

THE CAPE VERDE ISLANDS

9 – 21 MARCH 2008

TOUR REPORT

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The latest Birdquest to these islands was, like the others, a considerable success as far as endemic species and subspecies were concerned. All the widely recognized species – Cape Verde Shearwater, Cape Verde Swift, Raso Lark, Cape Verde Warbler and Iago Sparrow were easily located, as were most of the following Boyd's Shearwater, Bourne's Heron, Cape Verde Buzzard, Alexander's Kestrel, Neglected Kestrel and Cape Verde Owl. Add to this the species new to the Birdquest list for the islands which included Glossy Ibis, American Purple Gallinule and Little Ringed Plover and you can see that this trip was another great tour to these rather remote islands. 58 species is a reasonable total for the islands but as always a major bias towards seabirds and waders was obvious in the checklist.

Our late afternoon arrival on Sal unfortunately left little time for any local exploration but we did manage to add the first of the endemics, Iago Sparrow, to our very small list for the first day of the tour. The first full day on the islands started with an early morning flight from Sal to São Nicolau where we were met by Toy, who was going to be our driver for the next few days. Toy had filled the same position last year and it was good to get a driver who knew exactly where we wanted to go and was always on time for the pick ups. Our journey from the airport to our base in Tarrfal was rather unexceptional but we did see our first Cape Verde or Alexander's Swifts and our first Neglected Kestrels but there was very little in the way of a supporting cast. After our first substantial home cooked lunch at Casa Alice we took advantage of the hot afternoon to explore in the vicinity of the guest house or just chill out during the heat of the day. Later in the afternoon we got a lift from Toy out to the Ponta Do Barril where we enjoyed the first of many seawatches from this headland, which is situated on the coast of São Nicolau opposite the island of Raso. As one would expect the Cape Verde Shearwater was by far the most numerous of the species seen but we did get some rather brief and distant views of four Boyd's Shearwaters. These birds otherwise known as Cape Verde Little Shearwater were rather difficult to get on to and for anyone without a scope it was an impossibility. The surprise of the evening was a noticeable lack of any Fea's Petrels but they might just have been passing a bit further out than normal.

Dawn the next morning found us back at the lighthouse on Ponta Do Barril and today the Fea's Petrels were very much in evidence. We were all treated to some great views and they were close enough to shore for a few to be seen by those of us not using a telescope. There were a couple of

Boyd's Shearwaters as well but these were rather distant and the views were rather brief but as always the Cape Verde Shearwaters kept us entertained throughout our vigil. After lunch we were taken up to the Monte Gordo Natural Park offices where we met Tali who explained about the setting up and running of the park as well as the problems with the government granting permits for Raso and Branco. This was a problem that was affecting us as much as anyone else even though our agents were trying their hardest to get the relevant permission before our planned trip to the islands. On our drive back to Tarrafal we encountered the first Helmeted Guineafowl of the trip, Toy was the first to spot them as they scurried up a hillside and away from the road. In the evening we did another seawatch but the species were much the same as the other seawatches and then it was back to Casa Alice for another fine and substantial evening meal.

The following day was the day of reckoning but when the phone call came through the news was what we had been building ourselves up for. Unfortunately the government did not grant us the permission to land on Raso or Branco and so we would only be allowed to stay on the boat but would get as close as we could in our efforts to see the endemic Raso Lark. The crossing to Raso was a fairly calm one, and bird wise it was fairly flat as well because apart from the customary Cape Verde Shearwaters, all we saw were three Fea's Petrels until we got close to the island. Then the shearwaters were replaced by Brown Boobies and Red-tailed Tropicbirds coming and going from their cliff colonies. The tropicbirds were one of the highlights of the tour as they went through their aerobatic courtship flights over our boat. Although the seabirds were excellent we had to think about how we were going to get the lark, which wasn't going to be easy. We took the boat down to the south western end of Raso which is one of the best areas to see this bird if you can land on the island. Fortunately for us the conditions were favourable and after only a short wait we could see one bird as it occasionally performed its song flight. The views weren't brilliant, in fact they weren't even good, but we were able to observe the species from the boat which was better than it could have been. Also whilst sitting off shore we saw a couple of Ospreys, a Little Egret, a Eurasian Whimbrel, some Ruddy Turnstones, a Brown-necked Raven and a few distant Iago Sparrows which was basically what we would have seen if we were actually on the island. All in all we did very well considering we didn't have any landing permission but it did mean that we couldn't spend any time on Branco and so mid afternoon we returned to Tarrafal. After dinner we went out hunting for Cape Verde Barn Owl in the area around Praia Branca but we didn't have much luck and after a couple of hours we returned to Casa Alice empty handed.

