

Azores

Bird tour summary: 8-17 October 2018



Text © Dominic Mitchell (www.birdingetc.com). All images © the author unless credited otherwise.



The caldeira on Corvo, viewed from the ridge on the east side. Its twin lakes have harboured many rarities over the years.

Participants

Dominic Mitchell (leader)
Gerby Michielsen (co-leader on São Miguel)
Digby Greenhill
Sue Greenhill
Bob Murphy
Richard Cross

Introduction

This beautiful Atlantic archipelago was little visited by birders until the last decade or so, but it has firmly put itself on the map in recent years with a growing reputation as the Western Palearctic's number one hot-spot in autumn for regionally rare vagrants - especially for wayward migrants from North America. Add in the attraction of the endemic Azores Bullfinch and a number of distinctive endemic subspecies, several of them potential 'splits', and its appeal is plain to see. I first travelled to the Azores in September 1994, and have returned many times since - this October's tour was in fact my 17th visit to the islands. Once again, we were not disappointed, seeing and finding some first-class rarities, although as with all island birding, it was tough going at times and the weather ranged from hot and settled to rainy and foggy.

Map of the islands



© [Archipelago Azores](#)

Itinerary

8 October	Fly from London to Lisbon, then connecting flight to São Miguel
9 October	São Miguel
10 October	São Miguel, then fly to Corvo
11 October	Corvo
12 October	Corvo
13 October	Corvo
14 October	Corvo
15 October	Corvo, then fly to Terceira
16 October	Terceira
17 October	Fly from Terceira to Lisbon, then connecting flight back to London

Tour diary

Monday 8 October

Participants in this year's Azores adventure convened on time at London Heathrow, ready for the two-leg journey to the Atlantic archipelago via Lisbon. Departure from London was more or less on time, and just over two hours later we were in the Portuguese capital waiting for our onward flight to the main island of São Miguel.

The trip list started at the Lisbon departure gate with a **Northern Wheatear** on the runway outside. That was as good as it got until, after a slight delay boarding, we taxied down the runway to the turning point where I could see another three wheatears and a flock of seven **White Wagtails** feeding on a sandy patch of grass. Unlike the **Feral Rock Doves** nearby, neither of these species can be expected in the Azores, though we have occasionally recorded both.

After another two-plus hours in the air the distinctive outline of São Miguel finally hove into view, and we turned to land into the south-east wind. Touching down at Ponta Delgada some 30 minutes late, we had little daylight left for any significant birding, picking up our first common Azores species outside the airport, as well as the endemic **Azores Noctule** bat, before transferring to our hotel in the city centre. A rapid dash followed to the harbour, where in failing light there was just enough time to see many hundreds of **Azores Gulls** - the distinctive local form of Yellow-legged Gull - arriving to roost. A handful of other species included three **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, a **Little Egret** within the gull roost, several **Common Terns** and a flock of 11 **Ruddy Turnstones** flying across the harbour. After a long day of travelling, it was time to return to the hotel, eat and get some well-deserved sleep.

Tuesday 9 October

Our main target on São Miguel was the rare **Azores Bullfinch**. Endemic not just to the island but to native laurel forest in the eastern highlands, this species is slowly recovering from an all-time population low in the early Nineties which saw it classified as one of the world's rarest birds. Thankfully, the population has now grown steadily, and after a quick check of the harbour we headed with local guide Gerbrand Michielsen to one of the areas in the north-east where the species breeds.

These highlands have their own micro-climate, and as we left the main road behind and headed uphill along forest tracks, the coastal sunshine was quickly replaced by cooler, cloudy conditions. We've visited several different corners of the mountains to look for this species over the years, and this time chose an area in the Pico da Vara region which was well off the beaten tourist track. Much of the upland interior is still dominated by Japanese cedar plantations, but in places these and other introduced trees and shrubs are being thinned out and native laurel forest is being re-established, providing restored habitat ideal for the bullfinch, or *Priôlo* in Portuguese.



