

## **Madeira 2007 May**

Beautiful scenery, quality birding

### **A Familiarisation Trip in Association with Madeira Wind Birds**

**Ashley Beolens & Zoe Halliday**

**21st – 28th May 2007**

Madeira is Portuguese for wood; it is an archipelago situated in the north Atlantic; originally known to the Romans as Purple Islands. It is the home of a fortified wine and, contrary to popular belief, nothing whatsoever to do with the eponymous cake!

Our arrival on our Air Portugal flight, 4 hours from Gatwick, marked the beginning of a mixed week of relaxation and bird watching. Staying in some of the island's top hotels, our trip was set to be an experience neither of us quite expected.

They say you can experience four seasons in one day on Madeira and they are not wrong, micro climates seem to exist in each valley, as an example – we had pouring rain when entering a tunnel followed by blistering sunshine when exiting. The weather does determine the activities for the day unfortunately, as heavy rain can cause rockslides in the mountains, and fog can close the passes and harbour. That said it never seems too cold.

### **The Hotels**

#### **Casa Velha do Palheiro**

**21st – 23rd May**

We arrived at the 5\* Casa Velha do Palheiro – a 19th century hunting lodge now converted into a stunning hotel comprised of 37 luxurious rooms – late in the evening and were taken directly to our junior suite where we experienced our first taste of how opulent our destination was.

Set high in the mountains overlooking Funchal, with the world famous Palheiro Gardens adjoining one side and surrounded by the exclusive private golf course, the location is both idyllic and functional for a birdwatcher. A morning stroll around the gardens in the rain provided views over Funchal and many of the endemic species and sub-species of birds native to Madeira (more of which later), as well as a host of exotic plants from the world over.

The hotel is very much 'old money' and proved quite difficult for the hoi polloi such as ourselves to feel truly relaxed in, whilst dressing for dinner was not really an issue we did feel slightly conspicuous mixing with the gentility. However, the friendly staff helped us feel very welcome and were subtle yet efficient.

#### **Quinta do Furao**

**23rd – 26th May**

Quinta do Furo is a 4\* resort that is similar to most hotels around the world and if truth be told is not really deserving of the 4\* status it has. It is clean, the staff are friendly but loud and indiscreet, the rooms are average size, but do boast wonderful views of both the mountains and cliffs of the island. And the food is... well the food was poor to be honest, over-seasoned, undercooked and not well presented. The staff in the restaurant, however, were wonderful!

The one saving grace this hotel has for birders is that being based on the Northern cliffs of Madeira it is home to Cory's shearwaters, which can be heard coming in to roost just after dark. The place is also fortunate to be surrounded by vineyards teeming with life.

### **Choupana Hills, spa 26th – 28th May**

What can I say about this place? It is reportedly one of the top Spas in the world, and it really lives up to expectations. The oriental styled chalets are comfortable, large, private, and luxurious without being over the top. Set high in the mountains above Funchal the view from each suite is exquisite, especially when the town is lit up at night. The air is fresh and scented with eucalyptus and honeysuckle, and you wake to the sounds of the birds singing all around you.

The Staff are incredibly friendly whilst being very unobtrusive, and the restaurant is without doubt the best in Madeira, having not one but two world class French chefs.

In addition to the incredible staff, wonderful food and luxuriant accommodation, the spa is also surrounded by forest with wonderful, if hair-raising, walks along the 'lavadas', passed (and in some cases over) cascading waterfalls, and stunning views.

### **The Birding**

#### **22nd May**

##### **Palheiro Gardens and Golf course**

On the morning of the 21st we decided to risk the rain, grab an umbrella from reception and head into the gardens, and we were not disappointed. Not only are the Gardens full of exotic plants from South America to New Zealand but also boasts an abundance of the Endemic Madeira Firecrest, and archipelago sub-species of Blackbird, Chaffinch and Buzzard. When I say abundance there must have been 50+ Blackbirds around the gardens, and almost every small bird was a Firecrest. We were lucky enough to also see Blackcap, although not the melanistic sub-species that are known on the islands. The Golf course was home to Goldfinch and Greenfinch, and, again fortunately for us, a small flock of Canary, and with feral pigeons and Plain Swift zooming around the sky, we were steaming along in our quest for Madeira birds. The Afternoon was spent wandering around Funchal, exploring this sprawling city.

