

MADEIRA 4 – 11 March 2008

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General

We spent our winter holiday 2008 at Madeira with the aim of combining bird-watching with walks in nice surroundings and good food in the evenings. Having previously visited Tenerife and Fuerteventura, we hoped to supplement our list of Macaronesian endemics with Trocaz Pigeon and Madeira Firecrest and also expected there would be a chance of finding some displaced migrants. Seawatching was not a main priority, and even the shortest offshore trips were out of question as the wind during most of our stay made such ventures too much of a challenge to Astrid's seasickness.

Accommodation, car rental etc

We wanted to avoid busy Funchal and chose a small hotel at Caniço de Baixo, approximately 1.5 km E of Ponta do Garajau. The 'Inn & Art Gallery' hotel is located on a sea cliff some 50-70 m above sea level and has a terrace facing the sea, providing good opportunities of seawatching. On several days we spent the last hour of daylight on this terrace. The hotel has only 10 rooms and has a good restaurant, which also offers some local specialities (try the 'espada' fish with banana, accompanied by a premium vinho verde).

We rented a car for the entire stay through Bravacar (Holiday Autos). The car (a Renault Modus with just adequate power) was cheapish (153 EUR with free km and full insurance) but far from impeccable – windscreen broken, one tyre lost pressure etc. Distances are generally short and you probably have to fill the tank only once or twice during a one week stay, but be aware that there are not many gas stations on the island and none in the mountains.

Weather

On the south coast the weather was rather sunny and warm (up to 20-23°C) most of the time with very little, if any, rain. It was generally more cloudy on the north coast, and in the mountains we had some rain on two days and temperatures between 7 and 14°C. Strong easterly winds on most days were quite annoying but brought a good selection of migrants to Ponta de São Lourenço (see below).

Site information and maps

The trip was arranged at short notice, so pre-trip information was limited to what could be found on the internet. However, Niklas Holmström's excellent website (<http://madeira.seawatching.net/>) did indeed provide all that we needed for planning a one week birding holiday. The good descriptions of all major sites and the trip reports available at the website were a great source of inspiration. On the last day of our stay, we found out that there exists a book on IBAs in the Madeiran archipelago. We just had a brief look at it, but the book seems to include maps of all the major sites and might well be worth purchasing.

We brought the Kümmerley & Frey 1:50,000 map, which was very good for planning the walks but less useful for driving because major and minor roads were not well separated. The 1:137,000 map provided by our flight agency (TUI) at Funchal airport was in fact much better in this respect.

Overall impression

The overall impression was somewhat mixed. The scenery is really beautiful and birding is nice. Many birds, including Berthelot's Pipits and Madeiran Firecrests, were surprisingly tame – even the Rock Sparrows

allowed us to approach within 10-15 m. However, this is not the place if you want your birds and landscapes in quiet and peaceful surroundings... There are people almost everywhere; Madeira has 340 inhabitants per km² PLUS the tourists! Especially at the most popular levadas (e.g. at Ribeiro Frio and Rabaçal) as well as on the path at the Ponta de São Lourenço peninsula this was a real nuisance – at the latter place we estimated a density of about 200 persons per km track (must be even worse in high season). Whenever you visit one of the more popular sites, try to be there as early in the day as possible.

Itinerary and notes on sites and species

Tue 4/3: Arrival in late afternoon, too late for any birding.

Wed 5/3: We drove up into the mountains in the morning and found Ribeiro Frio where we parked in the village and walked up the road to reach the path to the Balcões viewpoint. One of the first birds seen was a **Trocaz Pigeon** flying along the road, and 100 m up the path the **Madeira Firecrest** was ticked off as well. Mission completed in 20 minutes! On the way back from the viewpoint it was possible to take a shortcut down to the village where we were greeted by singing **Canaries** and a pair of **Grey Wagtail**. We continued by car down the north slope, easily found the Fajã de Nogueira road and had a nice, undisturbed two hour walk there. Major sightings were a total of 22 **Trocaz Pigeons**, two groups of **Plain Swift** and a **Sparrowhawk**. From there we went down to Funchal and had a short walk at the harbour in late afternoon with 15 **Turnstone** and a **Common Sandpiper** along the sea promenade as the highlights.

Thu 6/3: First goal of the day was the lagoon at Lugar de Baixo, which was easily found following the description at the website. The small size of the lagoon made the 27x scope a bit overkill but allowed us to check that the female **Scaup** and the **7 wader species** present (see species list) were indeed European and not their American siblings. A small group of **Common Waxbill** was heard and seen in the reeds. We continued west to Ponta do Pargo. No birds in the lighthouse garden (it is probably better in autumn), but **Berthelot's Pipit**, **Spectacled Warbler** and a large group of **Canaries** were found in the surroundings. On the way back we wanted to visit one of the villages along the south coast and called in at Jardim do Mar. Not the best choice as there was no harbour, but a pair of apparently 'pure' **Rock Doves** were seen high on the cliffs above the village. In the evening, seawatching from the terrace produced a few **Cory's Shearwater** and a **Gannet**.