Our chosen area was in the transition phase, but attractive enough to hold a small population of this enigmatic endemic finch, which is now universally regarded as a separate species to Eurasian Bullfinch. After walking short distances on a couple of trails, the group was delighted to enjoy scope views of several bullfinches along the path ahead of us. They appeared to be feeding on the local variety of blueberry, and gave good views as they moved about in vegetation to the right of the track. Other forest birds here included the distinctive Azores form of **Common Chaffinch**, surely another good 'split' from its European congener, as well as **Goldcrest** (one of three subspecies in the islands), **European Robin**, **Eurasian Blackcap**, **Common Blackbird** and the ubiquitous **Grey Wagtail**.

From here we headed down to the south coast, pausing for lunch at Vila Franca do Campo where our first **Cory's Shearwaters** sheared back and forth over the distant horizon. Along with dozens of **Azores Gulls**, several **Ruddy Turnstones** and **Common Terns** provided the only other ornithological interest in the harbour, but proceedings were

rudely interrupted by the unexpected appearance of a **Monarch** butterfly. With several in the group also keen on Lepidoptera, this sparked a mini-twitch, though only Richard managed to see it again. Other butterflies noted here while trying to relocate the Monarch were **Red Admiral**, **Large White**, the relatively numerous **Clouded Yellow** and, found by Gerby, a **Painted Lady**.

Roadside birds as we returned westwards included the endemic *rothschildi* form of **Common Buzzard** (another future split?) and **Eurasian Collared Dove**, a recent colonist in these islands. Checking roadside fields full of Azores Gulls produced only three **Lesser Black-backed Gulls**, so we then moved on to a private pond on a working dairy farm, where we have permission to visit. The site attracts occasional rarities, though today's most interesting resident was a **Black-tailed Godwit**. **Common Moorhens** were present in good numbers and a first-winter **Black-headed Gull** had also made the pond its temporary home.

At this point, however, I received news from another birder arriving on the island that two **Hudsonian Whimbrels** had been seen among a group of **Eurasian Whimbrels** flushed by a plane landing at the main airport. We cut our pond visit short and headed straight there, though it took the same event for us to be able to locate the Hudsonians with certainty. While watching them I also picked up two small calidrid waders among the large **Ruddy Turnstone** flock. Unfortunately, these birds quickly vanished among the long grass and had to remain unidentified, as did a very distant plover out on the runway which was either Common Ringed or Semipalmated.

By this time it had become overcast and as we headed on towards the crater lakes the heavens truly opened. The rain was worst around the caldeira ridge, but began to abate as we descended towards Lagoa Azul. Here, with local knowledge at our disposal, we located the long-staying male **Pied-billed Grebe** lurking within aquatic vegetation; the bird even called as

we were watching it. Several **Little Egrets** and **Grey Herons** were noted around the lake, while at another site in the west of the island a **Long-eared Owl** staring back at us from its daytime roost was one of the highlights of the day. We returned to the capital and made one final stop en route to the hotel.



At the fish quays in the harbour we were on the lookout for any late Roseate Terns still in the area, but instead I picked up an odd-looking, short-winged tern in immature plumage. Its fluttery flight revealed it was moulting its outer primaries, and the tail was also still growing; with white secondaries and a dark carpal bar it had to be a second-year **Arctic Tern**, certainly the rarest find of a good day in the field.

Wednesday 10 October

After a substantial breakfast to set us up for the day, we headed to the airport for a mid-morning flight to Corvo, the most north-westerly outpost of the Azores archipelago. Corvo lies some 600 km from São Miguel and the flight is routed via Faial in the central group of islands. The weather was sunny and calm, in stark contrast to the forecast westerlies and rain over the next couple of days, and it was with a sense of anticipation that we landed on 'the Rock' soon after noon. Once established in our house, we set off to bird around the village and adjacent fields during the afternoon.

Fairly quickly, however, news of an American Redstart farther north on the island necessitated a rapid change of plans, and we headed uphill in a taxi on our first attempted Corvo twitch. As we neared Lighthouse Valley Richard thought he glimpsed a large raptor from the vehicle, but checking the area carefully we were unable to locate anything interesting. Around the same time, birders returning from the redstart spot reported that our intended quarry had vanished - not what we wanted to hear. Instead, we set about looking for a **Greater Short-toed Lark** found nearby by Danish birders. A

mega on Corvo and just the third record for the Azores, it was with some delight that we finally relocated it in a cow field east of the road. A **Little Egret** passing overhead was also somewhat unexpected, and possibly the first I've seen on this island.

