

Gran Canaria

In Search of the Other
Blue Chaffinch

Feb/Mar 2022

A Birding Trip
Report by
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In Search of the Other Blue Chaffinch: 26th February to 5th March 2022

Where

Back in March 2008, when we first visited the Canary Islands, our time on Tenerife, Fuerteventura and La Gomera gave us all of the archipelago's endemic birds in a very enjoyable introduction to Macaronesian birding. Then, in 2015, the taxonomists decided to split the Blue Chaffinch in two! At the end of two full years without foreign travel, and with the world starting to return to some semblance of normality in the post-pandemic era, it seemed to great time to ease back into the flight cabin with an exciting little challenge.

Our February/March 2022 trip to Gran Canaria was a rather focused visit, specifically planned around what is now the single-island endemic, Gran Canaria Blue Chaffinch. Following it's split from Tenerife Blue Chaffinch, this high altitude Canarian Pine specialist carries the unenviable accolade of being one of the rarest birds in the Western Palearctic, with a global range of just 40 km² and a population little higher than four hundred birds.

The Gran Canaria Blue Chaffinch is known from only two localities on the island of its name, one centered largely within the Inagua Nature Reserve and one within the La Cumbre pine forests. This central region is amongst the most picturesque, remote and least populated in Gran Canaria, with the pretty mountain town of Tejeda being situated conveniently between the two forest blocks. Needless to say, this is precisely where we decided to locate ourselves for our whole stay, and it proved to be a an excellent choice.

Worthy of note in this introduction is the fact that this was not a purely bird-focused trip, being conducted with my largely non-birding wife. We also set aside ample time for long mountain walks amidst some truly breath-taking scenery, sightseeing in the unspoiled Canarian towns and villages, and sampling the excellent local cuisine.



Inagua Nature Reserve, looking south. Cover image: Roque Bentayga at sunset

Our complete itinerary was as follows:

Day 1 Morning flight from Birmingham to Las Palmas airport. Pick up hire car and drive to our Tejeda accommodation for the next week, [Casa EntreRoques](#). Eat in.

Day 2 Early morning birding at La Cumbre abandoned due to adverse weather. Drive down to Maspalomas on the sunny south coast. Back up for evening meal at [Cueva de la Tea](#), Tejeda.

Day 3 Early morning birding at Inagua, via El Juncal route. Visit to Tejeda for sightseeing and provisions. Brief visit to La Cumbre. Eat in.

