

Cape Verdes late April/early May 2011



Red-billed Tropicbird at Praia, Santiago, 30th April 2011

Introduction

Following the sightings of three extreme Western Palearctic herons at one site in March 2011 (see [here](#) for details), I arranged to visit the island of Santiago in late April/early May in the hope of seeing these birds as well as catching up with some of the specialities again. Kris de Rouck also provided an invaluable update, having visited the island a couple of weeks prior to my visit.

Santiago is the most bird rich island of the Cape Verdes, and holds a number of notable species including Red-billed Tropicbird, Bourne's Heron, Alexander's Kestrel, Helmeted Guineafowl, Cape Verde Swift, Grey-headed Kingfisher, Cape Verde Warbler and Iago Sparrow. There is also a reservoir – Barragem de Poilão – that had only just been built when I visited in 2007, and has already gained a reputation as a top site to search for vagrant water birds.

Visas can be bought on arrival at Praia airport for €25.

Travel and Accommodation

I had previously visited the Cape Verdes in 2007, when all international flights had to go through the island of Sal. However, with the islands now being an up-and-coming tourist destination, it is possible to fly to Boavista or Santiago

(Praia) from Lisbon with TAP so things are simpler these days. I managed to get some reasonably priced flights (£496) from London to Santiago (Praia) at short notice, to coincide with the 4-day weekend caused by the Royal Wedding. A couple of birders, Andy Clifton and Mick Frosdick, also made the trip.

We decided not to hire a car, and used a taxi driver Paulino Vaurela Mendonca – he was excellent and spoke fluent English; he was happy to pick us up at odd times of day and night, and when he wasn't around he quickly organised for one of his friends to drive us to wherever we wanted to. Paulino came recommended from the aforementioned trip report, and some Belgian friends also used him a couple of weeks prior to our visit – he knows all of the birding sites on Santiago and can be contacted by phone on +238 9943506 and +238 9265837, or via email at paulinovarelam@hotmail.com.

Due to the time of our flights, we only needed two night's accommodation. We stayed at the Hotel Luar, in the centre of Praia, and found it to be excellent value – between the three of us, we paid €145. They did not seem to respond too hastily to emails, but on arrival it was obvious that they had received our booking request – they can be contacted at hoteluar@cvtelecom.cv or +238 2615947. Food wise, we used the small delicatessen at the end of the road by our hotel for general supplies, while on our first day we had a decent meal in one of the restaurants in Pedra Badejo – there's no issues with the food on the Cape Verdes, so long as you're a fan of fresh fish.

Itinerary

- **Friday 29th April 2011** late afternoon flight London Gatwick to Lisbon, Lisbon to Praia (arrival 1am)
- **Saturday 30th April 2011** dawn until early afternoon at Barragem de Poilão; lunch at Pedra Badejo; afternoon visit to the cliffs at Praia and then São Domingos; evening at Barragem de Poilão
- **Sunday 1st May 2011** morning visit to São Jorge dos Orgãos; midday at Tarrafel and afternoon/evening seawatch off Praia.
- **Monday 2nd May 2011** 1am flight from Praia to Lisbon, several hours wait in Lisbon, arrival at London Heathrow early evening.

Map of Santiago showing the main towns of Praia, Assomada and Tarrafal – the journey from Praia to Tarrafal takes approximately 1 ½ hours.

