

CAPE VERDE ISLANDS TOUR REPORT 2024

30 April – 13 May 2024

by Mark Beaman

Our 2024 tour to the Cape Verde Islands ended up turning up a lot of good birds, but it was certainly 'interesting times' as the Chinese would put it, as the domestic airline went bust just before we arrived! Internal flights in the islands have always been problematic, with frequent late schedule changes and sometimes cancellations, but this year was certainly even more tricky than usual!

Everything went very smoothly on the main island of Santiago. Our group consisted of those staying on in the Cape Verde Islands after the epic Atlantic Odyssey and those flying out to the islands for the tour. We all met up at our pleasant waterfront hotel which served good food and had a pleasant bar area.

Our first few days in Santiago were mainly a mix of visiting the island's selection of small wetlands and water treatment plants and exploring the rugged highland interior, although we also penetrated into the arid eastern lowlands as well.

There is not much in the way of natural wetlands on the island and most of the freshwater lies behind dames in the arid valleys that wind down from the interior highlands, while there are also a few small saline lagoons and beaches that attract shorebirds and the like. The star bird of the interior barrages was the attractive endemic 'Bourne's' Heron, the form *bournei* usually being treated as a subspecies of the Purple Heron. On this tour, second in line were the vagrant Yellow-billed Egrets that we found at Barragem de Faveta on each visit, while other waterbirds at the barrages included Common Moorhen, Black-winged Stilt, Kentish Plover, Common Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, Black-crowned Night Heron, Little, Western Cattle and Great Egrets, and Grey Heron.

Regular stops at the coastal wetlands, the water treatment works at Tarrafal and the more productive shorelines turned up some of the same birds but also Grey (or Black-bellied), Common Ringed Plover, Eurasian Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling, Little Stint, Wood Sandpiper, White-winged Tern and even vagrant Lesser Yellowlegs and American Golden Plover. The Cape Verdes has an impressive list of New World vagrants. A pale morph Western Reef Heron was found while we were tracking down the Lesser Yellowlegs.

Most of the Cape Verde endemic landbirds were easy to find, with Iago (or Cape Verde) Sparrow and Cape Verde Swift even occurring inside the Praia city limits, while Cape Verde (Cane) Warblers were not hard to find in the better-vegetated valleys. The endemic *acteon* form of the Grey-headed Kingfisher was everywhere and 'Alexander's' Kestrel (race *alexandri*) was common. The uncommon Cape Verde Buzzard took more work, as our early observations were distant, but

eventually, we had great views. Rather easier to find were 'Cape Verde' Barn Owl (race *detorta*), which put on a good show for us at dusk, Cream-coloured Coursers of the endemic form *exsul* Black-crowned Sparrow-larks and Bar-tailed Larks of the endemic nominate forms and the endemic form *boavistae* of the Greater Hoopoe-Lark.

Other landbirds included the introduced Helmeted Guineafowl, Common Quail, Rock Dove, Eurasian Collared Dove (a recent colonist in the islands), our first Osprey, Brown-necked Raven, Eurasian Blackcap, Spectacled Warbler, Spanish Sparrow and the introduced Common Waxbill. 'Landbird' migrants are sparse in the Cape Verdes but we did find a few Barn Swallows, a Western House Martin, a Northern Wheatear and, much to our surprise, an Alpine Swift that passed over us several times while we were scanning for Cape Verde Buzzards.

Our time on Santiago was split into two by a side trip to the adjacent island of Fogo. Fogo consists of a huge and active volcano that rises to 2829m (9282ft) and we had time to take the surprisingly good road that winds up to the huge caldera, a breeding ground for Fea's (or Cape Verde) Petrel, a species that nests only in the Cape Verde Islands. Known locally as 'Gon-gon', the petrels nest on the precipitous cliffs that fringe the caldera, although it was well past their breeding period so we were advised it was pointless to stay until after dark to listen for their cries.