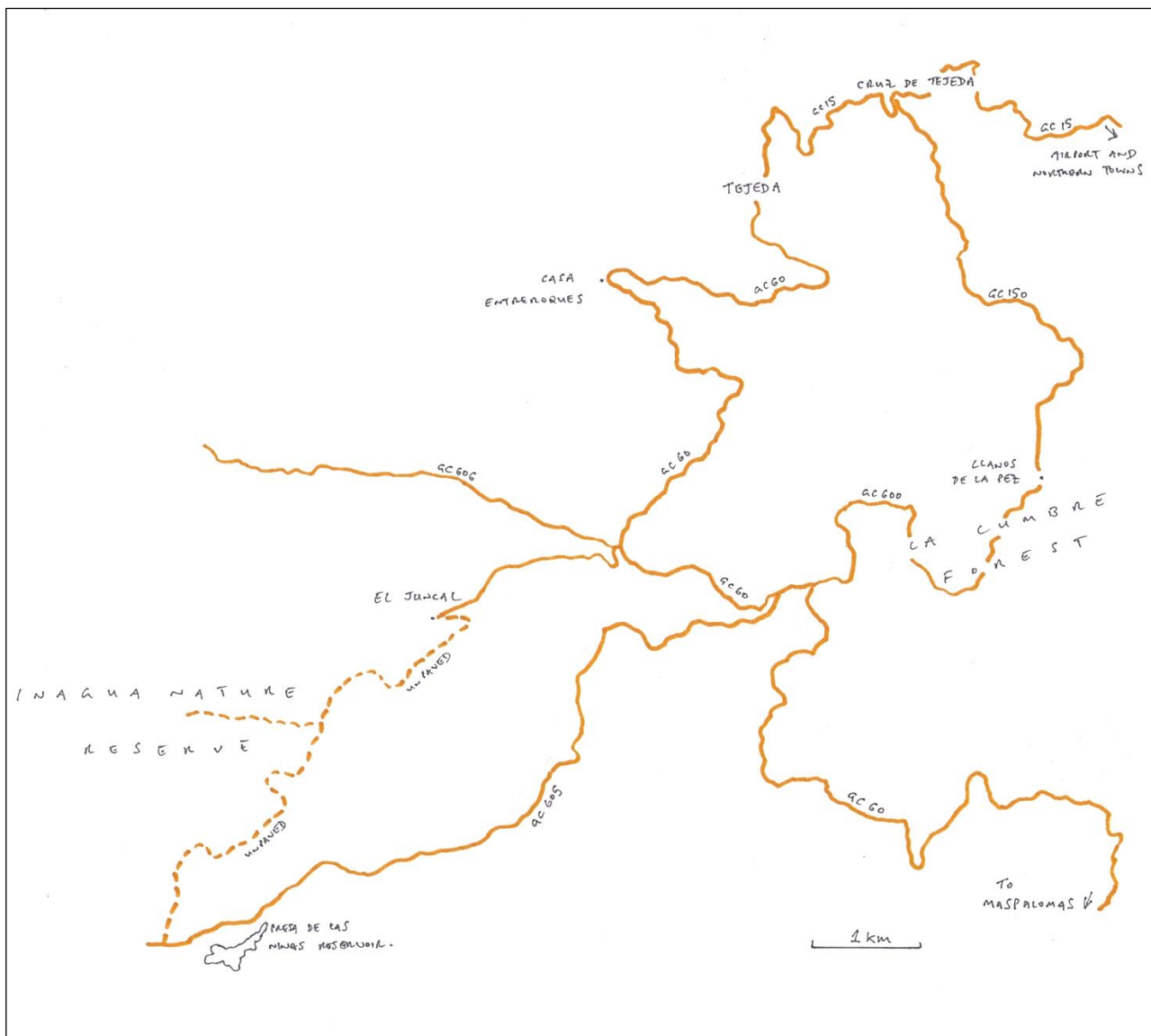
Day 4 Full morning walking at Inagua, via Cueva de las Ninas Reservoir route. Siesta, then brief visit to La Cumbre. Eat in.

Day 5 Early morning birding at Inagua, via El Juncal route (hike up Roque Bentayga for Victoria). Full afternoon exploring Tejeda. Eat in.

Day 6 Morning walking at Inagua, via El Juncal route. Brunch at Ayacata, then visit Cueva de las Ninas Reservoir. Home via El Juncal, evening meal at [La Dorotea](#), Tejeda.

Day 7 Poor weather at Tejeda so drive north to historic towns of Firgas and Arucas for sightseeing. Afternoon at Los Tilos laurel forest and Faro Sardina Lighthouse. Back to Tejeda to eat in.

Day 8 Check out, drive back to airport, return flight to Birmingham.



Sketch illustrating the location of the two core areas for Gran Canaria Blue Chaffinch, Inagua Nature Reserve and La Cumbre, showing access points and connectivity with Tejeda

When

In theory it is possible to see the sedentary Gran Canaria Blue Chaffinch (GCBC) at any time of the year, though the prevailing weather at different seasons is an important influencing factor when planning a visit. Also, flight prices vary significantly and if school holidays are not a consideration these periods are worth avoiding; the school half-term holidays just a week before our chosen calendar slot gave a four-fold increase in flight costs to this popular package holiday destination.

Through the winter months the weather in the Gran Canarian mountains can potentially be cold, wet and very windy. During our week at altitude we experienced low foggy cloud, heavy rain and gale-force winds, alongside days of cloudless blue skies and burning sunshine. Although winter sunshine is a great lure for those of us residing in Northern Europe, one must genuinely weigh up the risk of poor winter weather and at the very least allow enough time on site to account for some unbirdable days. In hindsight we may have been better off delaying our trip until later in the spring when more settled weather is likely, however these potential slots were already filled by other foreign birding ambitions in 2022!



