

Cape Verde Islands

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Participants

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Cape Verde Swamp-warbler

Leaders: Vaughan Ashby and Nigel Warren

Day 1: With participants arriving from all over the UK and The Netherlands, this new tour started with an early morning departure from London Gatwick to Boa Vista. On arrival, it took us a while to progress through immigration and collect our bags but then it was on to an internal flight to the island of Santiago. Whilst we were waiting on Boa Vista however, we managed to tick off our first endemic bird, Iago Sparrow so not a wasted travel day! After a short wait at the airport on Santiago, we hire a taxi for the luggage, picked up our rental cars and checked into our hotel in central Praia seeing our first Alexander's Kestrel en route. Our choice of restaurants for dinner was a family-run café full of locals with excellent food so we decided on the spot that this was where we were going to eat the following two nights as well.

Day 2: As is the case in many tourist hotels, breakfast was not served until 07.30 and I am sure that by us standing around watching the waitress we delayed the proceedings by a few minutes as she was determined not to rush! After finishing breakfast we drove to a local supermarket to pick up ingredients for a picnic lunch and headed north out of the town. It wasn't long before we spotted our first Alexander's Kestrel of the day and after we had passed two or three we decided to make a roadside stop to look closely at one. This proved to be a good plan as not only did we have excellent views of a pair of kestrels but we also found the first of the numerous Grey-headed Kingfishers we were going to see on the Island. A nice male Spectacled Warbler performed well and Common Waxbills proved to be just that, common! With a critical target bird still to see however, we headed first north and then west via a short detour (signposts are virtually non-existent on the islands!) to a small reservoir. There were a number of scarce/rare species for the islands here including Grey and Squacco Heron, Great Egret, Common Moorhen, Little Ringed Plover, Common, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Common Snipe along with the ubiquitous Cattle and Little Egrets, but no sign of any Bourne's Herons. Part of the group had split off by now, and we were pleased to find that they had located a group of Helmeted Guineafowl. Although an introduced species, this is a very well established introduction dating back over 150 years.

Back-tracking a couple of kilometers, we followed small road up into the hills but this proved not to be the correct one (again no signposts!). Eventually finding the correct one, we drove over a hill and down into a relatively lush valley where the breeding colony of Bourne's Herons can be found. As expected, the colony was empty (evidence of up to 12 nests but they normally finish breeding by the end of February) so we spent some time checking the general area but without success. We therefore decided to head to the Botanical Gardens for lunch (checking the reservoir en route again). The Botanical Gardens are set in a very picturesque valley with excellent views of the surrounding mountains and as we made/ate our lunches we were entertained by up to four Cape Verde Buzzards giving fantastic views as they displayed overhead. Plenty of Alexander's Kestrels but no sign of the hoped-for Cape Verde Peregrine. As I thought that I had glimpsed a Cape Verde Swamp-warbler (a bit of a misnomer as it inhabits mainly trees like an Olive-tree Warbler!) on the way up, we strolled back down the valley enjoying fantastic views of both Iago Sparrows and Spectacled Warblers. It didn't take us long to find our target bird and we all enjoyed superb views as it sang right in the open at the top of a tree. The pressure was still on however, we still needed the Bourne's Heron so we backtracked to the reservoir but no change in the variety of species so we headed back to the breeding tree again. We spent some time scouring the area enjoying numerous views of Helmeted Guineafowl, Alexander's Kestrels, Grey-headed Kingfishers, Blackcaps, Spectacled Warblers, Iago and Spanish Sparrows and Common Waxbills but still no herons. One vehicle then headed further up the valley, regularly reporting back by radio, but again without success. So it was back to the reservoir for an evening vigil. Numbers of Cattle Egrets had substantially increased at the reservoir and a Eurasian Spoonbill was found roosting in a dead tree. Time was passing however, sunset was approaching and everyone was getting nervous! Suddenly, there it was, the Holy Grail, a Bourne's Heron flying up the valley. Everyone was stunned and praying that it would land and so it did, on dead sticks in the middle of the reservoir in full view. Much back slapping, hand shaking and congratulations, not only had we seen the heron but also it was an adult, it couldn't get better than this, or could it? We had seen six species of heron on the reservoir, surely a record, and were speculating if anything else was possible when suddenly an immature Black-crowned Night-heron flew across, number seven, and another vagrant to the islands; wow! Then another Bourne's Heron flew in and yet again it was an adult. The sun had disappeared and we were now in the twilight zone and considering heading back to town for dinner when another heron flew in, Bourne's Heron? No, amazingly it was a Black-headed Heron, the fourth for the Western Palearctic. If the Bourne's Heron stunned everyone then the Black-headed Heron was totally sublime. Texts were flying back and forward to the UK and the Netherlands as we tried to digiscope the bird. It was a well-marked immature bird and it sat nicely next to a Bourne's Heron for comparison; fantastic! In fact bizarrely, hardly anyone noticed the third adult Bourne's Heron fly in! So we headed back to town for a well-deserved dinner and much celebrating.

