

THE AZORES

FLORES & SÃO MIGUEL, 12TH – 19TH OCTOBER 2019

PMC & APM

INTRODUCTION

This was our first visit to the Azores, a one-week trip in the hope of picking up a few decent Western Palearctic ticks. Owing in part to Hurricane Lorenzo, autumn 2019 was another bumper season on the islands, featuring two firsts for the Western Palearctic: Prothonotary and Connecticut Warblers. Both appeared during the middle two weeks of October (generally recognised as the best fortnight for Nearctic passerines).

However, our final tally for 4½ days on Flores was disappointing, with only one American Golden Plover, one Buff-bellied Pipit plus the usual Cory's Shearwaters provided any interest. This was completely overshadowed by neighbouring Corvo: on just one day, Corvo produced Cliff Swallow, Hermit Thrush, Bobolink and Indigo Bunting all fresh in, plus the Northern Harrier, Hooded Warbler and Northern Parula present from the previous week. Conditions are unpredictable though, and the last week of October saw no new arrivals on the Azores.



The Buff-bellied Pipit that spent several weeks by the Papadiamandis Restaurant in Faja Grande.

INFORMATION AND MAPS

The essential resource for birders is Staffan Rodebrand's website sr-oland.se, particularly the page on "Birdwatching Sites in the Azores" which has photos and directions to the main sites (and some lesser-known ones) on all the islands. Other recommended reads are Richard Bonser's 2008 - 2010 compendium, and Dominic Mitchell's excellent reports covering several years.

A must for all visitors is to get the Azores Whatsapp group on your phone. However, on Corvo the phone signal doesn't reach all areas, so you will also need a CB radio, which most birders carry. I would suggest that a CB is useful on Flores too: with so few birders around, your group will probably need to split up and search to have a chance of finding anything.

There were only about eleven birders present on Flores during our week, so we had our work cut out. Although not much bigger on paper than the island of Jersey, Flores has mountains rising to 2,000ft from sea level, so the only sensible thing is to focus on the best sites. A decent map is needed; we brought the [Freytag & Berndt 1:50,000](#) which was good for São Miguel and OK for Flores (but not much use for Corvo). The one you really need for Flores is the 1:25,000 [Mapa de turismo natureza e aventura \(Flores\)](#) published by Zoomazores. The tourist office at the airport doesn't sell them, but you might be able to get a copy via www.visitazores.com or madeinazores.eu.

For guidebooks, we had the Collins bird guide online, plus 'The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America' (ISBN 0-679-45120-X). With limited preparation time, I probably overlooked a few tricks e.g. a Screech Owl call would have been useful to lure out nearctic passerines.

GETTING AROUND

We flew Stansted to Ponta Delgada (São Miguel) with Ryanair, then used the local airline SATA/Air Acores for a two-leg flight to and from Flores via Terceira, although this return flight was referred to as 'direct' on SATA's website. The only alternative would have been flying straight to Terceira from the UK, but we wanted to get the endemic Azores Bullfinch on São Miguel. Following advice, we'd scheduled our São Miguel stopover for the end of the week, to mitigate the risk of getting delayed on Flores by bad weather – a real possibility at this time of year. Apart from some difficulty with the online booking system and a slight delay on the way out, we had no real problems with SATA/Air Acores, but apparently many Corvo birders endured a nightmare of lost luggage.

From Flores, we'd planned to take a trip to Corvo island on the scheduled '[Atlanticoline](#)' ferry service, which takes foot passengers twice a week (Saturdays and Tuesdays) from Santa Cruz das Flores to Vila do Corvo at 10am, returning at 4pm, allowing around 5 hours max on Corvo. It costs €22 per person and takes around 40 minutes to cross. Since the boat is a small craft for 27 passengers, it may be wise to book in advance through the 'Aferry' website. This has the additional benefit of updating you with any changes: we received an email to tell us the outbound sailing time had been brought forward an hour (for no obvious reason) which would have given us another precious hour on the island. Unfortunately, our Tuesday boat was then cancelled due to bad weather, and we never got to Corvo; at time of writing I am wrangling to get my €44 back. On the previous Sunday, bad weather also caused

the cancellation of a chartered boat full of Corvo birders who'd been hoping to twitch the Connecticut Warbler on Flores (chartered boats can apparently be arranged for around €70 a head).

It takes a little over an hour to drive between the furthest extremities of Flores, varying from easy driving to winding mountain roads. With relatively few tourists about, the locals seem to be relaxed about birders wandering down private farm tracks as long as no livestock are nearby.