Working the fields on our way back to town as the day drew to a close, we checked hedgerows and copses carefully, getting great views of some of the commoner birds on the island but not locating anything especially noteworthy. Offshore, good numbers of **Cory's Shearwaters** included a single raft of 321 birds, which was to prove to be the largest of the trip.



The third Greater Short-toed Lark for the Azores got our stay on Corvo off to a great start.

After returning to the house and putting our feet up for a short rest, it was then time to head out for dinner with other birders on the island - a great opportunity to socialise with the 'international brigade' of Corvo birders, and for me to meet up with old friends and exchange news about what's been seen where.

Thursday 11 October

Whether it was a bug picked up on the plane or something I ate I'm not sure, but after a terrible night I got up and felt very grim indeed. Determined not to let it get the better of me we headed out on schedule after breakfast, with the first birding taking place in strong winds near the old harbour.

The sea was up and the wind relentless, making seawatching difficult to say the least. I took the group behind the shelter of a building in the south-east corner of the island, and we set up scopes to go through the passing **Cory's Shearwaters** in the hope of finding something more interesting. Fairly quickly I picked up a dark-looking duck flying in from the north and careening past into the teeth of the wind - it wasn't in view for long but the dark wings and body with slightly paler head, whitish underwing and blue speculum with white trailing edge all indicated **American Black Duck**, an unexpected vagrant

on a seawatch to say the least! Whether it was one of the few remaining birds from the island of Flores to the south or a new arrival is impossible to say, but we were delighted to have been in the right place at the right time for this fly-by 'Yank'.

Unfortunately, sickness was starting to overwhelm me at this point, and despite trying to continue seawatching from another sheltered vantage point nearby, I was fairly quickly forced to give up and retreat back to base. It was the first time in 16 visits that I've fallen ill in the islands, and a truly grim and foodless 24 hours followed.

I did, however, manage to equip the group with radios and a bird news feed for the local WhatsApp group that I run, and Digby, Sue, Bob and Richard were able to spend the rest of the day birding under their own steam and chasing a few rarer species, which included the only **Red-eyed Vireo** to make it onto our trip checklist this year.

Friday 12 October



After yesterday was written off with a nasty bug I felt a little better and stronger this morning, and well enough to bird with the group around the village and local fields and valleys.

We worked our way west out of the village and through the middle fields, carefully checking each patch of scrub and stand of weeds in somewhat blustery conditions. Eventually we reached Cape Verde Farm, where after a short while a dapper **Spotted Flycatcher** (left) began performing in the relative shelter of the tamarisks. This may be a familiar migrant from back home but way out west in the Atlantic it has 'mega' status, being far more rare than the likes of Yellow-billed Cuckoo or Blackpoll Warbler. A brief **Willow Warbler** was another welcome rarity here, and again less frequent than some American passerines such as Red-eyed Vireo.

With no further rarities in this exposed part of the island during the rest of the morning, we eventually headed back to the house for a welcome break for lunch and shelter from the wind. Reinvigorated, in the afternoon we set out again, this time for the lower fields and south coast of the island, where Digby and Sue were able to indulge in some geocaching. Nearby, we succeeded in relocating an elusive **Spotted Sandpiper** - intriguingly, it was in almost exactly the same spot as one the previous year, presumably meaning this rocky coast

is perfect 'Spot Sand' micro habitat rather than a returning bird, though who knows.

With the wind still buffeting the coast and covering the path and bushes with spume, we headed inland around the airport and up through the middle fields, carefully scrutinising flocks of the usual suspects in the hope of finding something different. This time, someone else beat us to it - in mid-afternoon news quickly broke of a **Wilson's Warbler** in a heavily vegetated gully, just across the road from our house! We quickly rushed to the spot to find a number of other birders already waiting in a field below the gully, scrutinising the line of trees where the warbler had last been seen. After a while, with no further sign of the bird, I left the group to walk round and up into the field above, to look down into the gully. Chatting to a Danish birder who had the same idea, our conversation was rudely interrupted by a tiny flash of



bright yellow in the bushes: Wilson's Warbler! This American 'mega' reappeared but was moving actively, mainly within cover; a quick shout and wave of arms to the crowds below ensured an instant response, and before long birders were converging from everywhere to get good looks at this first for the Azores and Portugal.