Day 3: We decided to have a late breakfast and drive across to the cliffs on the west side of town. This was easier said than done however, as it was a maze of tracks everywhere. We knew where we wanted to be but not how to get there! Eventually we managed to ease our way across a stony plain and were rewarded for our efforts with good views of several Red-billed Tropicbirds circling the cliffs as well as Cape Verde Swifts. A group of four Cream-coloured Coursers flew over us and were eventually located on the ground as was a vagrant Northern Wheatear. A couple of Bar-tailed Larks and Black-crowned Finch-larks showed briefly before we headed back for breakfast. With better views required of some of these birds we headed back to our pre-breakfast location. Stopping by the harbour, we found Common Ringed Plovers, Ruddy Turnstones, Whimbrel and a single Western Reef-heron to add to our lists. Continuing on, one of the vehicles was fortunate to find the only House Sparrows of the tour! Cape Verde Swifts flew around the buildings of the small town before we headed into a building site where we were accosted by a guard who thought that we were going to steal his bulldozer! Getting to the cliff top nearby however, we were pleased to find that it was a perfect spot for getting eye-level views of Red-billed Tropicbirds. Offshore we watched various fish, sharks and a Humpback Whale with her calf as well as a distant Cape Verde Shearwater. Heading back to town, we were pleased to find a group of four Cream-coloured Coursers right by the side of the track, perfect for the photographers. Back on the main road and both Bar-tailed Lark and Black-crowned Finch-lark were found together and caused another impromptu stop. By now it was nearly midday and we only just reached the supermarket in time to buy ingredients for our picnic lunch. Heading north out of town we stopped in a small wooded area to have a picnic and watch the Alexander's Kestrels and Spectacled Warblers. It was now a case of just visiting all sites where Cape Verde Peregrine Falcon had been seen in the past but site after site proved negative for this hardest of the Cape Verde Birds. We did manage to get lost in a town on our travels, victims once again of the lack of signposts! So back to town where we spent some time looking abortively for Cape Verde Barn Owl below the old town before heading for dinner in our favourite restaurant again.

Day 4: Up early for our much anticipated flight to Sao Nicolau via Sal. Shuttling the luggage to the airport worked well and we were off on time. We had breakfast on Sal whilst waiting for the onward flight and eventually we arrived on Sao Nicolau mid morning to be met by our Alugars. The luggage took a long time to arrive, presumably the baggage handler

had to make the work from the thrice weekly flights last him! We left the airport and almost immediately found a Neglected Kestrel sitting on the side of the road. A huge amount of road works are taking place here and they seem to be making a pretty good job of it. Nevertheless, the journey to Tarrafal was somewhat long and winding and took nearly an hour via the north coast. As the crow flies it is just 5 miles from the airport to Tarrafal but our route took us around 20 miles! Checking in to our guesthouse late morning, we set about unpacking whilst lunch was prepared. And what a lunch it was, more like a feast! In the afternoon, we headed out for a seawatch at Ponta do Curral. It was extremely windy here forcing a Brown Booby close inshore. Numerous Cape Verde Shearwaters could be seen offshore and with a bit of patience and a slight location move we were able to enjoy good views. Several Little Shearwaters also flew past but the views of these weren't so good. An adult and immature Black-legged Kittiwake were a bit of a surprise, less so three Great Skuas. Heading back to town, the first Osprey of the tour put in an appearance whilst on the town beach both Ruddy Turnstones and Sanderlings were present. Late afternoon we headed back up into the mountains to a stake out for Cape Verde Barn Owl stopping for Neglected Kestrel en route and a spectacular scenic/photographic view. We split up into small groups around the church to cover all angles then waited patiently. It was pretty cold here as the sun dipped below the mountains as the wind was being funneled through the pass. Those wearing just T-shirts especially noticed it! As dusk fell we continuously scanned the slopes and valleys and occasionally judiciously played a tape but except for a brief response, nothing was seen. Although we were disappointed not to see the bird, most people were quite happy to get back into a warm Alugar and head down for what turned out to be a sumptuous dinner.