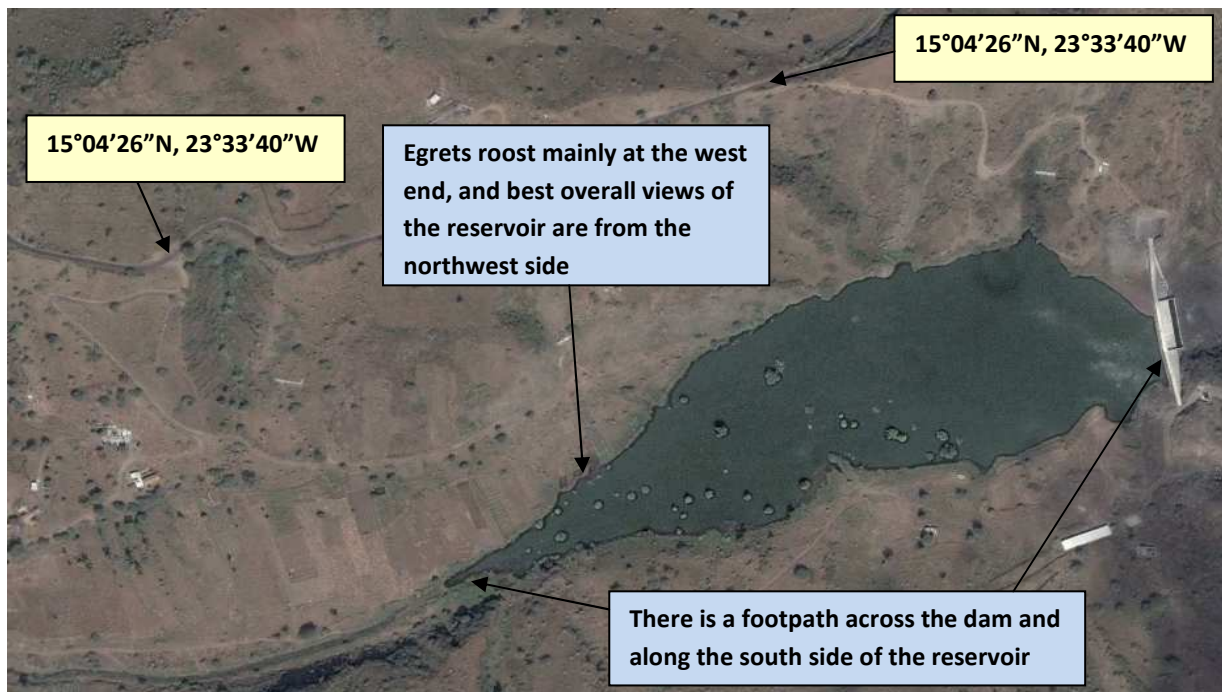


São Jorge dos Orgãos

Barragem de Poilão

30th April 2011

Barragem de Poilão – this is the only area of fresh water on Santiago, and attracts an excellent array of waterbirds. This site hosted three extreme vagrants to the Western Palearctic – a **Black-headed Heron** (found in 2009), two **Black Herons** and three **Intermediate Egrets** – during my visit.



The reservoir (barragem) is best accessed by driving north from Praia, through the village of São Domingos and then turning right (east) in the small village of Sacramento towards Pedra Badejo and Santa Cruz. After a few miles, Barragem de Poilão can be found immediately due south of the road. There are two driveable tracks that lead off the main road – one at 15°04'26"N, 23°33'40"W that leads to the west end of the reservoir and one at 15°04'35"N, 23°33'27"W that leads to the dam (at the east end).

It is possible to walk from the dam at the east end, around the south side of the reservoir (I had excellent views of **Alexander's Kestrel**, **Grey-headed Kingfisher**, **Common Waxbill** and **Iago Sparrow**) and then descend down to the west end. The only access on the north side is from the west end; you can walk a few hundred yards east before the footpath finishes by a rocky outcrop.



We arrived at dawn, and from the dam end, quickly located the **Black-headed Heron** in a dead tree at the west end; it departed at 6.30am and then did not come back in until about an hour before sunset (where again it favoured the west end) – it was not present at all during the day.

The majority of herons and egrets use the reservoir as a roost site, when upwards of 1,000 **Cattle Egrets** are present. However, the three **Intermediate Egrets** and two **Black Herons** were present throughout the day – the former generally being seen at the west end, while the two 'umbrellas' were both

mobile around the reservoir (and never seen together). At least six **Bourne's Herons** were also seen – mainly juveniles, but also an adult; these birds again are best early in the morning or in the evening when they come in to roost. There were also a couple of **Squacco Herons**, a fair number of **Grey Herons** and c.30 **Spoonbills** (including a first-winter ringed as a nestling on 13/5/2010 at Lac de Grand-Lieu, Loire Atlantique, France).



Waders were relatively thin on the ground, with the expected raucous **Black-winged Stilts**, a handful of **Common Sandpipers** and a few **Greenshanks**.

The area adjacent to Barragem de Poilão is excellent for seeing some of Santiago's specialist species, and the walk from the dam around the southern section passes through dry scrub and arable land – excellent for **Alexander's Kestrel**, **Grey-headed Kingfisher**, **Spectacled Warbler**, **Iago Sparrow** and lots of buzzing **Common Waxbills**. As I descended down to the western extremity of the reservoir, a rather babbler-like call signalled the presence of **Cape Verde Warbler**, and one of these was seen for several minutes coming to drink at the reservoir, amongst **Spanish Sparrows**, during the heat of the day. A handful of **Cape Verde Swifts** eventually made an appearance late morning, and scanning the distant peaks produced a **Brown-necked Raven**.

Looking west from the dam at Barragem de Poilão, Santiago



Pedra Badejo – this is the coast immediately to the east of Barragem de Poilão, and a place where I’ve seen Cape Verde Shearwater on a previous visit. However, in the heat of the day, it was dead although we had a decent bit of fish in one of the local restaurants.

Praia Cliffs – a well-known and easy site to observe Red-billed Tropicbirds at close range. At least eight birds were present, all showing well as they patrolled their nest site on the cliffs. The area is accessed to the east of the harbour, directly adjacent to the Shell Terminal.

São Domingos – heading back towards Barragem de Poilão late afternoon, we were fortunate that our driver was able to speak to a few locals and seek out the potential whereabouts of some **Helmeted Guinea fowl**. We ended up on a small hillside above the village of São Domingos, where we found three birds feeding.