Fri 7/3: We once again headed west, reaching Rabaçal in mid-morning. Notable sightings on the walk to the Risco waterfall were 5 **Trocaz Pigeons** and c. 15 **Madeira Firecrests**. After lunch we continued on to Porto Moniz and spent one hour seawatching from the westernmost part of the shore parade where a wall offered some shelter from the wind. A **Gannet** was heading E, small groups of **Cory's Shearwater** moved W and a **Great Skua** made its way low above the sea. A visit to the harbour revealed a few **Turnstone** and a **Meadow Pipit**. From Porto Moniz we headed east along the north coast and made a brief stop at the river mouth at São Vicente where a **Common Sandpiper** was found along the river and 2 **Whimbrel** were feeding on a lawn. Back at the hotel, a few more **Cory's Shearwater** were seen and a group of medium-sized whales (probably **Long-finned Pilot Whale**) was slowly swimming E 1-2 km off the coast.

Sat 8/3: Less windy today, so we headed NE towards Ponta de São Lourenço and did the walk on the peninsula from the parking to the rangers' cottage and back. Numerous **Berthelot's Pipits** were seen along the path and c. 50 **Rock Sparrows** were feeding in the grassy area W of the ranger station. As expected, the strong easterly winds of the previous days had brought some migrants: groups of **Barn Swallow** and a few **House Martins** were seen, a **Redstart** and 3 **Black Redstarts** were found around the cottage and a few **Phylloscopus warblers** were skulking in the palm trees. We sat down to get better views of the warblers, also hoping that additional species would appear, but groups of people (including rather noisy ones) were constantly coming and going, effectively thwarting our attempt. On the walk back a male **Wheatear** appeared on a ridge and no less than 7 **Quails** were calling from the grasslands near the car park. Heading

back towards Caniço de Baixo, we called in at Canical where a few **Spanish Sparrows** were heard and seen along the promenade and 2 **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** were standing on the outer pier. An evening walk in the hotel surroundings revealed a large group of **Canaries** and c. 10 **Goldfinches**.

Sun 9/3: The clouds were hanging low but we anyway took to the mountains where we had planned a walk in the upper parts of the forest. A visibility below 100 m combined with a cold wind soon made us retreat to lower levels. The levada walk found on the map as an alternative proved rather uninspiring (starting at a huge pig farm and continuing through eucalyptus plantations), so even if a few **Madeira Firecrests** were present along the trail we turned around and headed north. Heavy rain and a chaotic parking situation at Ribeiro Frio caused us to continue downhill to the Fajã de Nogueira road, which once again proved a peaceful refuge. The walk up the valley was less rewarding than last time, with only 4 **Trocaz Pigeons** seen. Back at the car, we realised that one of the rear tyres demanded our attention, so the next hour was spent remedying the situation. After we had finally found a gas station at Porto da Cruz, we headed towards the south coast where the weather was now much better. An hour at the hotel terrace restored our spirits even if no shearwaters turned up.

Mon 10/3: The morning was spent in Funchal where a check of the gulls in the harbour revealed c. 15 **Black-headed Gulls**, a 1st winter **Ring-billed Gull** (feeding on an apple core) and a 1st winter **Common Gull**. We continued on to Lugar de Baixo to check if anything new had appeared. The birds were more or less the same as at our previous visit, the only newcomers being a **Snipe** and two newly hatched Muscovy ducklings.

Tue 11/3: Departure from the hotel 05:45, car delivery at the airport and take-off at 07:55.

Species list – birds

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea*

C. 5 W Caniço de Baixo 6/3 and 7/3; c. 15 W Porto Moniz 7/3.

Gannet *Morus bassanus*

1 ad. E Caniço de Baixo 6/3; 1 ad. E Porto Moniz 7/3.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Seen daily; 1-2 birds at Caniço de Baixo, Funchal harbour, Lugar de Baixo and a few other places.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

7 Ponta de São Lourenço (at marine fish farm) 8/3; 1 above Lugar de Baixo 10/3.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

1 'pure-looking' ♂ together with Muscovy Ducks *Cairina moschata* Lugar de Baixo 6/3.

Scaup *Aythya marila*

1 ♀ Lugar de Baixo 6/3 and 10/3. The bird (2nd record for Madeira) had been present since November 2007.

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

1 Fajã da Nogueira road 6/3.

Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Seen daily in small numbers (c. 5), both inland and along the coast.

Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*

Fairly common and seen daily, mainly along the coast.

Quail *Coturnix coturnix*

7 heard Ponta de São Lourenço (just beyond the car park) 8/3.

Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

3 Lugar de Baixo 6/3 and 10/3.

Coot *Fulica atra*

C. 5 Lugar de Baixo 6/3 and 10/3.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

1 Lugar de Baixo 6/3 and 10/3.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

1 Lugar de Baixo 6/3 and 10/3.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

1 Lugar de Baixo 6/3 and 10/3.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

3 Lugar de Baixo 6/3, and 2 on 10/3.

Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

1 Lugar de Baixo 10/3.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

2 near the river mouth, São Vicente 7/3.

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

1 Lugar de Baixo 6/3 and 10/3.

Common Sandpiper *Acitis hypoleucos*

Single birds seen at Funchal harbour (5/3 & 10/3), Lugar de Baixo (6/3 & 10/3) and São Vicente (7/3).

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

By far the most frequent wader. Seen at several places along the coast; e.g. 15 Funchal harbour 5/3, 35 Lugar de Baixo 6/3, 4 Porto Moniz harbour 7/3.

Great Skua *Stercorarius skua*

1 W Porto Moniz 7/3.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

2 Funchal harbour 5/3, and c. 15 on 10/3.

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*

1 1st winter Funchal harbour 10/3.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

1 1st winter Funchal harbour 10/3.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

2 ad. *graellsii* type Caniçal 8/3.

Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis*

Common along the coast with highest numbers (several hundred) at Funchal harbour; also seen inland.

Rock/Feral Dove *Columba livia*

Common almost everywhere; 2 apparently 'pure' Rock Doves seen at Jardim do Mar 6/3.

Trocaz Pigeon *Columba trocaz*

Seen (singly or in small groups) at every visit to laurisilva areas: 3 Ribeiro Frio and 22 Fajã da Nogueira road 6/3; 5 Rabaçal 7/3; 4 Fajã da Nogueira road 9/3.

Plain Swift *Apus unicolor*

C. 20 Fajã da Nogueira road 6/3 and 5 on 9/3; 1 Caniço de Baixo 9/3. Unidentified swifts seen almost every day, mainly along the coast.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*

2 Ponta do Pargo 6/3; c. 25 Ponta de São Lourenço 8/3.

House Martin *Delichon urbica*

3 Ponta de São Lourenço 8/3.

Berthelot's Pipit *Anthus berthelotii*

5 Ponta do Pargo 6/3; 3 Paúl da Serra (around restaurant) 7/3; c. 40 Ponta de São Lourenço 8/3.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*

1 Porto Moniz harbour 7/3.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Seen daily in small numbers (< 5).

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Common in forest areas; also heard in gardens.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

3 at the ranger station, Ponta de São Lourenço 8/3.

Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*

1 ♂ at the ranger station, Ponta de São Lourenço 8/3.

Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

1 ♂ Ponta de São Lourenço 8/3.

Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Common in forest areas and in gardens.

Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata*

2 Ponta do Pargo 6/3.

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Common in forest areas and in gardens.

Phylloscopus sp.

C. 4, at least 1 of which probably Chiffchaff *P. collybita*, at the ranger station, Ponta de São Lourenço 8/3.

Madeira Firecrest *Regulus madeirensis*

Common in forest areas, especially laurisilva; e.g. c. 25 Ribeiro Frio/Fajã da Nogueira road 6/3 and c. 15 Rabaçal 7/3.

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*

C. 5 Caniçal 8/3.

Rock Sparrow *Petronia petronia*

C. 50 Ponta de São Lourenço (about 100 m W of the ranger station) 8/3.

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*

6 Lugar de Baixo 6/3.

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

Common in forest areas.

Canary *Serinus canaria*

Common almost everywhere, especially in open cultivated areas with trees, villages, towns etc; much rarer in forest.

Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

2 Ponta do Pargo 6/3; 2 Ponta de São Lourenço 8/3; c. 10 in the hotel area, Caniço de Baixo 8/3.

Other wildlife

A small group (5-10) of whales, probably **Long-finned Pilot Whale** *Globicephala melas*, was seen off the coast at Caniço de Baixo in the evening of 7/3. The only other mammal recorded was a (very) dead rat *Rattus* sp. on the Fajã da Nogueira road 9/3.

Madeiran Wall Lizards *Podarcis dugesii* were common at many sites, e.g. at Ponta de São Lourenço where they invariably approached us if we sat down and even licked at Astrid's finger. Never saw begging lizards before!

Butterflies were not studied in any detail. **Clouded Yellow** *Colias croceus* was recorded almost daily (common at Ponta do Pargo), and a **Monarch** *Danaus plexippus* was seen at Funchal harbour 10/3.