Roque Bentayga sunset, viewed from above Cruz de Tajeda

How

Excellent value and service were provided by [Jet2](#) in terms of a direct flight from Birmingham to Gran Canaria. Our Peugeot 208 hire car was sourced via [Kayak](#) and rented from [Europcar](#). Our vehicle proved to be ideal, being sprightly on the steep mountain roads but small and nimble enough to pick our way through the regular encounters with other mountain drivers. 689 km covered in the week-long hire period.

Navigation between sites was done by pre-downloaded [Google Maps](#), and it is worth mentioning that one cannot be in a rush on the extremely winding and often narrow mountain roads; allow plenty of time for travel and be patient, particularly in respect of the great many cyclists who also enjoy the hilly terrain. [Maps.me](#), again with pre-downloaded maps, and some very handy [eBird](#) sighting waypoints proved to be invaluable in locating precise birding areas.

In terms of accommodation close to the key GCBC site, I cannot recommend our Tejeda [AirBnB](#) cottage [Casa EntreRoques](#) highly enough. The property boasted fantastically equipped spacious accommodation, a large modern kitchen, private garden with barbecue, hot tub and 360 degree mountain views. It was just fifteen minutes from the El Juncal parking spot and ten minutes in the opposite direction from the beautiful hill town of Tejeda, with shops for provisions and a range of great restaurants. Look no further!

Finally, in the face of global warming and the known impacts of air travel upon climate change, I would urge anyone undertaking journeys such as the one described in this report to consider carbon offsetting via the excellent scheme hosted by the [World Land Trust](#).

Gran Canaria Blue Chaffinch Strategy



Gran Canaria Blue Chaffinch, male, Inagua Nature Reserve

At the end of the 20th Century the GCBC was restricted to the Canarian Pine forests of the 38 km² Inagua Nature Reserve. From 2010 a breeding centre was set up in the 3km² La Cumbre forest and birds began to be released at this site. Between 2015 and 2019 wild juveniles were also released at La Cumbre, from the source population of Inagua, and a self-sustaining population is now in residence in the La Cumbre forest.

Scientific studies have demonstrated, however, that the prevailing climatic conditions at La Cumbre are much less suitable to GCBC than those at Inagua, resulting in a significantly lower population density at the former site. Thermal and hydric stresses experienced during the breeding season mean that La Cumbre supports just 3.3 birds/km², whereas Inagua supports 10.2 birds/km². In terms of simple birding maths, you are three times more likely to find a GCBC at Inagua than La Cumbre!

This factor alone should point the visiting birder to Inagua, however the experience of a week largely spent birding at these two sites brought several other factors to the fore. Firstly, the topography of the mountains around La Cumbre mean that low cloud and accompanying unpleasant weather are often funneled into this area. On my first visit the site was effectively unbirdable, experiencing low dense foggy cloud, high winds and intermittent rain. The second visit was timed to meet a clearer spell later in the day, but was still plagued with low misty cloud and reduced visibility, and the final stop was a very brief foray at the end of a day spent elsewhere.

Conversely, all four visits which I made to Inagua were blessed with wonderful blue skies and warm sunshine, whilst it was visibly apparent that cloud was invariably still enveloping the valley in which La Cumbre lies. It seems that Inagua lies just within the rain shadow of the central peaks, which desertifies the southern

reaches of the island, whilst La Cumbre is located on the margins of the wet zone to the north. The second thing to note is that, in my personal opinion, the spectacular scenery and remoteness of Inagua make for an immensely more pleasurable birding experience.

La Cumbre is bisected by a road which is very popular with walkers and sightseers, sporting a camp site and several picnic areas. Consequently the whole forest block is always very busy, with favoured car parks being full on good weather days and making parking something of a premium; there is almost no parking available other than designated car parks, as the roads are narrow and winding with no pull-offs.

La Cumbre also lacks the spectacular vistas offered in all directions at Inagua, and the Canarian Pine forest is also much less impressive in terms of its maturity and diversity of understory species. Located on steeper hillsides, the structure of the pine forests of Inagua feels much more natural, with significantly wider spacing of mature trees allowing in more light and promoting more plant growth below the canopy; much of the La Cumbre forest has a dense and uniformly aged plantation feel to it. Overall La Cumbre seems much less birdy than Inagua and the statistics clearly back this casual observation; I found GCBC on each of four visits to Inagua, but I failed to see one at La Cumbre!



