

## Madeira, 27 January - 2 February 2019

When Sarah announced that she'd found cheap EasyJet flights from Bristol to Funchal in January I readily agreed. Not sure what the bird interest would be at that time of year I did some quick research and found there was more potential than I'd expected, so we booked a car - also very cheap from Europcar - and a reasonably-priced apartment in the centre of Funchal, where we arrived on Saturday evening.

### Sunday 27 January: Funchal

Our apartment was on the Avenida Arriaga, between the Cathedral and Santa Catarina Park, with the harbour to the south. The park is beautiful - full of stunning tropical and sub-tropical shrubs and trees, many of which were in full flower including strelitsias, cannas, yellow angel's trumpets, spineless century plants and purple orchid tree - you'd pay good money to visit a garden like this anywhere else! An early morning walk there confirmed that bird species diversity is low: there were plenty of blackbirds and blackcaps, a grey wagtail and some **Atlantic canaries** I could hear singing, but didn't see until I nailed one from the apartment balcony. No other passerines, although I did see a white wagtail on another visit. The little lake had 4 mute swans - 2 adults and their 2 young - and various ducks descended from domestic birds, some still retaining recognisable traits of mallard. A grey heron, a black-headed gull, and some large gulls were also making use of the little pool and feral pigeons were plentiful.

The large gulls were a bit perplexing: at first I thought the main group in the distant harbour were all lesser black-backed, but that seemed ridiculous. Most were clearly yellow-legged when I saw them close, but they were dark, and at distance looked too dark. It wasn't until we got back home that I realised we'd been looking at the darker *atlantis* race - wish I'd taken some photos!

We spent the rest of the day exploring Funchal, which is a lovely old Portuguese city. As we walked around we heard and saw plenty of canaries, a couple of kestrels and some Monarch butterflies, which proved to be plentiful in the town gardens.



The little pond in Santa Catarina Park, Funchal



Roadside view, Serra de Agua

### Monday 28 January: Serra de Agua, Sao Vicente, Porto Moniz and Paul da Serra

Heading north from Ribeira Brava we took the high road over the Serra de Agua and enjoyed the mountain scenery in the morning sunshine. A few more canaries were by the roadside, and in a bit of laurel forest north of the pass I encountered my first Madeiran chaffinch, this one a strikingly different female, which - like all the other birds I saw later - made a strange call recalling a distant green woodpecker.

Descending to the rainy and windswept north coast we enjoyed a coffee and custard tart at Sao Vicente and stopped at Porto Moniz for lunch. On the Pico Gordo plateau a rather chilly walk only produced some buzzards and a couple more kestrels but then finally emerging from thick cloud above Paul da Serra we found ourselves surrounded by **plain swifts** feeding in glorious sunshine. To be honest, they looked very much like common swifts at first but were somewhat smaller, faster, browner, and lacked pale chins. There did seem to be at least 1 common swift among them, although they're not supposed to winter at these latitudes.

## Tuesday 29 January: Monte

We were glad we had only hired a small car as we drove up from Funchal to Monte: the roads are steep and narrow, yet are busy, and if you veer off to avoid an oncoming vehicle your wheels could drop into a deep gully. The free car park near the cable car station was empty when we arrived, and we walked straight to Monte Palace Tropical Garden, where the woodlands contained robins, blackcaps, blackbirds and chaffinches and some **trocaz pigeons**, a pair of which obligingly landed in a tree in front of the palace, where we were starting to warm up in the sunshine after the shady forest. I heard probable crests and below the church I had a great view of a singing male **Madeiran firecrest**.

We'd started to see a pattern with the weather - there seemed to be sun for a couple of hours each morning, and sometimes a bit more in the afternoon, but largely cloudy, especially on higher ground. Funchal definitely gets the best of the weather, as we'd been told, and back in town it was pleasantly warm. The little lake in Santa Catarina Park had 12 black-headed and 3 Mediterranean gulls on it in the afternoon.



*Monte Palace Tropical Garden - trocaz pigeons seen from here*



*Aloe vera at Curral das Freiras - these are widely naturalised*

## Wednesday 30 January: Curral das Freiras

No pressure on the birding front as we'd found all the new species I'd hoped to see in the first couple of days without really trying, and the sun was shining so we headed up to another high point: the Curral das Freiras, a barely accessible hidden valley owned by the nuns from Santa Clara Convent (and used by them to shelter during a pirate raid on the island in 1566). The sunny viewpoint above the valley gave a great view - and selfie opportunity.

## Thursday 31 January: Quinta do Palheiro Ferreiro and Ponta de Sao Laurenco

The garden at Quinta do Palheiro Ferreiro (also known as 'Blandy's garden') in the hills east of Funchal is another gem, and although I hadn't heard of it as a birding spot it seemed to have an abundance of endemics. We saw at least 17 trocaz pigeons there, and Madeiran firecrests, Madeiran chaffinches and Atlantic canaries were constantly around us, singing their hearts out. Butterflies here included red admirals, painted ladies and speckled woods - these looked 'normal' rather than endemic forms but regrettably I didn't take photos. It was also amazing to see so many plants in full flower here, including tender annuals like cosmos.





*Trocaz pigeons, Quinta do Palheiro Ferreiro*



*Madeiran firecrest, Quinta do Palheiro Ferreiro*

We carried on eastwards to Ponta de Sao Laurencio and had a short walk, turning off the main trail to take a quiet track northwards towards the north coast. Along here we saw plenty of canaries, goldfinches, linnets a couple of Berthelot's pipits and a kestrel. After an excellent and good-value lunch in Frente Ao Sol in Canical (I had a plate of tasty and succulent octopus, fried with onions) we drove up to Santo Domingo da Serra for a walk through the park, where we heard more Madeiran firecrests.