We then had another day on São Nicolau because of the internal flight schedule and so we headed out to Ponta Do Barril for another seawatch which produced much of what we had been seeing on our other visits. Later in the morning the weather looked good inland and so we went up to the Monte Gordo Natural Park. Although this was not very productive on the avian front the botanical treasures were memorable with species like the numerous *Euphorbia tuckeyana*, the purple flowered *Campanula jacobaea*, the succulent *Aeonium gorgoneum*, the rather delicate Língua-de-vaca *Echium stenosiphon* and the yellow flowered *Nauplius smithii*. All of these plants are endemic to the Cape Verde Islands but they all have closely related species in the Canary Islands. After a late lunch and a lazy afternoon we went back to Ponta Do Barril for one last seawatch but we couldn't locate anything different no matter how hard we tried.

Our last full day on São Nicolau started with a boat trip out from Tarrafal to a few kilometres off Ponta Do Barril then parallel to the coast before returning to Tarrafal about mid day. We took a good supply of fish with us and from soon after leaving port we had a group of Cape Verde Shearwaters in permanent attendance that gave us some spectacular close up views. For the majority of our trip this was the only species we saw but a brief purple patch late on produced a couple of close Fea's Petrels and the only Boyd's Shearwater. This was one of the main target species for the trip as a couple of our group had not got on to any of the birds seen from the Ponta Do Barril during our various seawatching sessions. Fortunately this bird came close to the boat and was seen well by everyone even though it was just a brief encounter. The afternoon was spent at leisure but late on we went up

to Cachaços and waited behind the church until it began to get dark. This was a beneficial exercise as just before it became totally dark a Cape Verde Barn Owl appeared from the cliffs and circled round in the direction of the nearby agricultural fields where it was presumably going to hunt for small rodents. A little earlier at the same location we were given some of our best views so far of Cape Verde Swifts and we could also hear their distinctive buzzing calls.

The following morning we were on the move with the journey from Tarrafal to the airport and then after a minor delay we were on our way back to Sal. Unfortunately TACV seem to run virtually all their internal flights in and out of Sal further complicating the awkward inter island connections. This meant we had some time to kill before catching our onward flight to Boavista, some of this was taken up with a lunch stop in a local restaurant in Espargos but the rest of the time we used checking out the waders in the salt works. These are located at Pedra de Lume, which has already started to get developed for tourism around the coast. The salt works used to be a quiet and rarely visited location. This all changed a few years ago when it got opened up as the main tourist attraction on the island and nowadays the number of visitors may actually be effecting the number of waders wintering at this site. This year it was very noticeable that the number of birds at this location was much fewer than in previous years. The highlight of the visit was the Lesser Yellowlegs that had been present for some time but the other species recorded here included Black-winged Stilt, some nice summer plumaged Curlew Sandpipers, a Little Stint and a Grey Plover. After lunch in Espargos we were returned to the airport where we took our onward flight to Boavista. Upon arrival there was not much left of the day so a few people birded the coast close to the hotel, Tony had a meeting with Pedro Lopez to finalise the itinerary for the next 36 hours or so and a few just chilled out.