The ever-misty forests of La Cumbre

In late Feb / early March GCBC did not generally seem to be in full territorial song. Although song was heard on every visit to Inagua it rarely seemed to be sustained. On a couple of occasions small groups of feeding birds were encountered, passing through mid to high branches of mature pines, with males in the parties regularly breaking into short bursts of song. Contact calls were also noted from some individuals within the groups, though birds often remained entirely silent.

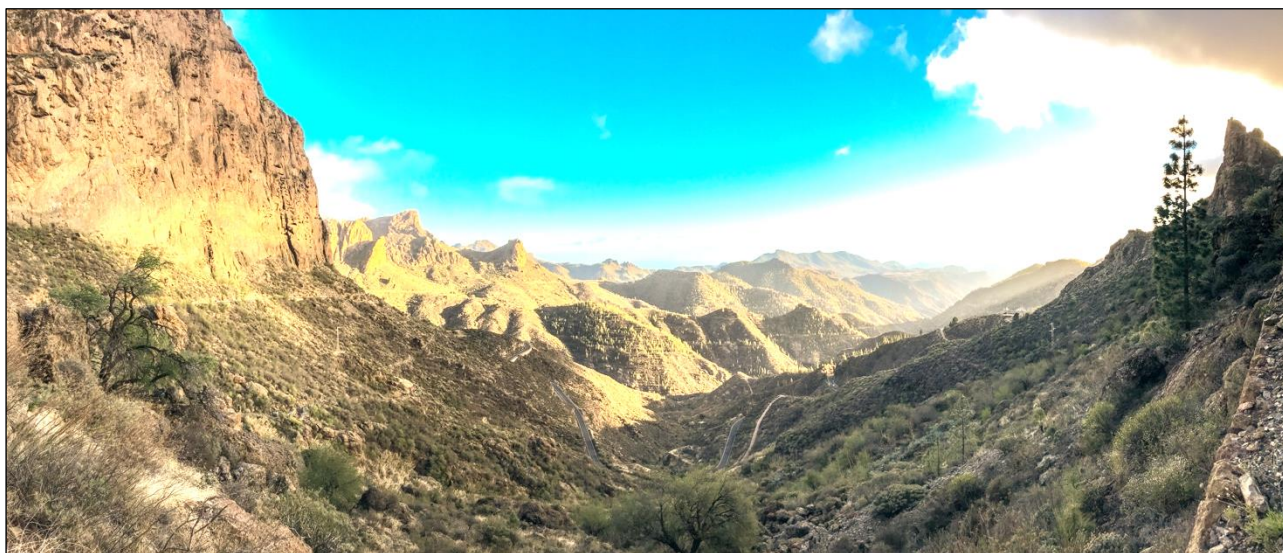
Success in finding GCBC during the time of my own visit was therefore derived from a mixture of tracking down somewhat irregularly calling birds but also in picking up movement of silent birds slowly moving through the boughs and needles of the pines, something which for a bird of very low population density can be quite a challenge!

Only twice did I encounter birds feeding on the ground, with the remainder of sightings all concerning arboreal individuals. GCBC appears to favour feeding along the thicker boughs of mature pines, though this is done in rather a lethargic and methodical manner, with regular prolonged pauses, meaning that picking out birds can be problematic; this is especially so when the birds are feeding on the highest boughs and also amongst the needles. Finding this scarce bird is not entirely straightforward by any means and photography is particularly challenging, as one is invariably looking upwards at birds which are generally unapproachable.

Specific GPS references for bird sightings are given in the species account section below, though in terms of general access to Inagua, the tiny hamlet of El Juncal is certainly the best point from which to commence the hike up to the key area of the reserve. Park at 27.954824, -15.648346. The walk from this point to the prime GCBC area is c4km, rising in altitude by a few hundred Metres. The track is wide and flat, however, with constantly changing spectacular views, and it is quite easy to walk to the GCBC site from El Juncal in an hour, given a reasonable degree of fitness.

Others appear to have made the hike from the GC 605 just northwest of the Presta Las Ninas Reservoir, however this route is almost 2km longer, with relatively little shade and with much inferior scenic viewing. Park at 27.927455, -15.677771. I would recommend that one looks no further than El Juncal for the above reasons and also in terms of accessibility from our recommended [Casa EntreRoques](#) accommodation (just fifteen minutes away) or if staying in Tejeda town (thirty minutes away).