1st May 2011

São Jorge dos Orgãos – we had a bit of a lie in, shattered from the long day yesterday. We headed north out of Praia up the central road, passing the junction where yesterday we headed east to Barragem de Poilão, and in the

small village of João Teves, we turned southwest off the main road to São Jorge dos Orgãos. This road terminates in a viewpoint at 15°03'02"N, 23°36'36"W where, surprisingly, the first bird we saw was a juvenile **Bourne's Heron** – flying in from the east and then feeding in a field. The bird we were here to find showed itself pretty quick too, in the form of a **Cape Verde Buzzard** that performed at mid distance over the rocky outcrops. **Grey-headed Kingfishers, Spectacled Warblers** and **Iago Sparrows** were common here, along with innumerable **Blackcaps**. A brief stop back down the road at the Botanical Gardens failed to produce any sightings of **Cape Verde Warbler**, though we didn't give it too long – this has traditionally been the best place to see this species on the island.

Tarrafel – we drove to the north end, and although conscious of arriving in the heat of the day, decided to have a quick seawatch from the small headland directly to the southeast of the main bay. Having stayed here a few years ago, I knew it was a good site for **Cape Verde Shearwater** – even at midday, distant views of a handful of birds were noted. On the far side of the bay, a **Red-billed Tropicbird** seemed to be patrolling the cliffs so presumably this species breeds here. Additionally, a **Common Tern** here surprisingly seemed to represent the second record for Santiago, with only a dozen or so recorded on the Cape Verdes (see [Hazevoet \(2010\)](#) for the latest report).

After travelling back to Praia, we were dropped off at the hotel where we packed our bags and relaxed for a couple of hours mid afternoon.

Praia Lighthouse – we had a seawatch here from 4.30pm until dark, and were mightily impressed with what we saw given the lack of mention of this site anywhere else. It's easy to get to, with plenty of parking, and the walls of the lighthouse compound allow shelter from the wind. We watched from 14°54'01"N, 23°30'33"W and looked directly south. Although the **Red-billed Tropicbird** colony on the cliffs to the east of Praia could be viewed very distantly here, it was the seabird passage that we had come here to see – upwards of 80 **Cape Verde Shearwaters** meant that they were almost constantly in view, although these were somewhat overshadowed by the excellent views of about five **Fea's Petrels** that were lingering offshore; presumably waiting for darkness to fall before flying into the mountains on Santiago where this species breeds. There was also a brief **Boyd's Shearwater**

that powered through, lost in the waves as it presumably characteristically ditched on the sea.

Mentioned above, **Common Tern** is a rare species on the Cape Verdes if you go by the previous records. However, there is plenty to still be discovered here and it seems that our visit coincided with the migration of this species – five birds were seen well on this seawatch while an extremely distant flock of 70 ‘commic’ terns were also noted.

Ribeira Chiqueira – we had an after dark mission, to try and track down some singing Boyd’s Shearwaters – just to the north of Praia, in both 2005 and 2006, birds were singing and seen in flight in ‘the valley running southeast from São Domingos, and audible from the layby on the south side of the road 700 metres west of the road junction north of Riberia Chiqueira’. However, with a lot of change in the roads (with a completely new road and junctions added), we were unable to interpret the new road layout with these directions and therefore drew a blank. A brief **Cape Verde Barn Owl** was decent enough, and this was to be the last bird of the trip.

We were taken back to the international airport at Praia, where we said our goodbyes to Paulino, and within a couple of hours the latest Cape Verdean experience was over. I’d forgotten how much I like the islands – its vibe, its people, its scenery and its birdlife. With a long (expected) wait in Lisbon, it wasn’t until the early evening that we finally arrived back in London after a very enjoyable trip.

Bourne's Heron at Barragem de Poilão, Santiago, 30th April 2011



Black Heron at Barragem de Poilão, Santiago, 30th April 2011

Alexander's Kestrel at Barragem de Poilão, Santiago, 30th April 2011



Grey-headed Kingfisher at São Jorge do Orgãos, Santiago, 1st May 2011



SYSTEMATIC LIST

Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae*
Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsi*
Boyd's Shearwater *Puffinus assimilis boydi*
Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*
Squacco Heron *Ardeola ralloides*
Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*
Black Heron *Hydranassa ardesiaca*
Intermediate Egret *Egretta intermedia*
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*
Black-headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala*
Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*
Bourne's Heron *Ardea purpurea bournei*
Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*
Cape Verde Buzzard *Buteo Buteo bannermani*
Alexander's Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus alexandri*
Helmeted Guineafowl *Numida meleagris*
Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*
Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*
Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*
Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*
Rock Dove *Columba livia*
Cape Verde Barn Owl *Tyto alba detorta*
Cape Verde Swift *Apus alexandri*
Grey-headed Kingfisher *Halcyon leucocephala action*
Cape Verde Warbler *Acrocephalus brevipennis*
Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla gularis*
Spectacled Warbler *Sylvia conspicillata orbitalis*
Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*
Spanish Sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis*
Iago Sparrow *Passer iagoensis*
Common Waxbill *Estrilda astrild*