This Wilson's Warbler on Corvo was the first for the Azores and Portugal. It was found in a small gully on the edge of Vila Nova - conveniently just across the road from where our group stayed! Photo © Vincent Legrand (www.vincentlegrand.com).

There was no way we were going to better that find in what little remained of the day, so after spending more time with the Wilson's Warbler we called it a day and retired for a celebratory drink and dinner.

Saturday 13 October



Breakfast was a relatively quick affair next morning - why hang around over cornflakes when you know there's a **Wilson's Warbler** likely to be lurking in the brambles just around the corner? So we headed out for a second bite of the cherry, and Digby and Sue in particular were pleased to enjoy a much more satisfactory encounter with the species.

Decisions, decisions. There were a few tempting vagrants dotted around the island yesterday, one of them being another American Redstart in a large wooded area on the the eastern side of the island. I decided to make this our morning target, preceded by short visits to two adjacent valleys. The first had produced that Red-eyed Vireo for the group a couple of days previously, but it was not on show this morning. The second brought back happy memories of our tour 10 years ago, when I found Hooded Warbler and Yellow-throated Vireo in the same spot within minutes of each other. Such experiences with extreme vagrants - at the time these were the fourth and third Western Palearctic records respectively - are what birding in the Azores is all about. They don't come along often, but you never forget the adrenaline rush when they do, and you know that eventually persistence in the field should be rewarded with good finds.

With these memories in the back of my mind we worked these valleys and the extensive cover in Fojo, spreading out but remaining within earshot of each other in case any one of us struck gold. Despite our best efforts, however, no trace of the American Redstart could be found. Lunch was taken at a nearby picnic area, my hope being that it (or something else) would be located in this often productive area, but it was not to be.

As we walked back southwards away from the eastern valleys, breaking news that a **White-throated Sparrow** (below) seen earlier in the day was now showing necessitated a hasty diversion to the west. After some anxious moments as this mobile bird kept us on our toes, everyone finally managed to get views through the scope, and closer looks revealed it was a first-winter with a tan-striped head pattern. Considering the number of American passerines now recorded on Corvo, sparrows seem somewhat under-represented - certainly so in comparison with records in Britain, where White-throated Sparrow has occurred more times than the great majority of vagrant wood-warblers. Could this indicate the effect of ship-assisted vagrancy to Britain, as opposed to natural vagrancy in the Azores?



Either way, satisfied with our sparrow reward for all the leg work, we opted to get a taxi back to the village. When it arrived to pick us up, I realised that with little cloud around the top of the island spectacular views should be possible looking into the volcano, so we drove in the opposite direction up to the ridge on the edge of the crater. The summit is often shrouded in cloud but today the vista was indeed breathtaking, with the distant twin lakes in the bottom of the caldeira glistening in the late afternoon sunshine. After the group had enjoyed the views and the novelty of the strengthening fresh wind had worn off, we duly headed back to the village at the end of another memorable day.

Sunday 14 October

News from last night's log included a Dickcissel seen within half a mile or so of where the sparrow had been found. This is a far rarer bird, and one with very few Azores and Western Palearctic records. There was no question where we were going to start the day, so after breakfast we headed uphill to the area of farmland where the bird had last been reported.

Unfortunately, despite the clear skies late yesterday afternoon, the weather had closed in dramatically overnight. Thick fog shrouded the area and the temperature had dropped. We huddled behind some farm buildings in the hope that visibility would clear - at times it was down to just 20 or 30 metres. At one point I heard a single call that sounded like a Dickcissel, but it was brief and distant, and not enough evidence that the bird was still present. Visibility did improve a little in the end, but the flocks of **Azores Chaffinches** and **Atlantic Canaries** contained no American interlopers. Digby and Sue decided to head back to the village and warm up, and not long after the rest of us worked our way back down the hill.

Back on the main road, news of a probable Red-backed Shrike saw us head north. As is often the case the bird had gone to ground before most birders managed to get there, but we took up position nonetheless - only for news of a mobile **Baltimore Oriole** even further north to crackle across on the radios. With two of the group needing this beautiful American icterid I opted to go with them, but even at speed it was some walk and again, by the time most birders arrived, the oriole was moving constantly through the fields one step ahead, often just out of view. Eventually, one of the group managed to get it on their list, so a lot of effort had finally paid off. Some days on Corvo you can feel you are chasing your tail more than vagrants, but that goes with the territory when it comes to island birding in autumn.