In theory it would seem possible to take a 4WD vehicle to within 1km of the primary GCBC site at Inagua, and walk the remaining relatively flat track, however this option would necessitate expensive specialist vehicle hire and driving off public roads with unknown permission requirements.



Spectacular views from the GC-60 mountain road, close to the turning to El Juncal

Daily Diary:

Sat 26th Feb

Early morning departure from Birmingham to arrive at busy modern Las Palmas airport under showery skies. Collect shiny new Peugeot 208 from Europcar. Set off and realise I've forgotten to download Google Maps, but it has been two whole years since I last needed them!

Follow modern motorway past sprawling holiday and commercial developments, along the barren coastline, past vast expanses of tattered poly tunnels, before heading inland to leave an ugly landscape and climb abruptly into a verdant green and less spoilt world of pastel walls, terracotta tiles, and rooftop house leaks.

Enjoyable food shop in the well-stocked Santa Brigida Spar, then on to our superb AirBnB mountain cottage, [Casa EntreRoques](#), just below Tejeda. Time for a short walk amidst the dramatic volcanic slopes before dark. Relaxing evening of red wine, home cooking and an early bed.

Sun 27th Feb

Out into a hostile world of gusting winds, low cloud and showery rain at 07.30. Twenty-five minute drive to Llanos de la Pez, initially through dramatic winding roads, hugging cliffs and with views down to brighter landscapes far below. Steep climb into pines brings horrendous weather, too dark, cold and wet for proper birding, but two hours duly spent in the right zone.

Back for a very civilised breakfast of cured ham, local goat's cheese and fresh bread, with juice and coffee. Long and highly scenic one-and-a-half hour descent to Mespolomas, with various scenic stops en route, most notably Mirador Astronómico de la Degollada de las Yeguas with its tame Berthelot's Pipits.



Mirador Astronómico de la Degollada de las Yeguas and Berthelot's Pipit

After Hoopoe and Monk Parakeet viewing in irrigated hotel gardens, Vic is dropped off to draw at Mespolomas lighthouse and I continue onwards for birding at Juncalillo del Sur. Meet back at 16.30 for iced coffee then leisurely ascent with many more stops, in particular savoring the charismatic town of San Bartolome. Quick brush-up, then ten minute drive into Tejeda for scrumptious local fare in [Cueva de la Tea](#).

Mon 28th Feb

Just fifteen minutes' drive to the pretty village of El Juncal and start of the hike up to Inagua. Delighted to be in valley relatively sheltered from the continuing strong northerly winds and with the most inspiring views down to the village below and a remarkable landscape beyond. Great weather and very birdy, with increasingly spectacular views as the walk progresses.

A full four kilometre uphill hike to the eBird GCBC spot, within the Inagua Nature Reserve, where a presumed restriction on grazing gives a totally different feel to this superb area of Canarian Pine forest, with swathes of low growth ground cover. Dazzling male GCBC picked up feeding on the ground in strong sunlight at my eBird waypoint, first new bird in two long years!

Rapid descent and drive back to Casa EntreRoques to meet Vic for a large brunch. Ten minutes' drive down to the charismatic little hillside town of Tejeda, under a clear blue sky, for Spar food shop, town exploration, cake buying and ice cream consumption, the latter two via the excellent [Dulceria Nublo](#).

Brief siesta then drive to Llanos de la Pez area for some walking in the broken low cloud, a few photos, then drive loop home via Cruz de Tejeda, amazingly still swathed in dense low cloud. Home for beers, wine, tick-celebrations and home-cooked cuisine.



Tejeda town, overshadowed by the imposing Roque Bentayga

Tue 1st March

Civilised three course breakfast then twenty-five minute drive to our parking spot close to Cueva de las Ninas Reservoir. Seventeen Kilometre mountain walk under clear blue sky, including a productive couple of hours around the Inagua GCBC site, along same 300m stretch of track.

Back to digs for brief siesta then end day back up at Llanos da la Pez, this time under blue sky. Very busy, habitat so much inferior to Inagua, very few birds.