#### **23rd May**

##### **Palheiro Gardens**

Another morning searching the gardens, this time in the sunshine, gave us exquisite views of the stunning Madeira Firecrest, and allowed me the opportunity to get some

fantastic photos of this energetic sprite. We also had our first meeting with the island's only lizard *Lacerta Dugesii* the Madeira Wall Lizard, whose colour ranges from a striped brown in the youngsters to a deep green/blue in full adults, and contrary to its name was first seen by us on a tree! We also had a brief view of the Three-toed or Trocaz Pigeon – well the underside of one sat in the top of a tree! The other new trip bird was a distant circling Sparrowhawk. As well as some Clouded Yellow butterflies.

### **Half day tour [14:30 pickup]**

*Guides – Catarina Fagundes & Hugo Romano*

#### **Santo da Serra**

After checking the local park and seeing one or two more Chaffinches, Goldfinches and Greenfinches as well as the now ever-present huge Blackbird population, and hearing a few more Firecrest, we were heading out of the park when a large raptor soared over, at first glance it was obvious that we were seeing a Black Kite and upon checking closer this was in fact the case. This is a very uncommon species in Madeira. We chased the bird as it flew over the golf course (home of the Madeira open) before losing sight of it.

#### **Machico**

A brief stop in this pretty town produced, Atlantic Yellow-legged Gulls, Grey Wagtail (another Madeira sub-species), Turnstone, migrant Redshank and Greenshank (by no means common on the island), and distant and short views of the stunning Common Waxbills (now resident on the islands having established a population after escaping incarceration). As well as a small history lesson in the flood that hit the town in November 1956, they seem to ignore this and are rapidly building below the flood level!

#### **Canical**

As well as the obvious Common Buzzard, the Black kite seen earlier by the golf course some miles away, had made the trip here quicker than we had, and was seen circling low around the scrubby hills.

#### **Sao Lorenzo**

Moving on to the nature reserve we quickly located, Canary by the road side and a number of Berthelot's pipits in the scrubland (at least one wearing a yellow ring) as well as a Painted Lady butterfly. We also had distant Common Tern, Atlantic Yellow-legged gull and Feral/Rock Dove.

#### **Canical**

Travelling around to the north side of this area we had stunning views along the northern coast of Madeira, as well as some good views of Sand Martin, Plain Swift and Barn Swallow and super views of another Micronesian endemic sub-species in the form of a Kestrel, as well as more views of Buzzards and the Black Kite.

### **24th May**

#### **Full day tour [09:30 pickup]**

*Guides – Catarina Fagundes & Hugo Romano*

#### **Ponta do sol**

Our day started at one of the few areas of standing fresh water, where the first interesting sighting was of a Monarch butterfly, closely followed by a breeding pair of Moorhens and their chicks (of various sizes) and the island's resident Coots. A pair of recently arrived Dunlin were precariously balanced on the rocks separating the sea from the pond, and 2 Waxbills flew calling overhead. Apart from the Muscovy Ducks that were an attraction for the local kids, not much else was in the area, apart from Zino's Palace; the former home of the man responsible for the protection of the petrel named after him.

### **Ponta do Pargo**

What at first sight appears to be a desolate range of grassland is in fact a haven for wildlife; it is such a shame that there are plans to create a golf course (designed by Nick Faldo) on the area. Our first sighting may turn out to be a first for Madeira! We spotted two small falcons perched on the overhead wires and closer inspection proved them to be a pair of Red-footed Falcons, newly arrived on the recent strong winds. And as well as the now usual Kestrels and Buzzards a single Peregrine Falcon circled high into the thermals. It really was becoming a Raptor haven.

The only passerines in the area (presumably due to all the raptors) were a couple of Berthelot's Pipits and one lone young Spectacled Warbler. Continuing the drive around the point another raptor (scarce to the island) was seen gliding silently over the road in the form of a male Marsh Harrier.

### **Ribeira da Janela**

A brief stop into the area saw many Mallards and Muscovy Ducks as well as a transatlantic vagrant in the form of a Green-winged Teal. Kestrel and many Plain Swift were the only other birds present. Stunning views of the waves crashing on the beach are the real experience here 'though and well worth the trip!

### **Ribeiro Frio**

The last stop on our tour was an area of laurel forest and we had sightings of many Trocaz Pigeon, unfortunately only in flight, but still great to see.