Monday 15 October

Our last morning on Corvo dawned bright and sunny, and with bags packed some of the group paid final homage to the Wilson's Warbler still in residence in the gully close to our house. How amazing to have had this first for the Azores as our near-neighbour for much of our stay!

Then it was time to give the fields around the village with their flocks of **Atlantic Canaries** one last check before departure. All the usual common species were in evidence but no new vagrants were found in the usual hot-spots, so we got to the airport in good order and checked in for the first leg of our flight to Terceira. Just as we were doing so a first-winter **Black-headed Gull** settled on the runway, a notable species as far west as Corvo. I saw it again on the nearby slipway just before we went through for boarding and, surprisingly, it was joined by a second bird. But all too soon we were in the sky and on our way to Faial, where we changed planes for our final Azorean destination of Terceira.

Lying in the central group of islands, Terceira is a personal favourite. There are always good birds to be seen and in Cabo da Praia it has the best wetland in the archipelago. On arrival in late afternoon we headed straight for this famous hot-spot, which is a former coastal quarry flooded by the tide twice a day, and thankfully now a protected area. Shorebirds depend on this key site for feeding and roosting, and in autumn good numbers are present constantly.



We had limited time at our disposal but nonetheless tallied 16 species of wader, with **Sanderling**, **Ruddy Turnstone** and **Kentish Plover** the dominant species but several rare and scarce shorebirds also present, including three **Semipalmated Plovers** (above), **White-rumped** and **Pectoral Sandpipers**, and **Lesser Yellowlegs**. Notable also was a flock of five **Ring-necked Ducks**, at one time swimming alongside a vagrant **Garganey** and a **Northern Pintail**! The quarry has a habit of producing such quirky sights, and we hoped to have more of them tomorrow.

Tuesday 16 October

After breakfast the next morning we left the hotel in Praia da Vitória and began birding at a small wetland on the edge of town. The target here was a recently arrived **Pale-bellied Brent Goose**, and a quick scan of the main lake soon saw us watching this bizarre vagrant at close quarters in the south-east corner.

A selection of other common waterbirds included three Grey Herons, two of which were juvenile. This species is not known to breed in the Azores but is present throughout the islands, and I always wonder whether juveniles such as these birds may just be of local origin rather than long-distance migrants from Europe or Africa.

Next it was back to Cabo da Praia, where the tide was high and the waders had gathered into roosting and feeding groups. The line-up was similar to last night, with three **Semipalmated Plovers**, one **Pectoral** and two **White-rumped Sandpipers**, and a **Lesser Yellowlegs** alongside a wide range of European species, which included yesterday's notable **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Curlew Sandpiper** and **Little Stint** duos. Suddenly everything went up in a frenzied mass panic, likely indicating a bird of prey in the area. We scanned over the quarry and couldn't see anything at first, but I turned to check behind us and picked up a distant large raptor moving steadily north-east out to sea. It proved to be a **Western Marsh Harrier** (below), a very rare species in the Azores with just 14 records in total, according to the latest bird report for the islands.



Delighted with this success, we moved on to the nearby fishing harbour where a large gathering of **Common Terns** included three **Sandwich Terns**, one of them a ringed individual which was surely a known bird from Poland returning for another winter. A methodical check of nearby scrubby grassland brought brief but close views of two **Common Quail** as they broke cover, while in the warm sunshine no fewer than 11 **Madeira Lizards** were basking on the rocks. And even the most focused of birders could not fail to have been impressed by the display of butterflies, with hundreds of **Clouded Yellows** dominating but also numerous **Long-tailed Blues** and a **Painted Lady**, with most of the insects congregating on an area of rocks covered in herbs, wildflowers and weeds.

After lunch in the town nearby, we headed inland to check areas in the centre of the island where waterlogged fields sometimes small create temporary wetlands which prove attractive to waterbirds. **Azores Gulls** are present in large numbers in this area and checking them carefully produced quite a few **Lesser Black-backed** but no true vagrant larids this year. However, two **American Wigeon** found the previous week by other birders were still present on a small shallow lake, and a brace of **Glossy Ibis** flying in to another wet area were a bonus. Brief views of a group of **Common Snipe** produced no obvious Wilson's candidates, so we moved on to check a reservoir and a woodland pond before returning to Cabo da Praia for one final look at the waders.