After breakfast we were met at our hotel by Pedro and two 4x4 vehicles to take us to Curral Velho but the first stop was on the outskirts of Sal Rei where we saw our first Black-crowned Sparrow-larks, Bar-tailed Larks, a couple of Greater Hoopoe Larks and a Cream-coloured Courser. The journey down was otherwise uneventful and we duly arrived in the dunes at Curral Velho opposite the island where the frigatebirds nest. The Ilhéu de Curral Velho is a small rocky island about 500 metres offshore which plays host to a colony of Brown Boobies and the last remaining Magnificent Frigatebirds in the Western Palearctic. This year two females attempted to nest but only one laid eggs and these were infertile, which is the same situation as the last few years. After a rather nervous wait one of the females went for a short fly over the island which was fortunate for us because their nesting ledges are on the back of the island and the birds can not be seen from the shore. This is a spectacular species and it is a real pity to think that in the near future it will be extinct in the Cape Verde Islands. On the way back to Sal Rei we stopped a few times to watch a few Greater Hoopoe Larks and the occasional Cream-coloured Courser. We also called in briefly at the only fresh water site on Boavista, the small reservoir at Monte Trigo. On arrival we flushed a group of about 30 Helmeted Guineafowl but apart from these the only birds of note were a couple of Eurasian Spoonbills and a few of the more common species of waders. After lunch, back at the hotel, we made ready for a mid afternoon departure to Bahia das Gatas. En route we stopped at a village rubbish dump where Egyptian Vulture has been seen but unfortunately there were no birds at the site whilst we were in the area. Continuing on to Bahia das Gatas we got into our boat for the quick trip across to the Ilhéu dos Passaros which was only 600 or 700 metres from the mainland. The landing was a bit wet as the boat could not get onto the island because of a reef but although very slippery underfoot we all got ashore unscathed with our food and equipment still dry. Once on the island which is only about 200 metres in circumference Pedro had a marked path through to the centre of the island where we set up our camp for the night. Soon after dark we got our first views of our required target, the White-faced Storm-petrel. Soon it became very apparent that we were in for a great experience as we got more and more birds and better and better views. Seeing these birds and their ungainly behaviour once on the ground was one of the highlights of the tour for many of the group, even though getting on and off the island was a little wet and rather treacherous underfoot.

After a rather sleepless night on Ilheu dos Passeros the boat arrived soon after 0700, but getting back on was probably slightly wetter than getting off the previous evening. However spirits were high and a little bit of sea water around the waist wasn't going to dampen them much. Once off the island we went back to Sal Rei for breakfast and then to Rabil Lagoon for a quick look around. Once at the site, we realized the water level was well down on previous years which is worrying, and we heard that the huge construction projects nearby were just taking the water they needed from the lagoon as it was a 'free' source. Ecological problems aside, the lagoon was still attractive to waterbirds and there were a reasonable selection of waders, the best of which were a couple of Ruffs and a Lesser Yellowlegs. In the afternoon we took a flight over to Santiago but there was a delay of just over an hour which for TACV is actually quite good but meant that our arrival at our hotel was somewhat later than anticipated. They were waiting for us but the food took a while to prepare and it was rather late by the time we retired for the night.

Our first port of call on Santiago was the heavily vegetated valley around Boa Entrada. This is usually an excellent site for the endemic Cape Verde Warbler but this morning things didn't seem to work out. All we managed with the warbler were a few distant calls and a very brief sighting by one observer. Perhaps the increased activity in the valley may have effected the population but the vegetation seems the same so perhaps it was just a bad day. The local populations of Grey-headed Kingfisher and Common Waxbill do seem to have maintained their status in the area and we got some excellent views of both these species. From here we moved on to the botanic gardens at São Jorge dos Orgãos where we stopped for our lunch but within minutes of our arrival we had located a pair of very vocal and showy Cape Verde Warblers that were also very photogenic. Also whilst at the same location Tommy and Ilona saw a distant Cape Verde Buzzard which fortunately put in a repeat appearance and was seen by all of us, but it was still rather distant. After consuming the rest of a rather interrupted picnic we made our way to the Barragem de Poilão which is the best freshwater site on Santiago. Although the site was still good the water level had dropped dramatically since last year and the site may not be functional for birdwatchers within the next three years or so. Doom and gloom aside the site is still good and we recorded a good selection of species here including the highly prized Bourne's Heron. This rare endemic is now known to have a pair breeding at a new location inside the Serra Malagueta Natural Park but the main breeding site is still the tree in Liberão which as the crow flies is just a short distance from the reservoir. We also saw Glossy Ibis and Little Ringed Plover at this site which were new species for the Birdquest Cape Verde list, a fine subadult American Purple Gallinule which was the first record for the islands, a Lesser Yellowlegs and the third Little Bittern for Cape Verde, but we had known about all of these birds in advance and didn't discover anything new ourselves. Less unusual species here included Eurasian Spoonbill, Common Snipe, Common Greenshank and Green and Wood Sandpipers.