Day 5: Today was our Razo boat day and we were pleased to find that it was fairly calm when we walked down to the harbour. Young boys were fishing and were keen to show us their colourful catches. Heading out at 08.30, we were soon amongst the Cape Verde Shearwaters and could see how they differ from Cory's Shearwaters from which they were split. There were several better views of Little Shearwaters on the way out as well as a brief sighting of a Band-rumped Storm-petrel. As we neared Razo, Brown Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds became common but it wasn't those that we had specifically come to see. Landing is no longer permitted on the island without a permit and these are only issued to bona fide research scientists. This is a rather bizarre situation as local fishermen are still allowed on the island to catch young Cape Verde Shearwaters for food! Nevertheless, we were hopeful of seeing our target bird of Razo Lark from the boat. We were slightly nervous as to how good the views would be but we shouldn't have worried as our expert captain maneuvered us closely inshore and we were able to enjoy excellent views of several birds flying around, chasing each other and even song fighting. Mission accomplished! We ate our packed lunch onboard ship close to the island whilst watching Brown Boobies at point blank range whilst the crew threw some fish overboard attracting Cape Verde Shearwaters within a few meters of the boat. It was time to head back by now but we had been lulled into a false sense of security as once we left the lee of the island we found that the sea was now extremely rough and that the fishing boat was pitching and rolling badly. Fortunately, most of us were good sailors so our main objective was not to fall overboard! Once again, Cape Verde Shearwaters were abundant but this time Little Shearwaters were also quite common with several seen and photographed at quite close range. Close enough to see their blue legs and feet! Then suddenly a storm-petrel was spotted at the back of the boat and our captain once again showed his skill, turning the boat around and intercepting it. We all had excellent views of the bird but unfortunately it turned out to be a Leach's Storm-petrel not Band-rumped. Although we had enjoyed spectacular views of the seabirds, I don't think that anyone was disappointed to get back into the calmer waters in the lee of Sao Nicolau mid afternoon! Back on land, we headed back up into the mountains enjoying further views of Neglected Kestrel and Helmeted Guineafowl before checking the agricultural areas. Iago Sparrows were common here and Cape Verde Swifts put on a good show. So with dusk approaching, we headed back to the church to look for the Cape Verde Barn Owl once again. Blackcaps and Spectacled Warblers still abounded and Brown-necked Ravens put in an appearance but despite waiting until it was virtually dark, there was no sight or sound of the owl. So it was back to the guesthouse for another banquet and the news that our flight was leaving two hours earlier than expected the next morning.

Day 6: A message that our flight time was two hours early didn't affect our itinerary too much so we had an early breakfast and headed to the airport. Unfortunately, the news of our flight being brought forward turned out to only be a rumour and we ended up spending two hours waiting for the flight to come in! Iago and Spanish Sparrows kept us entertained for a while and eventually we left spot on (the original) time! It was a short flight to Sal but we had to wait for the hire cars to arrive so spent the time having an early lunch at the airport. Eventually they arrived and we headed to Pedra Lume Salinas to find that they are now a tourist trap charging an entrance fee to lay in the saltwater! A couple of volunteers headed into the pans to see if it was worth us all going in amongst the tourist hordes but came back with the news of just a few Curlew Sandpipers far off in the heat haze. We therefore decided to head south to Santa Maria and check into our hotel. The road south is a brand new somewhat incongruous dual carriageway more suitable for a city than the few cars on the road so we got to Santa Maria in just a few minutes and actually spent longer finding the hotel than

travelling the 15 miles from the saltpans! On arrival we found some of the rooms weren't ready but by mid afternoon we were all checked in and heading back to other saltpans close to the town. These saltpans are well hidden between a shanty town and the sand dunes but we eventually found our way in only to find that they had all virtually dried out and seemed to be disused. By finding our way through a maze of tracks we eventually found some open water and here a good collection of waders: Black-winged Stilt, Grey, Common Ringed and Kentish Plovers, Common Redshank, Ruff, Little Stint and Sanderling. Pretty impressive really for a puddle! There were footprints of Greater Hoopoe-larks all over the place but no sightings of any birds! Back into town and more saltpans, which also turned out to be disused and in the middle of a building development, produced plenty more waders including Curlew Sandpipers, two Dunlins and Ruddy Turnstones. So, with the light fading, we headed back to the hotel to wash and change for dinner, which was taken at a nice Pizza Restaurant.

