

Canary Islands

8–15 September 2006

Participants:

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Houbara Bustard

**Leaders: Vaughan Ashby
and Peter Basterfield**

After a break of several years, Birdfinders' Canary Island endemics tour went ahead again and once more achieved great views of all of the endemic and speciality birds, together with several surprises!

Day 1: As usual, the first day was mainly a travel day, although Plain Swifts were very much in evidence around our hotel when we arrived. Parking around the hotel proved difficult but the area was generally quiet (unlike some parts of Tenerife), the rooms were very comfortable (satellite TV, fridge, etc.) and the food good.

Day 2: Our first full day and we were up bright and early. After breakfast we found our next two endemics when buying water at a petrol station! Both Canary Islands Chiffchaff and Island Canary showed well in the scrub behind the garage. In with the flock of Island Canaries were at least three European Serins, whilst the *teneriffae* race of African Blue Tit also put in an appearance. And so up towards Mount Teide where we made a stop at our traditional 'pigeon' site. We were not disappointed and had several views of Laurel Pigeon in glorious sunshine as well as soaring *insularum* race Common Buzzards, *granti* race Eurasian Sparrowhawks and *canariensis* race Common Kestrels. Continuing up towards Mount Teide, we took in the stunning scenery before heading down to a picnic area where we enjoyed great views of Blue Chaffinches, more Island Canaries and the *canariensis* race of Great Spotted Woodpecker. Hearing Tenerife Kinglets, a tape was played briefly to amazing effect, with at least three birds circling us and the male performing an amazing display with his crest raised. Three Pied Flycatchers were a surprise find at this inland site. And so on to another pigeon site where we were still blessed with good weather and enjoyed multiple sightings of Bolle's Pigeon as well as several more Laurel Pigeons. After a very full first day we returned to the hotel with all but one of the endemics under our belts.

Day 3: We decided to head down to Punta Rasca, a largely unspoilt area with great seawatching potential. We took the mountain route, stopping off at our picnic area again to enjoy more views of the Blue Chaffinches, Island Canaries and Great Spotted Woodpeckers. Unfortunately, when we arrived at our normal approach track to Punta Rasca, local banana farmers had played havoc with access to the point and only after a great deal of exploring did we find a rather cunning route to get there! By then, however, we decided to have lunch and leave our seawatch until later. During our lunch stop we found a small pool with Common Redshank, Common and Little Ringed Plovers, Common Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone and a *canariensis* race Grey Wagtail. 'Atlantic' Yellow-legged Gulls were common, with a scattering of Lesser Black-backed Gulls and out at sea good numbers of Cory's Shearwaters. After lunch we returned towards Punta Rasca but never reached it, as there were so many other good birds to look at! A couple of Southern Grey Shrikes of the race *koenigi* showed well, but a Eurasian Hoopoe proved more elusive. Good numbers of Cory's Shearwaters were seen at very close range from the low cliffs, whilst our final endemic, Berthelot's Pipit, was extremely common and confiding here. A real surprise, however, was a juvenile Eurasian Dotterel, a rare migrant/winter visitor. Plain Swifts nearly took our heads off as we walked towards the reservoir, where a Great Cormorant was a surprise find along with Grey Herons, three Dunlin, a couple of Common Greenshanks and a Common Sandpiper. Several Spectacled Warblers showed well as we headed back to the minibuses and home for an early night in preparation for a long day to come.

Day 4: We travelled to the airport after an early breakfast. It was dark when we took off for Fuerteventura and barely light when we arrived on the island. A slight delay with the hire vehicle followed by stopping for drinks and temporarily losing our way was a lot less serious than the weather, because we arrived at a new bustard reserve in a virtual howling gale! Southern Grey Shrikes, Eurasian Hoopoes, Berthelot's Pipits and Spectacled Warblers all showed well, followed by a juvenile Egyptian Vulture and *tingitanus* race Common Ravens, but no bustards. We headed to the other side of the reserve to gain some altitude and were rewarded with a flock of flyover Black-bellied Sandgrouse, but still no bustards. One of the vehicles then drove up a hill for further scouting and although Trumpeter Finches and a Northern Wheatear were added to our lists, still no bustards. So on to Los Molinos Reservoir, only to find our access blocked. The gate was unlocked, however, so we drove in, only to find that the goats had eaten all the vegetation and there was virtually no water in the feeder stream! A juvenile Black Kite and some flighty Lesser Short-toed Larks were nice finds, however. And so to lunch at a nice simple restaurant overlooking the sea where Fuerteventura Chat is normally present, but not this time! A couple of migrant Spotted Flycatchers were scant reward for our efforts. Just as we had finished lunch, however, CJ returned to the restaurant to say that he had found a chat. We quickly walked down to the stream but there was no sign of the bird. A couple of anxious minutes followed before we turned around to find male, female and juvenile Fuerteventura Chats on the rubbish bins behind us feasting on the flies! Great views and a sigh of relief as the wind was doing us no favours. So back to another route to the reservoir where access was easier. On the water were 46 Ruddy Shelducks (good breeding season) but no other ducks, just large numbers of Common Coot. Waders included Black-winged Stilts, Common Sandpipers, Little Ringed Plovers and a Common Greenshank, whilst a Trumpeter Finch showed well on the shore. Heading on to another bustard reserve, we spent some time exploring some dry wadis and abandoned fields, where there were good numbers of Barbary Partridges but still no bustards. So it was back to our fallback roosting site, where immediately we found two magnificent Houbara Bustards feeding in abandoned fields. We watched them for a good half hour before deciding to head back towards the airport. As we dropped down the hill we were staggered to find a third Houbara Bustard only 20 metres away by the side of the road. Although rather wary, it only walked a few metres further away before resuming feeding – fantastic! And so back to the airport for our flight back to Tenerife at the end of a highly successful day.