On the penultimate day of our trip, we returned to the Barragem de Poilão, but the birds were much the same as yesterday, and we could not locate the previously reported Intermediate Egret even though we waited for a couple of hours or more just in case it decided to drop in. We then went round to Liberão for our picnic which we took by the Bourne's Heron nesting tree, but as expected the birds that were seen earlier in the month had departed, and the tree was empty apart from the old nests. After a short while we continued along the minor road which although rather scenic produced no birds of note, but a few nice views. We then returned to São Jorge dos Orgãos where the Cape Verde Warblers entertained us again before we returned to Tarrafal. In the evening, prior to dinner, we went out to the abandoned sewage ponds to try for a Cape Verde Barn Owl but none appeared and we had to go back to the hotel with just three Black-crowned Sparrow-larks for our trouble.

In the morning of our last day we tried the coastal lagoons at Pedra Badejo but after an hour and a half to get there it was disappointing to find that this was another site that had deteriorated. Water levels were very low and there were no birds present at all, at least we verified that this location need not be visited in the future. We took lunch back at Tarrafal where we were entertained by a few low level Cape Verde Swifts, the ever present Grey-headed Kingfishers and some of the more common

species and then all too soon it was time to make a move towards Praia. We had an evening meal in one of the restaurants in the capital near to the bustling market area at Sucupira, which gave us one final encounter with the colourful local people. After dinner Daniel drove us the short distance to the airport where we sat around for the rest of the evening before catching the flight back to Lisbon in the early hours of the morning.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

PROCELLARIIDAE

Fea's Petrel (Cape Verde P) *Pterodroma feae*: Only seen from Ponta do Barril, where it was a bit distant, from the crossings to and from Raso and from our minor pelagic when some of the views were excellent but rather short lived.

Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*: Common from Ponta do Barril, numerous on the crossings to and from Raso and on our impromptu pelagic.

Boyd's Shearwater (Cape Verde Little S) *Puffinus boydi*: A few distant birds were seen from Ponta do Barril (but not as many as last year) and one was seen well but briefly from the pelagic trip.

HYDROBARIDAE

White-faced Storm-petrel *Pelagodroma marina*: As we were unable to spend the night on Branco this year the Ilhéu dos Passeros was a previously unused backup for our trip. It was excellent, the birds just kept coming and although it would be difficult to estimate the numbers of birds seen because of repeated sightings of the same individuals we guessed that a minimum of twenty birds were involved.

PHAETHONTIDAE

Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*: Seen on Boavista but the experience of sitting off Raso, under the cliffs where they breed, and watching the birds go about their daily business was one of the highlights of the trip.

SULIDAE

Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster*: Seen on São Nicolau, Raso and Boavista. The best views were from the boat looking the colony on Raso but the largest concentration was the colony on Ilhéu do Curral Velho off Boavista.

FREGATIDAE

Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens*: As is usual nowadays our only sightings of this species were from Curral Velho on Boavista. We didn't manage a male but thanks to the assistance of Pedro Lopes, the local guide, we got some great looks at one of the females.