Here, a **Greenshank** was new in since this morning, as was our first and only **Eurasian Teal** of the trip. In the late afternoon sunshine we were treated to some fantastic views of the shorebirds, especially a close **Semipalmated Plover** and a co-operative juvenile **White-rumped Sandpiper**. It's always hard leaving this site but with sunset approaching and a short night ahead of us, it was time to head back to the hotel for the final log and dinner of the trip.

Wednesday 17 October

A very early start this morning saw us saying goodbye to Terceira in the dark as we departed for Lisbon. The layover there produced a few common species, including a single **Crested Lark**, and so with our flight back to London another memorable trip to the Azores came to an end. The islands had again produced some excellent birds, even if we had to work hard for them at times, and another autumn visit extended our cumulative trip list by several species. I'm already looking forward to returning in 2019!

Species list

Participants were able to complete a detailed daily trip list at the end of each day. The summary below is based on a total of 57 eBird checklists that I generated during the trip, supplemented by notes made in the field and information collated subsequently. For completeness, several species seen only at Lisbon Airport when changing flights are also included.

Brent Goose *Branta bernicla*

One of the pale-bellied form *hrota* was at Paul da Praia, Terceira, on 15-16th - our first in the islands for 10 years. It was quite confiding, showing very well at times in the south-east corner.

Garganey *Spatula querquedula*

One associating with a Northern Pintail at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15th.

American Wigeon *Mareca americana*

Great views of two at Lagoa Ginjal, Terceira, on 16th.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

A total of 35 on 9th was split between Fajã de Cima and Lagoa Azul. Additional individuals showing domestic influence were also present at both sites.

American Black Duck *Anas rubripes*

One flew west past the Old Harbour, Corvo, at 09:45 on 11th, giving brief but relatively close views - key features noted included all-dark plumage with contrasting dark-edged pale underwing, slightly paler brown head, and dark blue speculum with no white 'inner' edge but a narrow white trailing edge. There are known hybrids as well as one 'pure' American Black Duck on the adjacent island of Flores: no obvious hybrid features were noted on this bird but it's not easy to fully eliminate this possibility on a brief flight view.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*

One at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15th.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca crecca*

One at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 16th.

Ring-necked Duck *Aythya collaris*

A flock of five was present at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15-16th, often consorting with dabbling ducks on the former date.

Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*

Two flushed from a rough grazing area near Praia da Vitória on 16th.

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*

It took some finding, but the long-staying individual at the crater lakes on São Miguel was seen lurking among waterside vegetation on 9th.

(Feral) Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Abundant and widespread on all three islands visited. The great majority are feral birds or show indications of domestic influence in their plumage, but genuine-looking individuals are occasionally seen (*eg* on Corvo), even if impossible to determine with certainty.

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

Noted on São Miguel, Corvo and Terceira; endemic subspecies *azorica*.

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*

The range of this species has increased markedly in recent years, and like the last species it was now noted on São Miguel and Corvo as well as Terceira.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

Recorded on São Miguel and Terceira, with a maximum of nine on a farm pond on the former island on 9th.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*

Present in good numbers on São Miguel and Terceira, maximum 17 at Paul da Praia, Terceira, on 16th.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

One or two at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15-16th.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

Present in good numbers on Terceira, with a maximum count of 34 at Cabo da Praia on 15th.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Up to four at Cabo da Praia, Terceira. Additionally, a single plover seen distantly on the runway at Ponta Delgada Airport on 9th was either this or the following species.

Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*

Present on each visit to Cabo da Praia, Terceira, with a peak of three on 15th. An unidentified plover at Ponta Delgada Airport on 9th was either this species or Common Ringed Plover.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

Found by other birders but successfully twitched by our group, a flock of six Whimbrels at Ponta Delgada Airport, São Miguel, on 9th was comprised of four nominate *phaeopus* European birds and two vagrants of the American form *hudsonicus*, considered a full species by some authorities.

Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*

An adult and juvenile together at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15-16th.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

One on a farm pond on São Miguel on 9th and up to 19 at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15-16th.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Recorded on all three islands, with a low maxima of 33 at both Ponta Delgada Airport, São Miguel, on 9th and Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 16th.

