back along the coast produced large numbers of **Yellow-legged Gulls**, a **1w Great Black-backed Gull** and a **Common Tern**.

e) **Porto Santo** – if you have time, I would thoroughly recommend this trip. The ferry leaves at 8 am from Funchal Harbour most days returning from Porto Santo at 18.00hrs and takes 2.5 hours. The crossings produced very large numbers of **Cory's Shearwaters** – especially just off Ponta de Sao Lourenco, plus a handful of **Macaronesian Shearwaters**. Porto Santo is quite unlike Madeira being flatter, drier and less populated. We took a taxi to Ponta where Janet went horse-riding and I birded the road up to the Golf Course. Common birds here included **Spanish Sparrow, Hoopoe, Spectacled Warbler, Collared Dove** (breeding) and **Red-legged Partridge**, plus **Plain Swift, Berthelot's Pipit, Goldfinch, Blackcap, Blackbird, Kestrel, Buzzard** and **Canary**. I found a singing **Chiffchaff** in the trees by the riding stables plus a few **Pallid Swifts** in with the hordes of **Plain Swifts** and had 5 **Rock Sparrows** on the rocky shoulder of the hill. The lakes and green lawns of the Golf Club are an obvious magnet for birds. In amongst the washing **Yellow-legged Gulls** were a couple of **Black-headed Gulls** plus **40 Coot** and **4 Moorhens**. A roosting gaggle of birds on the far side of the lake held **5 Black-tailed Godwits, a Ruff, 10 Mallard** (breed here) and a smaller sleeping duck which proved to be a drake **Blue-winged Teal!** After lunch we took a taxi to the famous pool at Tanque for more **Coots, Moorhens, Mallards**, an aggressive **Mute Swan**, a **Little Egret, Grey Heron** and **2 Black-headed Gulls**, plus a fine assortment of waders which included **2 Green Sandpipers, a Common Sandpiper, 5 Snipe, a Ruff** and **2 Black-tailed Godwits**. There were also more **Hoopoes, Spanish Sparrows** and **Collared Doves** here and on the walk back to the Vila Baleira, plus more **Moorhens** and Perez's Frogs in the stream valley.



Blue-winged Teal at the Golf Club on Porto Santo - apparently just the 3rd record for Madeira

3) East of the island

a) **Madeira Airport:**

Whilst waiting for our hire car to be ready, we picked up a **Whimbrel** and 2 **Turnstones** flying along the coast plus **Yellow-legged Gulls**, **Cory's Shearwaters** (easily seen from inside the terminal building!), **Canaries** and a group of **8 Common Waxbills** in the fringing shrubbery – the latter our only ones of the trip.

b) **Ponta de Sao Lourenco** – This is a popular spot for a walk and we quickly left the busy trail by heading west down an old track at the first sign-post that wound to the north coast up a green and bird-filled valley. There were **Berthelot's Pipits** and **3 Rock Sparrows** next to the car park and a group of **6 Barn Swallows** flew through low, which we took to be a good sign. The grassy valley was alive with birds. There was a mixed flock of some **50 Rock Sparrows**, **40 Canaries** and **10 Linnets** feeding on wild oat seed-heads, plus some purer-looking **Rock Doves**, whilst overhead at least **30 Barn Swallows** fed around the hill-sides. Checking of these produced a lone **House Martin** followed by 2 **Sand Martins** and finally a **Red-rumped Swallow** – all scarce migrants on the island. **Kestrel**, **Buzzard** and **Blackbird** (singing from inside a small cave) rounded off the bird list here.

c) **Machico** – we visited this famous site at midday with a lone **Turnstone** on the front and a **Moorhen** plus **Grey Wagtails** in the stream-bed the modest highlights, although a flock of 12 **Grey Herons** that flew east across the bay with **Cory's Shearwaters** nearby was less expected.

Species list We saw 60 bird species, 2 cetaceans, 2 reptiles, 1 frog, 11 butterflies and 3 dragonflies.