The main purpose of our visit to Fogo was to take a pelagic trip and explore the waters around Fogo, the small Rombos Islands and nearby Brava. We had a truly great day out on one of the local boats. At the Rombos and close to Brava we came across numerous Red-billed Tropicbirds and Brown Boobies, as well as four Red-footed Boobies (the latter species has only started to breed in the Cape Verde Islands quite recently). We learned that White-tailed Tropicbirds had successfully nested recently, but of these there was no sign.

Tube-noses were numerous and it was especially gratifying to see around 25 Fea's Petrels among the many Cape Verde Shearwaters (another species nesting only in the Cape Verde Islands). Plenty of Bulwer's Petrels were about and a good number of endemic Boyd's Shearwaters as well as Cape Verde Storm Petrels and lots of White-faced Storm Petrels. Migrants included many Arctic Terns, single Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaegers, (or Long-tailed and Arctic Skuas), single Wilson's and Leach's Storm Petrels and a Cory's Shearwater.

Very unfortunately for us, and in spite of the Cape Verde government chartering in planes from Senegal and Mauritania to operate as many of the domestic flights as possible, our flight to São Nicolau (the jumping-off point for day trips to Raso Island) was cancelled! What a blow! Sadly only part of the group decided to rearrange their flights home and have some extra days at Birdquest expense in order to get to São Nicolau and Raso, so after some unexpected extra time on Santiago we said farewell to those leaving and this time the flight to São Nicolau not only took off but on time!

It was a relief to enjoy the magnificent scenery of the mountainous but very remote island of São Nicolau. We had made it! The star bird here is the very distinctive 'Neglected' Kestrel. While generally considered a race of Common Kestrel, *neglectus* is rather different in structure, with shorter wings and tail, and the structure reminds me of the endemic Mauritius Kestrel. The males have a 'feminised' plumage. Like the Mauritius Kestrel, it seems to feed mainly on endemic geckos. It may well be that genetic studies will show that it is better treated as a separate species.

The other main reason for visiting São Nicolau is its proximity to Raso Island, home to the endemic Raso Lark. We took one of the local boats over to the island, enjoying the many Cape Verde

Shearwaters, Boyd's Shearwaters, Red-billed Tropicbirds, Brown Boobies and other seabirds but sadly not catching up with the Trindade Petrel that had been sighted a week or two earlier! Not that we expected to!

Landings on Raso are no longer allowed unless you are a warden or researcher, so we had to content ourselves with tying up to the rocks and waiting for the larks to appear. There were lots of rather unsatisfactory flight views of distant larks over the interior of the island but after a time a flock came to the nearby rocks and gave us some decent views.

Another 'Cape Verde' Barn Owl sighting at the edge of Tarrafal wrapped up our birding on São Nicolau, but the domestic flight gremlins still had it in for us with yet another cancelled flight and no choice but to take the ferry to Sal for our flights home.

Sal did give us some bonus birds, however, with Black-headed Gull, Purple Heron (a migrant of the nominate race) and Sand Martin, as well as a very unexpected wandering Cape Verde Buzzard.

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 follow Gill, F., Donsker, D., & Rasmussen, P. (Eds). **2024. IOC World Bird List (v14.1)**.

BIRDS

Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris* Common on Santiago and São Nicolau. Up to 50 in a day. Introduced.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* Small numbers on Santiago. Heard on São Nicolau.

Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba* One over the ridge above São Jorge das Orgãos was a surprise. A vagrant in the islands.

Cape Verde Swift ◊ *Apus alexandri* Common on Santiago, Fogo and São Nicolau. Up to 80 or more in a day. Endemic to the Cape Verde Islands.

Rock Dove *Columba livia* Common on Santiago, Fogo, São Nicolau and Sal. Up to 120 or more in a day. Many are feral, but the native form here is *gymnocida*.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* Common on Santiago, Fogo, São Nicolau and Sal. Up to 80 or more in a day. Quite possibly a natural colonist rather than an introduction.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* Locally common on Santiago. Up to 33 in a day.