Red Knot *Calidris canutus*

Four at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15th and five there the next day.

Ruff *Calidris pugnax*

Two at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15th and three there on 16th.

Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*

Two at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15-16th.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Recorded on São Miguel and in good numbers on Terceira, with a maximum there of 84 at Cabo da Praia on 16th.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

A juvenile at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15-16th.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta*

Two at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15-16th.

White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*

A poor year, with just one at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15th and two there the next day being the only records.

Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*

Another below-par showing with a single juvenile at Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 15-16th the sole record this trip.

Spotted Sandpiper *Actitis macularia*

Just one bird, on the south coast of Corvo on 12th, was poor by recent standards.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

One at Cabo da Praia on 16th.

Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*

Two at Cabo da Praia on 15-16th.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Some 14 individuals recorded this year, with records from São Miguel, Corvo and Terceira.

Azores Gull *Larus (michahellis) atlantis*

This endemic larid was widespread throughout the islands, with maxima noted of 970 in the Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, roost in early evening on 8th, and 237 near Praia da Vitória, Terceira, on 15th. Additionally, 12 nominate *michaellis* Yellow-legged Gulls were seen at Lisbon Airport on our return journey on 17th.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

A total of 17 birds logged this year, spread between two sites on São Miguel and four on Terceira, and with a maximum of seven at Lagoa do Junco on the latter island on 16th.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

Noted on all three islands, with maxima of 46 in Ponta Delgada harbour, São Miguel, on 9th and 89 in the fishing harbour at Praia da Vitória on 16th.

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisea*

A strange record of this very difficult-to-see species in the Azores involved a second-calendar-year bird at Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, on 9th. It was in heavy wing moult and missing its outer primaries, giving it a much more compact appearance.

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

Three together in the fishing harbour at Praia da Vitória on 16th included a ringed individual, presumably the returning Polish-ringed bird noted in previous autumns.

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea borealis*

Present almost constantly offshore in varying numbers, with the maximum count involving a raft of 321 birds settled on the sea off the east coast of Corvo on 10th.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

Noted on all three islands with 15 birds in total, and three at both Lagoa Azul, São Miguel, on 9th and Paul da Praia, Terceira, on 16th being the highest counts.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*

Seen at three sites on São Miguel, including four at Lagoa Azul on 9th, with another one in flight over the north section of the middle road, Corvo, the next day.

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*

Two at Lagoa do Junco, Terceira, on 16th.

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

A distant large, dark raptor which passed out to sea distantly over Cabo da Praia, Terceira, on 16th was confirmed from photos as this species - a superb chance record, and perhaps just the 15th or so occurrence in the Azores.

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

Endemic subspecies *rothschildsi* seen well on both São Miguel and Terceira; additionally, a nominate *buteo* individual noted at Lisbon Airport on 17th.

Long-eared Owl *Asio otus*

A roosting site on São Miguel gave us a welcome encounter with this difficult-to-see species on 9th.

Red-eyed Vireo *Vireo griseus*

One seen by the group at Ribeira do Cantinho, Corvo, on 11th.

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*

Two at Lisbon Airport on our return from the Azores on 17th.

Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*

After some searching we managed to relocate one found by other birders in a cow field along the north section of the middle road, Corvo, on 10th - the first record for the island, and just the third Azores occurrence.

Crested Lark *Galerida cristata*

One by the runway at Lisbon Airport on our return from the Azores on 17th was an unexpected addition to the trip list.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

The endemic subspecies *azoricus* was noted at two sites on São Miguel. None noted this year on Terceira, where the endemic subspecies is *inermis*. Does not occur on Corvo.

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

One seen very well at Cape Verde Farm, Corvo, on 12th.

Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*

Endemic subspecies *gularis* recorded daily on all three islands.

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

Excellent views of this rare Palearctic visitor at Cape Verde Farm, Corvo, on 12th. Two individuals may have been present

in the area.

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*

Frequently noted on São Miguel and Terceira.

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Added to the trip list by virtue of four at Lisbon Airport ahead of take-off to the Azores on 8th.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*

Endemic subspecies *azorensis* recorded daily on all three islands, with several distinctive partially leucistic individuals noted on Corvo (including two together near Upper Lapa Valley).