The weather during our week was mixed; cloudy conditions prevailed but it was pleasantly mild for birding along the coast. However, Hurricane Lorenzo had passed right over the Azores a few weeks previously with serious consequences. The destroyed harbour wall at Las Lajes meant that fuel rationing was imposed at 15 litres per day. There are three petrol stations on the island, two in Santa Cruz and one in Las Lajes, but they often seemed to be closed at crucial moments for us!

We didn't really need a Satnav on Flores. Our inbuilt Satnav on São Miguel was occasionally helpful. It's worth noting that on São Miguel there are two parallel routes between Ponta Delgada and the bullfinch sites to the east, a south coast route via Vila Franca do Campo, and a north coast route via Ribeira Grande. Both roads converge in a confusing series of junctions at Furnas, where unhelpful signs direct you towards "Ponta Delgada" without distinguishing between the northern and southern routes.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

On Flores we stayed in Faja Grande, central for the whole island and a rarity spot in its own right. Most other birders were staying here. An alternative base is nearby Fajazinha, also with plenty of accommodation and perhaps slightly more pleasant and sheltered.

We chose self-catering at the new build of Casa de Sol Posto; our only problem here was actually getting to the place. The turnings down the side streets in Faja Grande were so tight that even our small hire car couldn't get down them; we had to drive down to the harbour and loop back along the coast road. Faja Grande has a local shop (open all hours) and a restaurant, the Papadiamandis (closed Mondays). Also in this corner of the island there's a restaurant at Fajazinha (closed Sundays) and one at Aldeia da Cuada (closed Wednesdays). The latter is a smallish venue that may need pre-booking, but features a veranda overlooking the valley that could have been designed for birders!

On São Miguel we stayed at the Hotel Barracuda overlooking the beach at São Roque; Turnstone and Oystercatcher were added to the list here. There are several places to eat right opposite the hotel, but the recommended restaurant is the 'Cais 20' on the main road west of São Roque.

ITINERARY

- Sat 12th - 08:30 flight from STN to Ponta Delgada (Sao Miguel), arr 12:35; delayed flight to Terceira, arr 16:30; flight to Flores, arr 17:50. Drive to Aldeia da Cuada, arrive 18:30.
- Sun 13th - Morning: Aldeia da Cuada, Faja Grande, Ponta do Faja. Afternoon: Ponta Delgada, Ponta do Albernaz, Ribeira do Moinho, Lagoa Branca.
- Mon 14th - Morning: Faja Grande, Ponta do Faja. Afternoon: Laghoina Lopez lookout, Caldeira Rosa & Caldeira Funda, Lagoa Rosa dump, Ribeira Grande Marsh, Costa do Lajedo valley. Evening: Fajazinha, seawatch & check valley.
- Tue 15th - Morning: Santa Cruz harbour and airfield, Ponta Delgada, return Ponta do Faja to look for Yellowthroat. Afternoon: Ponta do Faja.
- Wed 16th - Morning: Costa do Lajedo valley. Afternoon: Lajes das Flores harbour, Ponta do Faja.
- Thu 17th - Morning: Flight from Santa Cruz das Flores, 12:00; transfer on Terceira; arrive Ponta Delgada (Sao Miguel) 2pm. Afternoon: Miradoura da Tronqueira track. Stay Sao Roque.
- Fri 18th - Morning: Miradoura da Tronqueira track; Lake Furnas. Afternoon: Lagoa Azul and "phyllo wood", Sete Cidades picnic site, Caldeira do Alferes.
- Sat 19th - Morning: Sao Roque beach, Flight from Ponta Delgada 11:35.

Flores island

We covered most of the sites on the island, but as newcomers to the Azores we suffered from the usual problem of unfamiliarity with the best locations. Flores has endless acres of scrub and forest for passerines to vanish into; apart from a small number of headlands, the most likely places to concentrate birds are the 'fajas', low-lying coastal areas backed by cliffs which act as migrant traps.

Fajazinha

This village in a west-facing valley has turned up a few oddities over the years including a white-tailed tropicbird in 2011. We found the small fields and hedgerows here quite easy to work; the watercourse in the centre of the valley seemed to be the focus of bird activity, but no rarities during our week.

Aldeia da Cuada

A village on the west coast, just south of Fajazinha. On the day we landed on Flores, a first for the Western Palearctic, a Connecticut Warbler, was trapped here. We headed straight from the airport, but the bird disappeared after being ringed and the thick undergrowth here was unlikely to ever give up such a skulking species.

Faja Grande / Ponta do Faja

The holiday village of Faja Grande sits on one of the few headlands on the west coast, and the low-lying area of thinly vegetated fields has an enviable list of transatlantic rarities. During our visit, a **Buff-bellied Pipit** stayed loyal to the lawn outside the Papadiamandis Restaurant. We came close to seeing the Laughing Gull and Scarlet Tanager which also showed up near the village; unfortunately both appeared the day after we returned to Sao Miguel.