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* Locally common on Santiago and Sal. Up to 16 in a day.

Grey (or Black-bellied) Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* Three singles on Santiago and three on Sal.

American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica* A single at Praia on Santiago.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* Fairly common on Santiago and Sal. Up to 8 in a day.

Spur-winged Lapwing *Vanellus spinosus* A single on Sal. This vagrant had been there for some time.

Kentish Plover *Anarhynchus alexandrinus* Fairly common on Santiago and Sal. Up to 10 in a day.

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* Small numbers on Santiago, São Nicolau, Raso and Sal.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* Small numbers on Santiago and Sal.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* One at the Tarrafal water treatment plant on Santiago on two occasions.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes* A single at Praia on Santiago.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* Small numbers on Santiago and Sal.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* Locally common on Santiago and Sal. Up to 18 in a day. In addition, one on Cima in the Rombos Islands.

Sanderling *Calidris alba* Fairly common on Santiago and Sal. Up to 8 in a day. In addition, one on Cima in the Rombos Islands.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta* Three on Santiago and two on Sal.

Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* Up to 12 on two days in eastern Santiago and five near Tarrafal on Santiago.

White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* An immature at the Tarrafal water treatment plant on Santiago on two occasions.

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* Mostly small numbers around Fogo and between São Nicolau and Raso, but 30 on our pelagic out of Fogo.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* An adult at Sal.

Long-tailed Jaeger (Long-tailed Skua) *Stercorarius longicaudus* One on our pelagic out of Fogo.

Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua) *Stercorarius parasiticus* One during our pelagic out of Fogo.

Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*

Wilson's Storm Petrel *Oceanites oceanicus* One on our pelagic out of Fogo.

White-faced Storm Petrel *Pelagodroma marina*

Leach's Storm Petrel ♦ *Hydrobates leucorhous* One during our pelagic out of Fogo.

Cape Verde Storm Petrel ♦ *Hydrobates jabejabe* Six during our pelagic out of Fogo, two from the Fogo-Santiago ferry and two off Raso. A breeding endemic that is not known to disperse widely outside the breeding period.

Fea's (or Cape Verde) Petrel ♦ *Pterodroma feae* Around 25 during our pelagic out of Fogo and six from the Fogo to Santiago ferry. A breeding endemic that disperses widely (mainly to the west and northwest, as far as the central-eastern US coast) outside the breeding period.

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis* One on our pelagic out of Fogo.

Cape Verde Shearwater ♦ *Calonectris edwardsii* Numerous during sea crossings, with up to 300 in a day. In addition, 15 seen from the shore at Fogo. A breeding endemic that disperses widely (mainly to the south and southeast) outside the breeding period.

Boyd's Shearwater ♦ *Puffinus boydi* Common or fairly common during sea crossings, with up to 30 in a day. A breeding endemic that is not known to disperse widely outside the breeding period.

Bulwer's Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii* Common or fairly common during sea crossings, with up to 35 in a day.

Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* Four during our pelagic out of Fogo. A recent colonist in the Cape Verde Islands.

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* Generally common or numerous during sea crossings, with up to 200 in a day. In addition, one seen from the shore off Fogo.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* Locally common on Santiago. Up to 47 in a day. Also four on Sal.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* Scattered records of small numbers on Santiago.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* Three immatures on Santiago.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* Locally common or fairly common on Santiago and Sal. Up to 15 in a day.

Western Reef Heron (Western Reef Egret) *Egretta gularis* A pale morph on Santiago and multiple records of a dark morph at Tarrafal on São Nicolau.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* Locally numerous on Santiago and São Nicolau. Up to 170 or more in a day. In addition, one on Fogo and five on Sal.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* Small numbers on Santiago and singles on Raso and Sal.

Yellow-billed Egret *Ardea brachyrhyncha* Up to two on each visit to Barragem de Faveta on Santiago.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Scattered records of small numbers on Santiago and Sal.