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Endemic and genetically distinct subspecies *granti* noted daily on all four islands.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Common and recorded on all islands; endemic subspecies *patriciae*.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba alba*

Another Lisbon Airport addition to the trip list, with a flock of seven on the runway prior to take-off for the Azores on 8th.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

The distinctive endemic form *moreletti*, a potential split, encountered in good numbers on all three islands.

Azores Bullfinch *Pyrrhula murina*

Once again we succeeded with this sought-after endemic, with several noted near Pico da Vara, São Miguel, on 9th.

European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*

Single birds recorded at two sites on Terceira.

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*

Recorded regularly during the trip; seems to have become more numerous on Corvo in recent years.

Atlantic Canary *Serinus canaria*

Macaronesian island endemic, recorded on all islands and in good numbers, with some significant flocks on Corvo.

White-throated Sparrow *Zonotrichia albicollis*

A successfully twitched first-winter in Upper Lapa Valley, Corvo, on 13th was a welcome addition to our long list of American vagrants in the Azores.

Baltimore Oriole *Icterus galbula*

An elusive and mobile bird in fields above upper Ribeira Cancelas was seen by just one of the group.

Wilson's Warbler *Wilsonia pusilla*

Bird of the trip! This delightful American wood-warbler took up residence in a small gully close to our house in Vila Nova, Corvo, and showed itself - occasionally well - from 13-15th. The first record for the Azores and Portugal.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*

Abundant and widespread on all three islands.

Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*

Established introduction, recorded at multiple sites on both São Miguel and Terceira.

Other wildlife

The short mammal list was comprised of the endemic **Azores Noctule** bat *Nyctalus azoreum*, seen on both São Miguel and Terceira (conveniently, this species often flies by day), and a **Brown Rat** *Rattus norvegicus* on Terceira, while one of the group glimpsed either the latter species or **Black Rat** *Rattus rattus* in Ribeira da Ponte on Corvo. Unusually, no European Rabbits *Oryctolagus cuniculus* were noted - formerly a very common sight, the population has declined hugely in recent years, apparently through widespread disease.



Good numbers of the introduced **Madeira Lizard** *Teira dugesii* were found at one site on Terceira, while the frogs glimpsed on Corvo were thought to be **Perez's Frog** *Rana perezii*.

We fared reasonably well for butterflies, with a **Monarch** *Danaus plexippus* on São Miguel, excellent views of multiple **Long-tailed Blues** *Lampides boeticus* on Terceira, single **Painted Ladies** *Vanessa cardui* on São Miguel and Terceira, and good numbers of the three common species, **Red Admiral** *Vanessa atalanta*, **Large White** *Pieris brassicae* and **Clouded Yellow** *Colias croceus*. Terceira also produced **(Blue) Emperor** *Anax imperator* and **Red-veined Darter** *Sympetrum fonscolombii* dragonflies, while on Corvo I photographed the first **Large Conehead** *Ruspolia nitidula* I have seen on the islands.

Madeira Lizard (above) and male Clouded Yellow (right), both near Praia da Vitória, Terceira.



Acknowledgements

As well as to the participants in this tour, thanks as always to Gerby Michielsen for his assistance on São Miguel, Vincent Legrand for the use of his excellent Wilson's Warbler image in this report, and all resident and visiting birders for exchanging information while in the islands.

Join me next year!

The next Azores tour will run from 7-16 October 2019. Group size is limited to six participants plus leader. As the only regular organised bird tour to the islands in October, places tend to fill quickly so early booking is strongly advised.

The tour is fully guided on São Miguel and Terceira. On Corvo we will be adopting a more flexible approach, with guided excursions in the mornings and the afternoons free for participants to look for particular target rarities or explore more widely at their own pace. This will enable us to cover more ground and see more species, and those who want to spend more time photographing rarities or embark on longer hikes will have the freedom to do so.

For the first time in 2019, we also hope to offer a short excursion at the end of the tour in mainland Portugal, starting and ending at Lisbon Airport, to target some exciting species not present in the Azores.

This tour is ATOL bonded for your financial security and peace of mind, and professionally organised through the islands' leading specialist operator. For full details please contact Archipelago Azores on (+44) (0)1768 775672.



Only in the Azores! Garganey (left, rear), Northern Pintail (right, rear) and five Ring-necked Ducks rest together on Terceira.