Day 5: Today was somewhat more relaxed as we had a full day yesterday and there were virtually no new landbirds left to see on the island! We started the day with a seawatch close to our hotel and were rewarded with good numbers of Cory's Shearwaters as well as at least 10 Little Shearwaters. An adult Pomarine Skua with full spoons was a nice find, but the major surprise was a flypast 'Hudsonian'

Whimbrel, possibly a first for the islands of this race. Next we decided to head for Punto Teno, stopping at a nice restaurant en route. A couple of Great Shearwaters put in a brief appearance but unfortunately they were 'leaders only' birds! The views driving to Punto Teno were spectacular, but the wind was once again verging on gale-force and with little cover, seawatching was difficult, so we headed back to a new golf course we had spotted on our way out, hoping for a vagrant wader or two! No vagrant waders but a Dunlin, five Common Ringed Plovers, a Common Sandpiper, three Whimbrels, two Northern Wheatears, two Eurasian Hoopoes and lots of Berthelot's Pipits were nice before we headed back home.

Day 6: This was our pelagic day, but to start the day we headed back to Punta Rasca and the lighthouse. The birds at the reservoir were virtually identical to our last visit with the exception of the addition of a Little Egret. Spectacled Warblers showed well and Plain Swifts once again tried to take our heads off! A couple of Southern Grey Shrikes hunted the numerous lizards and geckos as we walked through this delightful habitat, which, sadly, is disappearing rapidly on Tenerife. At the point there were huge numbers of Cory's Shearwaters forming large rafts on the sea and with perseverance we found several more Little Shearwaters and a single distant Bulwer's Petrel, which was unfortunately only seen by a couple of the group. As we headed back to town for lunch, several Barbary Partridges were flushed and a couple of Eurasian Hoopoes seemed unconcerned at our presence. A large falcon was spotted by a couple of the group so we stopped the vehicles to be rewarded with prolonged views of hunting Barbary Falcon – wow! A Curlew Sandpiper was the only bird of note during our lunch break before we headed to the port. With the La Gomera ferries no longer being suitable for seawatching, we had chartered a whale-watching boat for several hours and it was obvious on our arrival that the skipper and crew had never done this before! The boat was a fast, new one, very suitable for our purpose, and the skipper and crew very willing to do whatever we wanted, so we set off in high spirits. Many Cory's Shearwaters were seen at extremely close range, including a few small rafts on the water, and each time the skipper manoeuvred in for amazing up close and personal views! We also had fabulous views of Short-finned Pilot Whales and Bottle-nosed Dolphins, but the surprise find was a Loggerhead Turtle basking on the surface. With time running out and just as we were about to head back to port, a Little Shearwater was seen briefly. This was immediately followed by a Bulwer's Petrel, which flew in close to the boat so that everyone could enjoy every detail of this graceful seabird, including the pale upper wing coverts! At this point a spontaneous cheer and round of applause broke out, much to the bewilderment of the skipper! Heading back to port the only bird of note was a Common Tern. The windy drive back to our hotel seemed shorter than usual with everyone in high spirits, even those who had felt a little queasy on the boat!

Day 7: We headed up into the Laurel forest in the foothills of Mount Teide again. This time we were treated to more typical weather conditions, with the mist and clouds rolling in and out. Many pigeons were flying around but lots remained unidentified in the conditions. However, during the clearer moments we enjoyed further views of both Bolle's and Laurel Pigeons. We also had more fabulous views of Tenerife Kinglet and Canary Islands Chiffchaff, whilst the *superbus* race of European Robin was well studied. Eventually, the mist got so thick that we decided to abort and return to our hotel, grateful that we had enjoyed a clear day on our previous visit. After lunch we decided to visit one of the town's parks, where the highlights were Monk Parakeets, Spanish Sparrows, Common Blackbirds and a single Island Canary. Having now achieved a new record of 67 species on this tour, we decided not to chase the only remaining landbirds of European Goldfinch, European Greenfinch and Eurasian Linnet but to do a seawatch in the evening instead. Nothing more was added to the list although a single Little Shearwater was seen.

Day 8: The final morning and a few of the group opted for a seawatch again, where, in addition to the ubiquitous Cory's Shearwaters, a couple more Pomarine Skuas were seen. And so back to the airport for our return flight home surrounded by fried lobsters with hangovers!