Faja Grande backs onto a series of ascending scrubby slopes, so no doubt many arrivals quickly disappear into this cover. If birds do happen to turn north however, they run into the migrant trap of Ponta do Faja, an area of fields and hedgerows around a small village which is hemmed in by towering scrub-covered cliffs to the east. The list of past rarities recorded here is even more impressive than Faja Grande, including tennessee warbler, northern parula, white-eyed vireo and grey catbird. During our week, a Yellowthroat and at least two Red-eyed Vireos were spotted around Ponta do Faja, though all showed quite briefly.

Ponta do Albernaz

This headland ought to be first landfall for many transatlantic vagrants (e.g. a scarlet tanager here in October 2014), but in fact its list of rarities is rather overshadowed by nearby Ponta Delgada. This seems rather surprising as Albernaz boasts the most powerful lighthouse anywhere on the islands, and the habitat of stunted hedgerows and fields of short grass – more open than many places on Flores – should make it relatively easy to search the area. Access seems rather limited with one road leading up to the lighthouse, and a second road leading south into the hills. The latter route borders some deep, partially vegetated gullies that looked quite promising. Most maps suggest the road south ends in a dead end, but there may be a driveable track over the hills towards Faja Grande?

Ponta Delgada

One of the top rarity hotspots on Flores, this headland hosted a western kingbird in October 2018 and the list of rarities includes black and white warbler, cedar waxwing and bobolink. Following an Atlantic storm, Ponta Delgada or Faja Grande are probably the places to be.

After passing through the centre of Ponta Delgada village, a left turn is signed towards Ponta do Albernaz, while the road straight ahead leads to a dead end with a picnic area that held several sparrow & canary flocks when we visited – certainly worth checking through.

Taking the Ponta do Albernaz turning, the road rejoins the coast by a large building on the right, where a minor road leads off to the headland. It's probably easiest to park opposite the building and walk the road. On the right near the tip of the headland, the famous 'football field' is distinguishable by the concrete bench-shelters on the south side. We managed to get the **American Golden Plover** here and in adjacent fields, possibly one of a pair that had been seen earlier in the autumn. A Pectoral Sandpiper was also found here by Lorenzo's group, although we failed to relocate it. Between the football field and the tip are a number of stubble fields and hedgerows that looked extremely promising.

Santa Cruz das Flores

The island's main town can boast a fair list of rarities including mourning dove, spotted sandpiper and snowy egret. We headed here on Tuesday, partly to refuel but also to check if seabirds had sought shelter in the leeward side of the island, following stormy overnight weather. A search of both ends of the airport runway and around the rocky shore and harbour area produced several Common Terns, but little else.

Las Lajes das Flores

The main port in the southeast of the island, the harbour here offers shelter in bad weather, and has previously turned up belted kingfisher among other birds. We arrived here in the middle of the day and checked the beach and creek, the harbour and several shrubby areas. Both the harbourside café and the restaurant here offer decent views along the coast, so could be good places to hole up in bad weather and watch for passing seabirds. The town itself quite attractive with a range of holiday accommodation, but as a birding base it's located at the furthest point from the best headlands.

The Caldeiras

The lakes or 'Caldeiras' in the centre of Flores have turned up many Nearctic waterbirds over the years, although the native birdlife is almost non-existent – theoretically making it easy to pick out a rarity! It should be remembered that the Caldeiras are all at altitudes up to 2,000ft, so the weather can be very different here compared to the coast. The highest point, Morro Alto (c3,000ft), may be worth checking if the weather isn't too harsh: a flock of Snow Buntings were here during our stay.

The first lake we 'scoped was the Caldeira Branca, which you can hardly miss if you're heading back along the mountain road from Ponta do Albernaz. Viewed fairly distantly from the road high above, it looked attractively marshy, with a **hybrid Black Duck** snoozing on the near shore.

By Monday afternoon, having spent plenty of time at coastal sites, we decided to give the lakes a proper check. We started at the 'Laghoína Lopez lookout', which is actually a mirador on the ER2, a short drive northeast from the Fajazinha/Faja Grande turning. The mirador overlooks a precipitous drop to the marshy, reedy laghoína below, but nothing here when we visited.

We continued south to the Caldeira Funda and Caldeira Rasa, which are both overlooked from the same mirador on the road between them. No birds, but an incredibly strong wind was blowing, so we headed northeast to seek out the Lagoa Rosa dump. This is mentioned in Staffan Rodebrand's site list for Flores; after a short search we found what we assumed was the dump, but it appeared to have been long since filled in and abandoned.