#### **Friday 1 February - Santana and Ribeiro Frio**

It was nice weather in Funchal but when we arrived in Santana on the north coast it was wet, windy and cold, so we had a quick look at the traditional houses and headed back via the central mountains, hoping we might break through the cloud, but no luck this time and the rain persisted until we got back to a warm and sunny Funchal. I enjoyed a walk round the Museu Quinta das Cruzes and its peaceful garden, while Sarah notched up about 12 monarch butterflies in Santa Catarina Park.

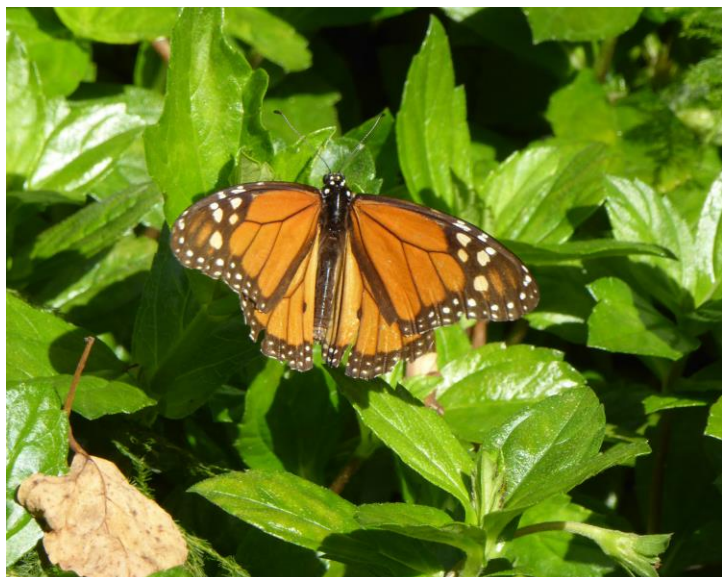
#### **Saturday 2 February - Machico**

We had some time before our flight back to the UK, so after visiting the excellent market in Funchal we had a pleasant walk round Machico, near the airport, before returning the car. Along the river there were a little egret and a moorhen, and a turnstone on the beach.

#### **Conclusion**

Madeira really is a beautiful island, with outstanding scenery and a lot more historical interest than I'd expected. The climate in winter is wonderful in Funchal, and friends who went earlier in January came back with impressive suntans and tales of wearing shorts and T-shirts. Flowers and fruits are abundant, and anyone interested in horticulture would love it; however I was slightly disappointed that apart from the extensive laurel forests on the north side, most of the plants we saw appeared to be introduced - although I am no expert. Since there are no beach resorts (and no good beaches) there hasn't been too much nasty tourist development along the coast; Funchal retains its flavour of a proper Portuguese town. Bird life on the island is limited, but includes some interesting endemics. Although the final trip list was only 26 I was delighted to see all 4 of the new species I'd hoped for - many more than most of our recent European trips.

We both felt we'd be happy to go back to Madeira. If we went in the winter again I'd take more interest in the native butterflies and plants; at any other time of the year there'd also be other birds to look out for. And a day trip to Porto Santo island would be good if the weather was fine - they were operating these from Funchal daily at 8.00 am while we were there.



Monarch, Jardim Municipal do Funchal



Locally grown tropical fruit, Mercado dos Lavradores, Funchal

**Birds seen in Madeira, 27 January - 2 February 2019**

	Funchal town	Monte	Mountains and north	Quinta do Palheiro Ferreiro	Ponta de Sao Laurenco	Elsewhere
Mute swan	4 Santa Catarina Park	1	-	-	-	-
(Mallard)	(16+ domestic derivatives)	-	-	-	-	(c10 domestic derivatives, Machico)
(Muscovy duck)	(12+ domestic derivatives)					(c20 domestic derivatives, Machico)
Little egret	-	-	-	-	-	1 Machico
Grey heron	2 Santa Catarina Park	-	-	-	-	-
Buzzard	-	-	C6 Pico Gordo/Rabacol/ Paul da Serra	-	-	-
Kestrel	4+	-	4+	-	1	-
Moorhen	-	-	-	-	-	1 Machico
Turnstone	8 Harbour	-	-	-	-	1 Machico
Black-headed gull	Max 12	-	-	-	-	-
Mediterranean gull	Max 3	-	-	-	-	-
Yellow-legged gull	1,000+	-	8 Paul da Serra	-	Sev	Sev
Lesser black-backed gull	6+	-	-	-	-	-
Feral pigeon/rock dove	Many	Sev	Many Porto Moniz	-	-	Many
<b>Trocaz pigeon</b>	-	<b>3 Monte Palace Tropical Gardens</b>	-	<b>17+</b>	-	-
<b>Plain swift</b>	-	<b>c50 Paul da Serra</b>	-	-	-	-
Common swift	-	1+ Paul da Serra	-	-	-	-
Berthelot's pipit	-	-	-	-	2	-
Grey wagtail	4+	1	-	-	-	-
White wagtail	2	-	-	-	-	-
Robin	-	4+	-	4+	-	-
Blackbird	10+	Sev	Sev	Sev	-	Sev
Blackcap	10+	Sev	-	Sev	-	-
<b>Madeiran firecrest</b>	-	<b>3+</b>	-	<b>4+</b>	-	<b>2+ Santo Domingo da Serra</b>
Chaffinch	-	3+	1	4+	-	-

	Funchal town	Monte	Mountains and north	Quinta do Palheiro Ferreiro	Ponta de Sao Laurengo	Elsewhere
Linnet	-	-	-	-	4+	-
Goldfinch	c12	-	-	-	4+	-
<b>Atlantic canary</b>	<b>20+</b>	<b>Sev</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Many</b>	<b>C30</b>	<b>Common</b>

*Geoff Upton, Southern England*