Purple Heron ♦ *Ardea purpurea* A migrant bird on Sal.

Purple Heron ♦ **[Bourne's Heron]** *Ardea [purpurea] bournei* Locally not uncommon or even fairly common on Santiago. Up to 11 in a day.

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* Small numbers on São Nicolau, Raso and Sal.

Cape Verde Buzzard ♦ *Buteo bannermani* We recorded a total of eight, although there may have been a bit of overlap, in the highlands of Santiago. This has been a scarce bird for at least the last 50 years on Santiago but it still hangs on. One on Sal was clearly a wanderer. There are now several records from this island.

Western Barn Owl ♦ **[Cape Verde Barn Owl]** *Tyto [alba] detorta* Two seen and two heard at two different locations on Santiago and another see on São Nicolau.

Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala* Numerous on Santiago with up to 80 in a day. The endemic form in the Cape Verde Islands is *acteon*.

Common Kestrel ♦ **[Neglected Kestrel]** *Falco [tinnunculus] neglectus* This distinctive endemic form was common on São Nicolau. Up to 12 in a day. In addition, two on Sal.

Common Kestrel ♦ **[Alexander's Kestrel]** *Falco [tinnunculus] alexandri* This endemic form was common on Santiago and Fogo. Up to 17 in a day.

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis* Common on Santiago, Fogo and São Nicolau with up to 16 in a day. In addition, two on Raso and four on Sal.

Greater Hoopoe-Lark ♦ *Alaemon alaudipes* Two in eastern Santiago and eight on Sal. The form in the Cape Verdes is the endemic *boavistae*.

Bar-tailed (Desert) Lark ♦ *Ammomanes cinctura* Fairly common in eastern Santiago, in western São Nicolau and on Sal. The form in the Cape Verdes is the endemic nominate race.

Black-crowned Sparrow-Lark (Black-crowned Finch-lark) *Eremopterix nigriceps* Fairly common on Santiago and on Sal. Up to 15 in a day. The form in the Cape Verdes is the endemic nominate race.

Raso Lark ♦ **(Razo L)** *Alauda razae* Up to 25 on Raso. Endemic to the northwestern Cape Verde Islands and until recently reduced to a small population on the small island of Raso. Recently reintroduced to the island of Santa Luzia.

Sand Martin (Bank Swallow) *Riparia riparia* Three on Sal.

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Small numbers on Santiago, São Nicolau and Sal.

Western House Martin *Delichon urbicum* One at the ridge above São Jorge das Orgãos.

Cape Verde (Cane) Warbler ♦ *Acrocephalus brevipennis* Small numbers in the more vegetated valleys on Santiago. In addition, heard twice on São Nicolau.

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* Common on Santiago and São Nicolau. A couple on Fogo. The form here is *gularis* (which is also found in the Azores).

Spectacled Warbler *Curruca conspicillata* Fairly common on Santiago, Fogo, São Nicolau and Sal.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* A migrant at Pedra Badejo.

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* Common on Santiago, Fogo, São Nicolau and Sal. Up to 30 or more in a day.

Iago Sparrow ♦ *Passer iagoensis* Very common on all islands, even Raso. Up to 60 or more in a day.

Common Waxbill (introduced) *Estrilda astrild* Numerous on Santiago, with up to 170 in a day. Also one on Fogo.

MAMMALS

Grivet (or Grivet Monkey) *Chlorocebus aethiops* Five of these introduced monkeys were seen in the highlands of Santiago.

Black Rat (introduced) *Rattus rattus* One on Santiago.

Short-finned Pilot Whale *Globicephala macrorhynchus* Four during our pelagic out of Fogo and two from the Fogo to Santiago ferry.

Atlantic Spotted Dolphin *Stenella frontalis* A large pod of 100 during our pelagic out of Fogo and six from the Fogo to Santiago ferry.

Common Bottlenose Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus* Six between São Nicolau and Sal.