Day 7: Barn Swallows around the hotel were new but a quick look at the saltpans revealed nothing different, so we headed back north up the 'motorway' to the airport to be greeted with the news that our flight was early and they were waiting for us! We took off, arrived early on Boa Vista and transferred to our hotel. We then had a little wait for Pedrin to arrive with everything needed for our journey to Curral Velho and overnight on Ilheu dos Passaros (island of little birds). We drove back around the airport and then off road for about 20km across flat stony plains, Greater Hoopoe-larks proved to be both common and confiding and Bar-tailed Larks were abundant. Black-crowned Finch-larks were also seen but were by no means as common as the other two species. Eventually we arrived at the southernmost tip of the island overlooking Curral Velho Island and drove high up on the sand dunes for the best lookout position. As we arrived one of the vehicles got stuck and as we stopped to look at what had happened Dominic spotted a Magnificent Frigatebird in the air over the island. Quickly getting the 'scope on it I could see that it was a male but before anyone else could get on it the bird promptly disappeared. There then followed an anxious hour as we all waited and watched the Brown Boobies and Red-billed Tropicbirds for further sign of a frigatebird. In the meantime, Pedrin and his girlfriend swam across to the island to check if they were there and as they arrived, not one, not two, but three Magnificent Frigatebirds rose into the air to check them out. We all enjoyed good 'scope views of the male and two females before the females settled down and the male flew right over our heads giving us superb views of his red pouch. Although a common bird in the Caribbean, this species is inexorably heading towards extinction in the Western Palearctic because of persecution from fishermen and we were privileged to be some of the few birders who have ever seen them. A group of four Bar-tailed Godwits were also seen on the beach together with a couple of Ospreys.

Flushed with success, we split into two groups, with most heading off to Bahia das Gatas for the short boat trip over to Ilheu dos Passaros to spend the night on the small islet to see the White-faced Storm-petrels. We soon met up again however, as the first group had found a male Western Marsh-harrier, a very rare vagrant on the islands. The island overnights stopped en route to pick up their boatman, and then on arrival at Bahia das Gatas removed as much clothing as decency allowed and packed it into waterproof bags before clambering into the small boat for the crossing. It took two trips to get everyone and their bags over and despite having to wade through thigh deep water and slippery rocks, all managed to make it without falling over, well almost all! The group made camp in the centre of the island and after coffee and sandwiches settled down to wait for darkness and the petrels to appear. Jan was the first to see the birds through his night vision scope, but it wasn't long before all were getting good views with the aid of red-filtered torches. One by one, as each was happy with his views, they crawled into their sleeping bags and listened to the petrels calling and watched their silhouettes against the night sky. The other smaller group slowly headed back to Sal Rei birding their way across the stony plains seeing large numbers of Greater Hoopoe-larks and Bar-tailed Larks as well as four Cream-coloured Coursers.

Day 8: For the group on the island, it was another wet crossing, but they soon dried off and headed back towards Sal Rei. After an unsuccessful stop to look at a nest site for Cape Verde Barn Owls, they called in at a small wetland area, which produced Black-crowned Finch-larks and two Common Moorhens. On the final journey back to the hotel for a late breakfast they also saw the only Egyptian Vulture of the trip. The other group first visited Sal Rei harbour seeing Brown Boobies and a Common Sandpiper before moving on Boca de Salina. No major surprises here, just Kentish Plovers, and a Whimbrel together with a nice male Black-crowned Finch-lark. In an endeavor to add Egyptian Vulture to the group list (not knowing that the others had already seen one!), we next headed to the rubbish tip. Large numbers of Brown-necked Ravens gave close-up views but new were a small group of House Martins. Unfortunately, a vagrant Red-rumped Swallow seen by one member of the group escaped the others so didn't make the list which finished on an amazing 69 species, a new record for a week on the islands thanks to the hard work of everyone.