

AZORES TOUR REPORT 2024

31 May - 4 June 2024

by Diedert Koppenol

Our second-ever tour to the Azores was another great visit to this Portuguese archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean. This tour is focused on the now three endemic breeding birds of the amazing islands, which is linked nicely with our Madeira tour.

We had great success finding the endemics: the intriguing Azores Bullfinch, the recently split Azores Chaffinch and the cryptic Monteiro's Storm Petrel. Furthermore, we enjoyed views of Sooty Tern, showy Common Quails, a Barolo Shearwater, Roseate Terns in the colony and Atlantic Canaries were everywhere.

The tour began on São Miguel, where we all met up at Ponta Delgado Airport in the afternoon. After picking up the minivan, we went to the hotel to check in and then we were off to the harbour of Caloura. Here we had our first Yellow-legged Gulls of the *atlantis* race. We walked down the pier and picked up on a Common Tern colony and two Ruddy Turnstones were present in the harbour. Far out, scopes allowed to pick up a few Cory's Shearwaters chasing a fishing boat. Not much else was about so we decided to head inland and see if we could find some of the land birds. However, as soon as we turned in for our destination, the road turned out to be a bit unsuitable for minivans, to put it mildly. The sky also burst and we decided to head back to the hotel to enjoy a nice dinner.

Out and about early next morning, we went on the hunt for our main quarry: the endemic Azores Bullfinch. The Azores Bullfinch can only be found at the eastern parts of the island of São Miguel, currently. The population is slowly increasing, but it is still vulnerable to natural disaster and habitat destruction. As our hotel is on the other side of the island, we had a fair way to drive, if you can describe it like that. Our first stop was at Lagoa das Furnas where a Pied-billed Grebe has been present for a long time. Sadly, it wasn't showing when we were there, but we did enjoy great views of our first Azorean landbirds, including the endemic Azores Chaffinch, along with Atlantic Canary, European Robin and Common Blackbird. Other birds on the lake were Common Tern, Eurasian Coots and some birds that were most akin to Mallard, but all of very dubious origin. Common Starlings were flying on and off with food for their youngsters and Common Wood Pigeons enjoyed the forests around the lakes. The northern side of the lake features some interesting smoking boilers, called fumolas, emitting strong-smelling sulphur, coming from the vapours and gases emitted by the volcano underneath!

After this, we set out further east towards to see the Priolo, as the bird is locally known. Our first stop resulted in a short scope view, so we wanted more, of course! Goldcrests, Azores Chaffinches, European Robins and Common Blackbirds did show well here.

Sadly, one of the roads that is good for the bullfinch was closed, so we had to walk a fair bit before we found two Azores Bullfinches close to the road. However, these also did not show for very long,

as they are quite shy birds, and we decided to go for lunch before trying another site. After a very nice local lunch, we made our way to the visitor's centre for people interested in the Priolo. The grounds of the centre are a good place to see the bullfinch, but it is usually covered in clouds or rain. We were lucky to be visiting on a clear, beautiful afternoon, but no Priolo's showed in this area. Since the cloud coverage was so low, we could drive up all the way towards a high viewpoint and on our way down from the viewpoint we finally found the flock of Azores Bullfinches we were looking for! At least five individuals showed quite well and allowed for a nice photography session. Happy days for all! Several Grey Wagtails were fluttering about here high up as well. During our visit of this area, we saw loads of Azores Chaffinches, Atlantic Canaries, Common Blackbirds, Common Starlings, European Goldfinches, House Sparrows and Eurasian Blackcaps, along with Common Wood Pigeons flying everywhere and a few Common Buzzards. Eurasian Collared Doves are common throughout the islands as well, following introduction to the island. After our successful afternoon here, we drove back via the northern side of the island, to enjoy the scenery and went via Lagoa das Furnas to have a second try for the Pied-billed Grebe. It still did not want to play ball and thus we went on without this Nearctic vagrant on our list. Another great dinner was waiting for us and we went to bed early, as we had to leave on a morning flight to Graciosa the following day!

Despite an early alarm clock and heavy rain, we left São Miguel in good spirits. After a flight of about an hour to the small island Graciosa, in our twin-propeller engine plane, and a long wait at the airport for the minivan, we set off to the hotel. Being one of the least touristic islands of the Azores archipelago, everything here goes at its own pace. Which is usually not superfast. However, it makes for a very nice and quiet island!

Some had made good use of the wait as they already enjoyed views of the Azorean race *conturbans* of Common Quail. After checking in, we went out to enjoy a nice local lunch at the only restaurant, out of five on the entire island, that is open on Sunday. After lunch, we had a bit of time to catch up on some lost sleep, while gearing up for our first pelagic this afternoon.

From Praia Harbour, we set off for open ocean. First, we took a short pause off the nearby islet 'Ilhéu De Praia', which holds a breeding colony of Roseate and Common Terns. We saw plenty of these but our target here was to see the Sooty Tern that has been present here for a while. Furthermore, the islet is the main breeding ground for Monteiro's Storm Petrels. We couldn't find the Sooty Tern here, so on we went, to deeper pastures!