ARDEIDAE

Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*: Only the third record for the Cape Verde Islands. This bird was seen on both our visits to the Barragem de Poilão on the 18th and 19th.

Western Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*: Common on all the main islands visited with the exception of São Nicolau where it was rather scarce.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*: Most numerous at the Barragem de Poilão on Santiago.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: Widespread but not common anywhere.

Bourne's Heron (Cape Verde Purple H) *Ardea bournei*: The breeding tree at Liberão had been deserted a few days before our visit but fortunately we saw two immature birds on the nearby Barragem de Poilão.

THRESKIORNITHIDAE

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*: An adult was seen at the Barragem de Poilão on Santiago during both our visits to this site on the 18th and 19th. It was only the fourth record for the islands and a first for the Birdquest list.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*: Two were on the small fresh water site on Boavista, Monte de Trigo, and then seven birds were at the Barragem de Poilão, Santiago, on both our visits. Two of these birds were ringed in the Netherlands as nestlings on 26 June 2006 and were present at the same location in late March last year.

ACCIPITRIDAE

Cape Verde Buzzard *Buteo bannermani*: Two were seen around São Jorge dos Orgãos on the 18th. Unfortunately neither were seen as well as we would have liked but nowadays any Cape Verde Buzzard is a pleasing site as these birds seem to be getting more scarce.

PANDIONIDAE

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*: Only small numbers recorded from São Nicolau, Raso, and Boavista.

FALCONIDAE

Alexander's Kestrel *Falco alexandri*: Easily seen on Sal, Santiago and Boavista where it is a common resident.

Neglected Kestrel *Falco neglectus*: Quite common on São Nicolau. This is the more distinctive of the two being smaller and more Merlin-like in flight.

PHASIANIDAE

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*: Only one was seen this year on the headland close to Tarrafal, Santiago, on the final morning of the tour.

NUMIDIDAE

Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris*: This year birds were seen on São Nicolau and a large group at the Monte de Trigo site on Boavista. It was a bit of a surprise that we saw none around the Barragem de Poilão this year but then again the increased local population have to eat something along with their crops.

RALLIDAE

American Purple Gallinule *Porphyrio martinica*: One, a subadult, was seen on both our visits to the Barragem de Poilão on Santiago. This species was a new bird to the Cape Verde Islands and therefore an automatic addition to the Birdquest list for the islands. It had been seen earlier by other groups so we could not be credited with the find.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*: About ten birds were seen on our visits to the Barragem de Poilão which included both adults and well grown young indicating that the species had bred here recently. This species would appear to have started breeding regularly at this location.

RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*: Seen at Pedra de Lume (Sal), Monte Trigo and Rabil Lagoon (Boavista) and at the Barragem de Poilão (Santiago). The highest concentration this year was at Rabil Lagoon on Boavista.

GLAREOLIDAE

Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor*: Even scarcer than last year with a mere half a dozen getting seen on Boavista. Birds were seen on the outskirts of Sal Rei, the drive to Curral Velho and the return drive from Bahia das Gatas.

CHARADRIIDAE

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*: Four were seen at the Barragem de Poilão, on Santiago, a new addition to the Birdquest list.

- Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*: Nowhere common this year with records from Pedra de Lume on Sal and from Monte Trigo and Rabil Lagoon on Boavista.
- Kentish Plover (Snowy P) *Charadrius alexandrinus*: Perhaps the numbers of visiting tourists is having an effect on the numbers of waders at Pedra de Lume on Sal, because this year this species was most numerous at Rabil Lagoon on Boavista.
- Grey Plover (Black-bellied P) *Pluvialis squatarola*: This year only recorded from Sal and Boavista with the largest count of four from Rabil Lagoon.

