

Madeira, Porto Santo 1st to 8th May 2024

Beata and I visited Porto Santo, part of the Madeiran archipelago from 1st to 8th May 2024. We stayed in the Pestana Hotel on an all-inclusive deal for one week booked via TUI, flying from Gatwick. Facilities, staff, and food were all excellent. All in all, we had a great holiday and would return.

There is very little on the internet about birding on this island, save a few entries on eBird and a little on another site Madeira Sea watching, which is constantly blocked by my anti-virus software. I knew from experience that pickings were a bit slim on the Atlantic Islands, and this proved to be the case. We were however, not there just for birds.

We didn't really explore the top half of the Island, as it is quite mountainous, and stuck to the populated Southern half.

The Island is small and there is a main road which runs East to West along the Southern coast.

The size of the habitats, and the size of the island, coupled with its remoteness, does make it surprising that some species are present or maintain a viable population, but they are there, and we recorded them.

Sites visited.

The Western part of the island is a good site, the last km or so to the end has good habitat for all the passerines on the Southern (seaward) side and there seems to be an EU project in progress to protect it. As with most EU projects, it seems a good percentage of the budget is spent on signs telling you what they are doing, and who is doing it.

The Hotel gardens contained a few birds and were well maintained with flowering plants for butterflies. Spanish Sparrows pillage the restaurant tables. There is a wooden walkway to the beach which prevents people roaming all over the sand dunes. There are some wet dune slacks on the landward side of this, which look good for migrants but held only the common species plus Moorhens. It's possible to sea watch from the end of the walkway, but this produced only Yellow Legged Gulls and Cory's Shearwaters, and the latter are distant.

The area in and around the Golf Course is also good. The South is quite productive, the perimeter fence of the golf course is flattened in some places, but I didn't enter, there is no real need to. Roads to the North give views of the whole area, especially the ponds, a telescope is useful here. The area is well signposted from the main road as "Campo de Golf".

Walking into the town takes about 45 minutes at a steady pace, and there are some undeveloped areas of scrub on the seaward side of the road not far from the centre.

There is a concrete sided flood channel running through the town from the reservoir to the sea which looks good but only seemed to contain what looked like a burgeoning population of feral Mallards and Muscovy Ducks, plus a few frogs. I did see my first Canary here on 3rd May.

A site called "El Tanque", a water storage area near the airport seems to be the major focus of eBird reports. It lies immediately to the East of the airport terminal, behind a military base. There is a gas station opposite and a vehicle dump which contained an interesting selection of derelict buses. We got lost trying to find it, and were directed to it by a jogger, who turned out to be a retired Brit. It's an underwhelming, concrete sided reservoir which no doubt has its days but seems now to have a low water level and is overrun with what appear to be introduced plants, with few bird species.

We booked a boat trip across the Bay, booked from a kiosk in the centre of town, on the left just before the roundabout coming from the hotel. We had hopes of seeing cetaceans and seabirds but saw only a few Common Terns in the harbour and Cory's Shearwaters at sea, but this is no reflection on the company running it, who were organised, professional and friendly.

Bird List. 27 species recorded.

Mallard - Feral birds on the Tank and adjacent creek.

Muscovy Duck - Feral birds on the Tank and adjacent creek.

Cory's Shearwater - Large numbers on morning sea watches and on the boat trip.

Grey Heron - a pair on the Golf Course ponds.

Little Egret - a pair on the Golf Course ponds.

Common Buzzard - 2 birds seen over the mountains at the Western end.

Common Kestrel canariensis - common throughout.

Common Moorhen - pairs wherever there was water, even in the dune slacks. Also at the tank, creek, and the golf course.

Eurasian Coot - pairs at the Golf course and at the tank. The pair on the golf course ponds had 5 chicks on the first visit, 3 on the second, being eyed by grey herons and gulls.

Ruddy Turnstone - 1 on the beach on the first morning.

Sanderling - 3 on the beach on the first morning, with the Turnstone.

Yellow-legged Gull - common, maximum count about 50. Seemed to be the Azorean subspecies.

Common Tern - a few seen fishing in the harbour.

Feral Pigeon - common throughout.

Eurasian Collared Dove - common throughout.

Turtle Dove - a pair seen in the beachside scrub on the first morning.

Laughing Dove - seemed common and recorded largely around the town, where well photographed. Perhaps a recent colonist.

Plain Swift- uncommon, 3 over the hotel most mornings and a pair over an offshore island on the boat trip, but that was it.

Hoopoe - surprisingly very common and seen in good numbers, breeding in old stone walls, and birds were seen carrying food all over.

Berthelot's Pipit - common throughout

Common Blackbird - common throughout

Grey Wagtail schmitzi - one bird seen badly and briefly South of the Golf Course.

Eurasian Blackcap heineken - occurred wherever there was dense scrub, even in the hotel garden, song was very different from European ones.

Spectacled Warbler orbitalis. 1 individual near the Golf Course. Not the sulking bird I have seen in other countries but perched up high like a Whitethroat.

Magpie sp. 1 bird seen at airport by Beata, species unknown.

Spanish Sparrow - commonest bird.

Atlantic Canary - widespread but not common and difficult to pin down, took time to get good views.

Gordon Shaw West Molesey, Surrey May 2024