## **26th May**

### **Lavada walking**

Lavadas are the concrete/stone water courses that run through the mountains, they are about a metre across but only about a 3rd is walkable. After an early drop off [no pun intended] due to bad weather in the mountains, we decided on a walk along the Lavada that runs through the resort spa, and see what it was all about!

We started out from the Choupana Hills Spa and headed west along a very newly restored lavada, and were stunned by the amazing views we were blessed with from the outset; we were surrounded by Madeira Firecrests and Chaffinches for most of the walk.

As we made our way along the winding path our breaths were literally taken away as we passed over a waterfall that must have been a 500+ metre drop straight down,

while it was hard to cross the narrow pass above the flowing torrent, the view was stunning!

It turns out that this lavada leads to Monte, which was basically a low tunnel that the water course takes through the mountainside. Without a torch we decided not to take this and instead headed down the mountain – it was at this point we realised how high we had been, as we walked down past the cable car station at 550 metres. This was a mistake as our knees can tell you; the walk down consists of a winding set of precarious stairs, to say we were tired by the end would be an under statement. We also realised we had to walk back up through the hills to our resort! Fortunately, a quarter of the way up, the free shuttle bus picked us up. I doubt we would have made it otherwise!

## **27th May**

### **Boat trip**

*Guide Catarina Fagundes*

It was a slow start to the sea trip, with only the odd Common Tern to talk about, until suddenly we were in the midst of a flock of 30+ Cory's Shearwater, with one lone Manx Shearwater sharing their company.

A call over the radio alerted the crew to a school of dolphins nearby, we headed towards them seeing 2 Loggerhead Turtles on the way before being blessed with close ups of a small party of Bottle-nosed Dolphins playing in the ship's lea, and more Cory's Shearwaters.

The rest of the trip didn't produce many other birds bar one lone Bulwer's Petrel distantly shearing through the waves, and a few Atlantic Yellow-legged Gulls.

## **Pico do Areeiro**

*Night trip guide Hugo Romano*

Sadly, our last night but after a sumptuous meal in the hotel, we were picked up by Hugo for the trip to the 3rd highest peak in Madeira, in search of the incredibly rare Zino's Petrel.

Half way to our destination we passed one of the most breathtaking and awe-inspiring views I have been fortunate enough to behold, the sun was setting in the distance beyond the mountains, which were enshrouded in fog.

Arriving at the mountain top, we were issued with head torches and set out for what looked like a treacherous walk into the dark – thousands of metres up, in the dark of the night (fortunately we had a strong moon and torches). The long walk out to a viewing platform was frightening as well as exciting.

After a short wait we heard the distant, but unmistakable, call of Zino's Petrel, and were soon privy to stunning close views of the birds' high-speed flights around the nest sites, calling all the while. This was an experience that will live with me throughout my years.

## Final Bird List

In systematic order:

Zino's Petrel *Pterodroma madeira* R5  
Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii* S3  
Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea borealis* R2  
Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* P\*  
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* P5  
Black Kite *Milvus migrans* P5  
Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* A  
Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus granti* R5  
Buzzard *Buteo buteo harterti* R4  
Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus canariensis* R3  
Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* A  
Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* P5/R5  
Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* P5/R5  
Dunlin *Calidris alpina* P4  
Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* P5  
Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* P5  
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* P4/W5  
Yellow-legged Gull *Larus michahellis atlantis* R2  
Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* R3/S3  
Rock Dove *Columba livia* R3  
Feral Dove *Columba livia* (domestic) R3  
Trocaz Pigeon *Columba trocaz* R4  
Plain Swift *Apus unicolor* S/R3  
Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* P5  
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* P5  
House Martin *Delichon urbica* P5  
Berthelot's Pipit *Anthus berthelotii madeirensis* R4  
Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea schmitzi* R3  
Robin *Erithacus rubecula* R3/W3  
Blackbird *Turdus merula cabrerai* R3  
Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata bella* R5  
Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla heineken* R2  
Madeira Firecrest *Regulus madeirensis* R3  
Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs maderensis* R3  
Canary *Serinus canaria* R2  
European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* A/P5  
Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis parva* R4

Birds not on the checklist we were given

Green-winged teal *Anas crecca carolinensis*  
Red-footed falcon *Falco vespertinus*

Ashley Beolens – June 2007