SCOLOPACIDAE

- Sanderling *Calidris alba*: Seen in small numbers on São Nicolau and Sal but this year it was most numerous at Rabil Lagoon on Boavista.
- Little Stint *Calidris minuta*: One at Pedra de Lume on Sal and four at Rabil Lagoon on Boavista were the only records this year.
- Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*: Another species with a decline in numbers at Pedra de Lume on Sal with only about 30 present this year whereas there were about 80 at Rabil Lagoon on Boavista.
- Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*: Two were seen at Rabil Lagoon on Boavista on the 17th.
- Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*: One at Rabil Lagoon on Boavista and then a maximum of five at the Barragem de Poilão on Santiago. This species seems to be becoming more common in the islands.
- Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*: One of the most widespread of the shorebirds recorded with records from most of the islands visited.
- Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*: Two at Pedra de Lume on Sal on the 15th and then one at Rabil Lagoon on Boavista on the 17th.
- Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*: This species was recorded on Sal, Boavista and Santiago with a maximum of seven birds at the Barragem de Poilão on the 19th.
- Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa favipes*: One at Pedra de Lume on Sal on the 15th and another at the Barragem de Poilão, Santiago, on the 18th and 19th.
- Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*: A maximum of two birds at the Barragem de Poilão, Santiago on the 19th.
- Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*: Two at the Barragem de Poilão on both our visits to the site.
- Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*: Quite a widespread species but nowhere common with a maximum of four at the Barragem de Poilão on the 19th.
- Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*: This was the most numerous and widespread of all the shorebirds recorded.

COLUMBIDAE

- Rock Dove *Columba livia*: Common and widespread but genuine looking birds are getting harder to find among the Feral Pigeons.

TYTONIDAE

- Cape Verde Owl (CV Barn O) *Tyto detorta*: One was seen at Cachaços on the evening of the 14th which was seen well by everyone who went to look. The bird appeared just before dark when it flew off the cliff and circled around to hunt over the fields near the village. Then on the 17th two were seen by Tony on the drive from the airport at Praia to Tarrafal on Santiago.

APODIDAE

- Cape Verde Swift *Apus alexandri*: Seen on both Santiago and São Nicolau but our best views were those seen flying around our hotel at Tarrafal on the 19th.

ALCEDINIDAE

Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala*: Common and very conspicuous on Santiago and as always this was a popular bird with the group.

ALAUDIDAE

Black-crowned Sparrow-lark (B-c Finch-lark) *Eremopterix nigriceps*: These birds were a common feature on Boavista but we also saw a couple in the vicinity of the abandoned sewage farm near Tarrafal on Santiago.

Bar-tailed Lark (B-t Desert L) *Ammomanes cincturus*: Recorded on both Sal and Boavista but it was much more numerous on the latter.

Greater Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes*: Only recorded on Boavista where it was common and widespread on our journeys to and from Curral Velho and Bahia das Gatas.

Raso Lark (Razo L) *Alauda razae*: This year because of the problems created for us by the Cape Verdean government we could only sit off Raso and wait patiently. Rather surprisingly this tactic paid off and we managed to see one bird song flighting over the southwestern part of the island.

HIRUNDINIDAE

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*: Two were seen at Tarrafal, São Nicolau, on the 10th and then four were seen on the 15th on the same island.

House Martin *Delichon urbica*: One was seen on São Nicolau on the 11th and was a non-leader record, however the same or another was seen on the 14th.

SYLVIIDAE

Cape Verde Warbler (CV Cane W) *Acrocephalus brevipennis*: This year rather unusually this species was only recorded from São Jorge dos Orgãos on Santiago. Despite some thorough searching we could not get to grips with any in the Boa Entrada valley apart from one heard briefly and distantly and one glimpsed by one or two of the group.

Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata*: Common and widespread on Santiago, São Nicolau and Boavista.

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*: Fairly common on all the main islands visited with the exception of Sal.

CORVIDAE

Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*: Recorded from all the main islands visited.

PASSERIDAE

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*: Fairly common on both Santiago and Boavista.

Iago Sparrow *Passer iagoensis*: The most common and widespread of the Cape Verde endemics.

ESTRILDIDAE

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*: Common and widespread on Santiago where we recorded it in fairly large numbers by the hotel in Tarrafal, in Boa Entrada and by the access road to the Barragem de Poilão.