Experience with storm petrels learns one that they can be quite rare / difficult to connect with, but not so for us with Monteiro's Storm Petrel! There was a rain front coming towards us, which might have helped push the birds towards the island, but after only a few minutes we set eyes on our first Monteiro's Storm Petrel! It turned out to be one of many, with at least twenty individuals seen by all. We even came across of a raft of about 7-8 individuals, something I had never seen of stormies before. Further out we went towards Bank of Fortune, where nutrient-rich cold water rises to the surface, and soon the captain called out 'whale!' A few blows were seen and after a short wait we lay eyes on a Bryde's Whale surfacing, but sadly it was to be the final oxygen intake before it went under again. Excitement followed shortly when we picked up a Manx / Barolo type shearwater. It landed on the water so we gave the boat a quick jolt and it allowed for views and a few photos before it flew off. Upon reviewing the photos later, during dry hours on land, we concluded it was a Barolo's Shearwater! After this shearwater, several rafts of Cory's and a few more Monteiro's later, we didn't find much else of interest. Also, rain had now really caught up with us and we decided to return to the harbour. Not before we had another check of Praia Islet to see if the Sooty Tern had returned home. We didn't have to wait for very long to pick up a nice

black tern flying through the colony! A nice way to end the day, along with a good dinner to round things off.

As we had no real land bird targets on Graciosa, we dedicated the early morning to an optional photography session of Common Quail, which is indeed very common on the island. Although the first few locations didn't give up their singing quails, the airport hosted a group of more cooperative individuals! After this, we went for breakfast, before heading out again to just explore the island. We found another place in the middle of the island with nice, showy Common Quails so we took some more time photographing them. After that, we went for scenic drive around the island, with several stops at viewpoints. From the coast we managed to also see the other central islands of Terceira, Pico, São Jorge and Faial but bird wise we had the standard Atlantic Canaries, European Goldfinches, Azores Chaffinches, Grey Wagtails, European Robins, Common Blackbirds, Common Starlings, Eurasian Blackcaps, Common Wood Pigeons and one or two sightings of Common Buzzard. That is, apart from the huge numbers of feral pigeons, introduced Eurasian Collared Doves and a new species for the trip: an introduced Red-legged Partridge. It was then time for lunch as we had another afternoon pelagic on the schedule.

We went to sea again, this time going further out to reach Fortuna Bank. we found hordes of Cory's Shearwaters and a handful of Monteiro's Storm Petrels, but nothing new for the list, sadly. On the way back, we spent some time around Praia Islet, and here, as well as getting some stunning views of Roseate Terns.

Our last day on the island went a bit different than planned. Supposed to be boarding our flight at 08:30, we found ourselves with a cancelled flight. Nothing to be done, so once we finally had our lunch vouchers and put ourselves on the waitlist for the next flight, we went out to explore the island a bit more. Our great friends from DivinGraciosa gave us some tips and they recommended a visit to the caldeira in the south. A very unique place, not only featuring the only tunnel of the island, but after passing this tunnel you soon feel like you are in a Jurassic-type world. Literally inside the old volcano, we found Europe's largest lava cave here too! We went to take a look inside the cave and saw the boiling water and mud inside, heated by the magma below. After this, we went for lunch with a view! Soon after lunch, a text came through as one of us had been accepted on the afternoon flight. We returned to the airport and luckily, by the end of the day, all were accepted on the afternoon flight to Terceira and we could end the tour with peace of mind.

Many thanks to our friends from DivinGraciosa for organising the great pelagics (the special treats from the island were much appreciated as well) and being very welcoming hosts to the island!

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g., it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

The species names and taxonomy used in the bird list follows Gill, F., Donsker, D., & Rasmussen, P. (Eds). **2024. IOC World Bird List (v14.1)** (this was the current version when the checklist for the tour report was created).

Where the subspecies seen is/are known, these are often given in parentheses at the end of the species comment.

BIRDS

Mallard (introduced) *Anas platyrhynchos*

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix conturbans*

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Rock Dove (introduced) (introduced) *Columba [livia] domestica*

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus azorica*

Eurasian Collared Dove (introduced) *Streptopelia decaocto*

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Sooty Tern *Onychoprion fuscatus*

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii*

Yellow-legged Gull (Azorean G) *Larus michahellis atlantis*

Monteiro's Storm Petrel ◊ *Hydrobates monteiroi*

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis*

Barolo Shearwater ◊ *Puffinus baroli*

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo rothschildi*

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla gularis*

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus azoricus*

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris granti*

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula azorensis*

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula rubecula*

House Sparrow (introduced) *Passer domesticus*

Common Waxbill (introduced) *Estrilda astrild*

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea patriciae*

Azores Chaffinch ◊ *Fringilla moreletti*

Azores Bullfinch ◊ *Pyrrhula murina*

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Atlantic Canary ◊ *Serinus canaria*

MAMMALS

Bryde's Whale *Balaenoptera brydei*

Azores Noctule *Nyctalus azoreum*

European Rabbit (introduced) *Oryctolagus cuniculus*