Back to Cara EntreRoques via spectacular sunset vista from the mirador above Cruz de Tejeda, then relax and cook our own tea before an early night.

Wed 2nd March

06.00 alarm and early start for El Juncal. Surprised to find that direct walk to the Inagua GCBC site takes just fifty minutes, once one is familiar with the route. Stunning early morning light over spectacular local landscapes. Typically the montane birds are late to rise and finding the GCBCs proves to be hard work.

Back downhill c12.00 via endemic Odonata sightings. Hearty late brunch with Vic, who has hiked up Roque Bentayga. Afternoon exploring the wonderful nooks and crannies of Tejeda, especially the winding narrow streets of its lower elevations. More superb ice cream in the warm sunshine. Back via La Cesta for obligatory photos.

Beers in our personal jacuzzi, with a mountain backdrop, then best home-cooked meal yet of chorizo fried potatoes, and fresh courgette with red pepper. Great day!

Thursday 3rd March

Relaxed breakfast then to El Juncal to show Vic the scenic splendors of the alternative Inagua route. Great weather but again hard birding as GCBCs remain in the upper branches of the pines.

Downhill again and onwards for coffee and jamon croquettes at Ayacata, then to Cueva de las Ninas Reservoir, which actually turns out to be a rather inhospitable and birdless spot. Brief return to El Juncal for a wander around the quiet village, then home.

Wash and brush-up, then out for traditional Canarian dining in Tejeda at [La Dorotea](#).



Inagua Nature Reserve, looking northeast towards Roque Nublo; male Gran Canaria Blue Chaffinch

Friday 4th March

Dull, wet and windy at Tejeda as per forecast. Breakfast then foggy and wet drive over the roof of the island in thick low cloud; remarkable transformation as we travel into verdant green valleys, punctuated with sleepy towns and villages.

First stop is the small town of Firgas, which boasts a couple of architectural lures. Short drive onwards to Arucas, with its spectacular cathedral and historic cobbled streets for sightseeing, coffee and cake.

Early afternoon to the Los Tilos laurel forest, a tiny block of remnant habitat where a break in the clouds produces an hour of great birding. Final stop Faro Sardinia Lighthouse for photos and a brief sea-watch, then winding drive home for sunset walk, then final Gran Canarian supper.

Saturday 5th March

Just time for an hour at El Juncal for last birding and photos in cold and blustery conditions, then finish packing, last breakfast and tidy our wonderful cottage in anticipation of departure.

An hour and a quarter driving first through clouds and rain, then dropping into warm overcast skies in the lowlands. Surprisingly painless Europcar drop off in the vast underground parking lot, and equally civilised check in for our flight home.

Notes on Key Target Species and Local Specialties

Birds:

Cory's Shearwater *Calonectris borealis*

Fifteen counted close in, past the headland of Faro Sardina, late in the afternoon of 03/03/22.

Plain Swift *Apus unicolor*

Recorded on five days out of eight, at a wide range of locations, from the coastal town on Maspalomas to the mountain tops at Inagua. Peak counts c20 at Maspalomas on 27/02/22 and c50 at Inagua on 03/03/22.

Laurel Pigeon *Columba junoniae*

The Laurel Pigeon is believed to have become extinct in Gran Canaria in the late 19th Century. In 2010 a breeding centre was established and in 2012 the first birds were reintroduced onto Gran Canaria. Between this date and 2017 a total of 261 birds were released, and now there is a small but self-sustaining population on the island.

On 04/03/22 we visited the excellent laurel forest at Reserva Natural Especial de los Tilos, parking at 28.088417, -15.593124. The weather was predictably wet and gloomy, but during a brief early-afternoon break in the cloud we immediately saw at least three Laurel Pigeons, with others calling from the lush vegetation cover. Although sadly just a tiny pocket of habitat, this site is well worthy of a visit to give a feel for the natural wonders which the island would once have held.



Los Tilos laurel forest and Laurel Pigeon

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo insularum*

This Canary Island endemic subspecies was seen daily at all altitudes, with double-figure counts on some days.

Greater Spotter Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major thanneri*

The Gran Canaria endemic subspecies was recorded on every pine forest excursion, though daily counts never exceeded single figures.



Plain Swift, Inagua and Greater Spotted Woodpecker, Llanos de la Pez

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus canariensis*

This Canary Island endemic subspecies was seen daily at all altitudes.