We carried on towards the Ribeira Grande marsh, a flattish area that can be viewed from the road junction to the southwest. There were several flooded pools here, it looked interesting but nothing about today. From this point we'd planned to cut back north to visit the Caldeiras Funda, Comprida and Seca, but the road to the ER2 was closed (flooded?) so we had to backtrack towards Lajedo.

Costa do Lajedo valley

We spent all Wednesday morning and part of Monday afternoon in this little-visited but very scenic valley, right at the south-west corner of Flores. The whole valley looked a good bet for vagrants, though to date not much news has come out of here. One plus point here is how easy it is to scan a huge amount of habitat from a single vantage point; perfect for spotting birds like flycatchers (if they'd been any around). In October, many of the trees had already dropped their leaves, so it was relatively easy to search the canopy.

The road from the ER1 down to Costa do Lajedo is particularly steep, perhaps not to be attempted in heavy rain. After passing through the village, the road at the bottom of the valley turns east (left), and shortly after this there's a track on the right signed "hot water" which presumably refers to hot springs. Unable to park any further on, we explored on foot along this track. The track down the slope passes through some promising looking woods and fields. On reached several stands of bamboo lower down, it became clear we'd have to make a hazardous scramble over some rocks to actually reach the springs, so we turned around.

Continuing eastwards past the 'hot water' sign, the minor road eventually bears south and terminates at a small turning area. From here, a steep, metalled track on the left plunges down the slope in the direction of Ponta de Rocha Alta, the southernmost tip of the entire island. Having trudged many miles already that week we didn't feel up to this tough descent/ascent, but the headland is surely worthy of further exploration. Also at this turning area, a rather slippery, hazardous path directly ahead leads through the trees to a rocky 'eyrie' that overlooks the whole of the headland and fields below.

São Miguel island

With just a day and a half on São Miguel, we prioritised the Azores Bullfinch. But there are often rarities on this island, particularly the beaches – Baird's and Spotted Sandpipers appeared shortly after we left. On our outbound journey we had a couple of hours at Ponta Delgada airport waiting for our connecting flight, and checked out the scrubby bank opposite the terminal building. This actually held quite a bit of birdlife including our only Greenfinch of the trip.

Miradoura da Tronqueira road

This is the famous site for **Azores Bullfinch**, roughly 1hr 15mins east of Ponta Delgada. The road winds through the mountains of the Serra da Tronqueira, between the EN1 northeast of Povoação and the outskirts of Nordeste on the east coast. To find it, follow the EN1 east out of Povoação for 5.2km until you pass the Miradouro do Pico Longo on the left. About 1km beyond this, the mountain road is well signposted on the left (**note that the 'Priôlo Visitor Centre' is on a completely different road from this*).

The mountain road is actually a graded gravel track, but on arriving we found a moveable no-entry sign just up from the junction. We could have easily pushed this aside and driven through, but decided to park and walk, since the first few km are the prime area.

Low cloud can be a problem here, but on both visits we were lucky, enjoying still and clear conditions though overcast. Just over 1km from the EN1 junction the road curls around a steep, wooded valley. Beyond this, the slopes on the left open up into logged areas of regrowth, which is the best habitat for bullfinches. The optimum spot is c2.7km from the junction: sure enough, on the first afternoon we could hear the distant whistling of bullfinches in this area, just detectable among the numerous calls of chaffinches and waxbills. Plenty of other species were popping in and out of the thick cover, but the bullfinches refused to play ball, even though they were virtually the only birds still calling as dusk approached at 7pm.

We returned to the same spot at 9am next morning, and this time our luck was in: after a short search two **Azores Bullfinches** appeared in dead branches close to the path, giving great views for ten minutes before disappearing. One bird appeared to be moulting its black cap and may have been a juvenile.

We walked on for another kilometre, reaching a junction with a metalled service road (see photo) where other visitors have also spotted bullfinches. However, by this point the mixture of laurel, cedar, pittisporum and Azorean heather are giving way to pure Japanese cedar plantation, which is not ideal habitat. Other attractions in the area include introduced **Common Waxbills**, and the endemic **Azorean Noctule Bats** which can be on the wing at any time of day.

Lagoa Furnas

Near the tourist town of Furnas and its hot springs, this lake is an established spot for nearctic waterbirds, and held a long-staying Pied-billed Grebe, American Wigeon and two Pintails in autumn 2019, all at the north end of the lake. We made a brief stopover by the church at the south end, but not much there.