A) Birds

Fea's/Zino's Petrel *Pterodroma feae/Madeira* One west off Porto Moniz.

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea borealis* Regularly seen in numbers (hundreds) off most coasts, especially in the morning and late afternoon and from boat trips.

Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* A handful seen off Porto Moniz.

Macaronesian Shearwater *Puffinus baroli* Small numbers seen on sea-watches at Porto Moniz, Funchal and from boat trips.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* Up to 2 in the Funchal Harbour area and 1 at Tanque.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* 2 seen passing off Funchal, 1 at Tanque and 12 headed east off Machico.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Only seen on Porto Santo (where they breed): 10 at the Golf Course and 8 at Tanque.

Blue-winged Teal *Anas discors* A fine drake at Porto Santo Golf Club (3rd for Madeira).

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* Up to 2 in the Funchal Harbour area and 1 at Tanque.

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus granti* Seen near-daily around Serra de Agua and also 1 near Cabo Girao.

Buzzard *Buteo buteo* Pairs regularly seen at most sites around island and Porto Santo.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus canariensis* Widespread and common – seen daily in suitable habitat including Funchal and Porto Santo.

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa* Seen/heard at Ponta de Pargo, Paul de Serra and Porto Santo.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* Good numbers at Lugar de Baixo and on Porto Santo (where it breeds), 1 at Machico.

Coot *Fulica atra* Good numbers at Lugar de Baixo and on Porto Santo where it breeds.

Ruff *Philonahcus pugnax* 1 at Porto Santo Golf Club and 1 at Tanque.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* At least 5 at Tanque.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* 5 at Porto Santo Golf Club and 2 at Tanque.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* 1 near Maderia airport, 2 at Sao Vicente.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* 2 at Tanque.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* 1 at Tanque.

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* 2 near Madeira Airport, 4 at Lugar de Baixo, 2 at Sao Vicente, up to 5 daily at Funchal Harbour area, 1 at Machico.

Mediterranean Gull *Larus melanocephalus* A 1w bird in Funchal Harbour.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* Up to 30 daily in the Funchal Harbour area, 2 at Porto Santo Golf Club and 2 at Tanque.

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis* Up to three 1w birds in the Funchal Harbour area.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* At least 4 imms in the Funchal Harbour area.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus (michahellis) atlantis* Widespread and common along all coasts, on ferry crossings and on dolphin-watching trip. 1200+ at Funchal Harbour, 80 at Lugar de Baixo, 30 at Porto Moniz.

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* 1-2 1w birds in the Funchal Harbour area.

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus* 1w bird off Funchal Harbour.

Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvichensis* 2 on 2 dates off Funchal Harbour.

Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* Adult in Funchal Harbour.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* 1 in Funchal Harbour and 1 west of Ponta da Cruz.

Trocaz Pigeon *Columba trocaz* Seen daily in fair numbers in the Serra de Agua / Boca da Encumeada area, also at Sao Vicente and at Monte / Botanic Gardens. Shy but seen at all times of day and often perched conspicuously in the open. Often seen on low shrubby habitat on cliffs/ steep slopes.

Rock Dove *Columba livia* Feral birds common in and around towns/villages, wilder-looking birds on sea-cliffs and other more remote areas but true status unclear.

Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* Common in settled areas on Porto Santo where it breeds.

Ring-necked Parakeet *Psittacula krameri* Seen / heard daily in groups of up to 4 in central Funchal.

Barn Owl *Tyto alba* 1 pair regularly heard and seen at Pousada dos Vinhaticos.

Plain Swift *Apus unicolor* Regular in flocks of up to 30 above Serra de Agua and central Funchal, larger numbers near Ponta on Porto Santo.

Pallid Swift *Apus pallidus* at least 3 with Plain Swifts at Ponta, Porto Santo.

Hoopoe *Upupa epops* Common at Ponta and Tanque on Porto Santo.

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* 2 with Barn Swallows at Ponta de Sao Lourenco.

House Martin *Riparia urbicum* 1 with Barn Swallows at Ponta de Sao Lourenco.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* 1 at Ponta de Pargo, at least 30 at Ponta de Sao Lourenco.

Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica* 1 with Barn Swallows at Ponta de Sao Lourenco.

Berthelot's Pipit *Anthus berthelotii* Local on Madeira – seen at Ponta de Pargo, Paul de Serra and Ponta de Sao Lourenco. More widespread on Porto Santo.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea canariensis* Common in lowlands of Madeira with concentrations at river-mouths such as Sao Vicente.

Robin *Erithacus rubecula rubecula* Commonly heard singing from most wooded habitats including Eucalyptus plantations, gardens, laurel forest, chestnut forest and broom.

Blackbird *Turdus merula cabreræ* Very common and widespread in all wooded habitats including Porto Santo.

Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata orbitalis* Only seen at Ponta de Pargo and Ponta de Sao Lourenco on Madeira. More widespread on Porto Santo

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla heineken* Widespread and common - heard/seen daily at most sites visited including Porto Santo.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* 1 singing at Ponta, Porto Santo.

Madeiran Firecrest *Regulus madeirensis* Heard /seen daily in good numbers in the Boca da Encumeada area but also near sea-level at Sao Vicente and Seixal.

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* Common in settled areas on Porto Santo.

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia madeirensis* 1 at Ponta de Pargo, 6 near Ponta on Porto Santo and 50+ at Ponta de Sao Lourenco.

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild* 8 in the shrubberies of Madeira Airport.

Canary *Serinus canaria* Numerous in all habitats from the mountains to the coast and on Porto Santo.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* Numerous in more open habitats from the mountains to the coast and on Porto Santo.

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina guentheri* Very local: 5 at Ponta de Pargo, 10 at Ponta de Sao Lourenco, not seen on Porto Santo.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs maderensis* This distinctive race was common in all wooded areas in the hills of Madeira.

B) Cetaceans

Short-finned Pilot Whale *Globicephala macrorhynchus* several seen off Funchal on calm days.

Common Dolphin *Delphinus delphis* Commonly seen in large groups feeding off Funchal and from the dolphin-watching boat.

C) Reptiles and Amphibians

Madeiran Wall Lizard *Teira dugesii* Widespread and numerous – seen at most sites including Porto Santo

Canary Lizard *Galiotia gallotia* Examples of this introduced species were seen in central Funchal.

Marsh Frog *Rana perezi* Heard and seen in many wet places – especially at Funchal Botanic Gardens, on Porto Santo and at Machico.

D) Butterflies

Small White *Artogeia rapae* Common and widespread in agricultural and open areas.

Clouded Yellow *Colias croceus* Common in more open areas and on Porto Santo.

Small Copper *Lycaena phlaeas phlaeoides* Regular in small numbers in the Serra de Agua / Boca da Encumeada area.

Long-tailed Blue *Lampides boeticus* Widespread in lowland areas.

Red Admiral *Vanessa atalanta* Small numbers seen at lowland and mountain sites.

Indian Red Admiral *Vanessa indica vulcania* Odd individuals seen near Boca da Encumeada and at the edge of the Botanic gardens.

Painted Lady *Cynthia cardui* Common on Porto Santo and a few at Ponta de Sao Lourenco.

Monarch *Danaus plexippus* Odd ones seen around Funchal, Lugar de Baixo, Porto Santo and Ponta de Sao Lourenco.

Madeiran Grayling *Hipparchia maderensis* Fast-flying dark butterflies at Paul de Serra were thought to be this species.

Speckled Wood *Parage a. aegeria* Common in lightly wooded habitats.

Madeiran Speckled Wood *Parage xiphia* Restricted to more heavily wooded habitats.

E) Dragonflies

Emperor Dragonfly *Anax imperator* 1 at Tanque.

Vagrant Emperor *Anax ephipigger* 1 in Funchal and 2 at Ponta de Sao Lourenco.

Red-veined Darter *Sympetrum fonscolombei* Seen near streams in the hills and also at the Botanic Gardens and near Funchal Harbour.