Monk Parakeet *Myiopsitta monachus*

Introduced. Double figures recorded in the irrigated parks of Maspalomas on 27/02/22.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax canariensis*

The only corvid recorded on the trip, this Canary Island endemic subspecies was encountered in double figures on most days.

African Blue Tit *Cyanistes teneriffae teneriffae*

This subspecies, restricted to Tenerife, La Gomera and Gran Canaria, was a common resident, with up to fifty birds recorded per day. Numbers greatest in pine forests.

Canary Islands Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus canariensis canariensis*

Very common resident in all habitats, by sight and especially by ear, with three-figure numbers estimated on some days.

Eurasian Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla heineken*

Although described as a 'common resident' this Canary Islands endemic subspecies was only recorded on two occasions.

Sardinian Warbler *Curruca melanocephala leucogastra*

Singles recorded on four days, Canary Islands endemic subspecies.

Spectacled Warbler *Curruca conspicillata orbitalis*

This Macaronesian Island endemic subspecies was only seen at Juncalillo del Sur on 27/02/22, a single pair. 27.795550,-15.479875.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula cabreræ*

The Madeira and Canary Islands endemic race was a very common resident at lower altitudes and sounded quite vocally distinct from the nominate race.



African Blue Tit and Canary Island Chiffchaff, Llanos de la Pez

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula superbis*

Endemic subspecies to Tenerife and Gran Canaria, this was not a common bird and was only encountered on four days, always in areas of rather dense vegetation.

Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis hispaniolensis*

Small groups seen at just two, rather desolate, lowland locations.

Berthelot's Pipit *Anthus berthelotii berthelotii*

Seen or heard daily, maximum c15 on the descent to Mespalomas.

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs canariensis*

Surprisingly just two records of the race endemic to Tenerife, La Gomera and Gran Canaria, a pair at Llanos de la Pez on 01/03/22 and one on the descent to the airport on 05/03/22.

Gran Canaria Blue Chaffinch *Fringilla polatzeki*

Only seen within the bounds of Inagua Nature Reserve, the prime site was on the mountain trail between points 27.945016, -15.671876 and 27.945548, -15.675863. Each of the following sightings were either of birds sighted visually along the above stretch of forest track or by following singing birds which had been heard from the track:

Single male on 28/02/22.

Seven individuals seen or heard on 01/03/22.

Four seen on 02/03/22.

Four seen on 03/03/22.

Additional records remote from the above area were of unseen singing males at 27.949536, -15.654733 and 27.938463, -15.665589, both on 02/03/22.

As per the species-specific notes given in the previous section of this report, birds can be elusive at the season of our visit, not yet being in full territorial song and often tricky to pick out in their Canary Pine environment. Check mid and upper pine branches for movement, as birds quietly feed in pairs and small groups, often foraging along the thicker boughs. Note that they rarely seem to feed on the ground.

Atlantic Canary *Serinus canaria*

Probably the most commonly encountered bird species on the island, with estimates running into three figures on several days of the trip.



Common Chaffinch, Llanos de la Pez and Atlantic Canary, male, El Juncal

Odonata:**Island Darter *Sympetrum nigrifemur***

Once considered as a subspecies of *S. striolatum*, most authorities now acknowledge this dragonfly as a full species endemic to the Canary Islands and Madeira. Distinguished by the reduced yellow in the leg-stripes, it was recorded around the standing water in the largely dry river valley below El Juncal, with six on 02/03/22 and two on 03/03/22.



Island Darter, left male and right female, El Juncal

Lepidoptera:**Clouded Yellow** *Colias crocea*

Two seen at Cueva de las Ninas Reservoir on 03/03/22.

Canary Islands Red Admiral *Vanessa vulcania*

Seen on six days of the trip, though in single figures on each.

Monarch *Danaus plexippus*

One seen at Maspalomas on 27/03/22.

Canary Specked Wood *Pararge xiphioides*

Two seen in ornamental gardens in the centre of Arucas on 04/03/22.

Ian Merrill, Leicestershire, UK. March 2022.

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Inagua Nature Reserve; Hoopoe, Maspalomas; Atlantic Canary, female, El Juncal