Sete Cidades / Lagoa Azul

Around 45 minutes from Ponta Delgada, this town by the lakes is famous for its unique 'crossing rainbows'. The two lakes often hold rarities and we found the long-staying **Pied-billed Grebe** loitering in a shallow bay on the east side of Lagoa Azul, viewable from the causeway that divides this lake from the adjacent Lagoa Verde. The causeway is also one of the best vantage points from which to check out the 'Phyllo Wood' at the west end, which over the years has turned up yellow warbler and yellow-throated vireo among other rarities.

The lakeside [picnic site](#) just east of Sete Cidades town, which overlooks the west side of 'Phyllo Wood', is another area worth checking. There was large flock of House Sparrows and Atlantic Canaries feeding in a stubble field here, including a leucistic sparrow which caused us momentary panic. Since it was now late afternoon, we checked through the Yellow-legged Gulls arriving to roost on the lake, and found at least eight Lesser Black-backed Gulls among them.

Caldeira do Alferes

Another little-known site from Staffan Rodebrand's website. On google maps it looks like a promising marshy area close to Sete Cidades, so we reckoned it was worth a try at the end of our last day. This site takes some finding: continuing along the ER9/EN9-1A west from Sete Cidades, the road curves uphill for a few km before a right turn on a left hand bend. Take this turning and follow the minor road, looking out for a muddy uphill track on the right. Park carefully by this junction. The uphill track is impassable to most vehicles and is a 1-mile hike on foot. It ascends to the top of a wooded ridge where three more tracks diverge: take the right-hand, downhill track, which emerges into open farmland with 'scope views of the marshy fields to the left. The small pools here didn't hold any birds, but it might be more attractive later/earlier in the year when water levels should be higher.

SPECIES LIST – BIRDS Total: 31

Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*): One long-staying individual on the eastern side of Lagoa Azul, São Miguel island.

Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*): Two seen at Ponta do Albernaz, by livestock pools in the fields; one flying over Costa do Lajedo; one over Caldeira Funda.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*): Fairly common on both islands.

Coot (*Fulica atra*): Several on Lagoa Azul, São Miguel.

American Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*): One stayed for several days around the football field at Ponta Delgada.

Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*): One on the beach at São Roque.

Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*): One on the beach at São Roque.

Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus michahellis atlantis*): Azores subspecies, common on Flores and São Miguel.

Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*): At least eight going to roost on Lagoa Azul, São Miguel with c100 Yellow-legged Gulls.

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*): Several offshore at Santa Cruz das Flores on 14th, following the storm on Sunday.

Cory's Shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea borealis*): Common offshore in the mornings and evenings.

Feral Pigeon (*Columba livia*): Very common on Flores and São Miguel.

Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocta*): Common on São Miguel.

Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus azorica*): Regular on Flores and São Miguel.

Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo rothschildi*): Azorean subspecies, regularly seen around São Miguel.

- Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla gularis*): Very common on Flores and São Miguel.
- Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus azoricus*): Fairly common on Flores and São Miguel.
- Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*): Occasional on São Miguel.
- Starling (*Sternus vulgaris granti*): Common on Flores and São Miguel.
- Blackbird (*Turdus merula azorensis*): Very common on Flores and São Miguel.
- Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*): Fairly common on São Miguel.
- Common Waxbill (*Estrilda astrild*): Introduced species, now common on São Miguel.
- House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*): Very common on both islands. Leucistic female at Lagoa Azul.
- Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea patriciae*): Azorean subspecies, very common on both islands.
- Buff-bellied Pipit** (*Anthus rubescens*): One bird present throughout October in Faja Grande, usually by the swimming pool outside the Papadiamandis Restaurant.
- Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs moreletti*): Abundant on both islands.
- Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis parva*): Common on Flores and São Miguel.
- Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris aurantiiventris*): One at Ponta Delgada airport, on the bank opposite the terminal building.
- Atlantic Canary (*Serinus canaria*): An introduced species, abundant on Flores and São Miguel.
- Azores Bullfinch** (*Pyrhulla murina*): Two seen along the Miradoura da Tronqueira road through the Serra da Tronqueira mountains, at 9:30am on 18th.
- Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*): One seen feeding on the highest point of the E8 road to Sete Cidades. Also a flock was also present on top of the high peak of Morro Alto, Flores during our stay.
- Also seen: hybrid Black Duck/Mallard, Muscovy Duck*

MAMMALS

- Azores Noctule Bat:** Seen quite regularly over the forests at Serra da Tronqueira and Sete Cidades.
- Rabbit: Common on both islands.

BUTTERFLIES

- Long-tailed Blue: One seen at Lagoa Furnas.
- Large White: Fairly common on both islands.