Tenerife – February 6th-10th 2017

This report covers a 5 day, mainly birding, trip to Tenerife in early February 2017 with my girlfriend. With it being my first time on the Canaries, or indeed on any of the Atlantic islands, a number of endemic species and Macaronesian specialties were my aim before the holiday. In total, I had 12 targets, and managed to see 11 of them with relative ease, including both Pigeons, the Blue Chaffinch and Barbary Falcon. A couple of surprise, bonus species were also seen, the standout being a Barolo Shearwater, making the trip extremely successful. I left the island having seen 44 species in all.

Transport, accommodation and weather

We flew with Monarch, with return flights from London Gatwick booked in October for a good price of £60 each. It was my first time flying with Monarch, and without blowing my mind, I was pleasantly surprised. The legroom was ample, and both flights took off and landed promptly. On the island, we rented a car with Hertz. Having initially booked with Goldcar, we changed companies after reading numerous very poor reviews, and complaints at the extra charges they impose. So, we were surprised and disappointed to experience a similar issue with Hertz, meaning we had to pay a £73 ‘insurance fee’, as well as putting down a deposit of £100 to guarantee we’d return the car full of petrol. We did, and we got our money back, but it was a fairly annoying start to the holiday. It does seem it’s a Tenerife problem – we have used Hertz before, with no such fees.

With birds in mind, we booked an apartment in La Perdorma, near La Orotava, in the north of the island. It was an hour and 15 from the south airport but well worth the journey, putting is not only in a prime place for coastal birding, but also close enough to Mount Teide, and laurel forests. We booked with AirBnB, as usual, and our host Carmen provided us with a beautiful, spacious and comfortable apartment, where we cooked a few meals and could enjoy a balcony view over the sea.

The weather was exceptionally good during our trip. From Monday to Thursday, the sun was almost always out, with temperatures hovering around the 22/23 Celsius mark. This made for pleasant conditions, and the wind was only really notable along the north-east coast (particularly Punta de Teno). Only on the last day was there rain (and lots of it), aside from the briefest and lightest of showers in the laurel belt on Tuesday 7th.

Literature

As ever, Gosney came into good use, particularly for finding the Pigeons. The new Crossbill guide to Tenerife and La Gomera was also very helpful, and I would recommend both of these guides. Clarke and Collins was rather dated. I used the vast CloudBirders archive like normal, which was useful for working out recent gen as well as what species I could expect in the winter. Below is an appendix of books.

- Finding Birds in the Canaries (Gosney, 2013)
- Crossbill Guide: Canary Islands, Volume 2: Tenerife and La Gomera, Spain (Hilbers & Woutersen, 2015)
Highlights
Barolo Shearwater, Laurel Pigeon, Bolle’s Pigeon, Barbary Falcon, Barbary Partridge, Blue Chaffinch, Atlantic Canary, Canary Islands Chiffchaff, Berthelot’s Pipit, Plain Swift, African Blue Tit, Little Bittern and Spectacled Warbler.

Day by day account
Monday 6th February
Having arrived at Tenerife South airport at about 14:30, we collected our car and made our way along the coast, up past Santa Cruz and across the north side, to our apartment in La Perdorma. On the way, my first Canary Islands Chiffchaffs and Atlantic Canaries were noted, as well as numerous Kestrels and a few domesticated African Collared Doves (AKA Barbary), with their more numerous Eurasian cousins. Having settled in, with a few hours of light left we decided to go for a drive to explore our local area and some sites for targets that weren’t far up the road. With a couple of cars parked in the famous Mirador de La Grimona, we continued on to Barranco de Ruiz, where large numbers of the Chiffchaffs were making themselves heard. After a short while, a Buzzard appeared over the west ridge, and it was soon joined by a Barbary Falcon, which began to mob it. The bird wasn’t in view for long, but was a fine start to the trip. We quickly checked Roque de Garachico before sundown, with Barolo Shearwaters said to still be nesting here, but the belief that they return well after dark seems accurate, and all we had were Yellow-legged Gulls.

Tuesday 7th February
We were up well before dawn, and headed into the Parque Nacional del Teide, stopping a couple of times to appreciate the breath-taking views from above the clouds. One such stopped revealed a few Tenerife Goldcrests, as well as the ubiquitous Chiffchaffs and Canaries. As we drove through the pine forest near Aguamansa a small, blue finch flew over the road – quite clearly my first Blue Chaffinch. Swapping Canadian-like forest for the dry, desert of Mount Teide produced another lifer fly over the road, this time a Berthelot’s Pipit. We pushed on, pulling ourselves away from the stunning geology, and reached Las Lajas picnic area, near Vilaflor, at about 08:30. Within moments of parking near the trough by the small building, the calls of various birds could be heard, and in the following hour we enjoyed simply fantastic views of 6+ Blue Chaffinches, 4 African Blue Tits, 2 Great Spotted Woodpeckers, 20+ Canaries and a few Canary Islands Chiffchaffs, as well as a single Raven. The Chaffinches were very confiding, though their preference for the shade prevented any crippling views. This is surely the site to experience close-range views of this special Western Palearctic bird and, satisfied, we headed off again, this time to Erjos/Monte del Agua.

Arriving at Erjos we were hoping to drive into the laurel forest in search of Pigeons, but we found the route blocked to cars, and seemingly walkers too. Instead, we decided to check nearby Erjos Pools, and this lovely site produced the first waterbirds of the trip (Grey Heron, Moorhens and Coots), as well as huge numbers of Canaries and Chiffchaffs. A male Sparrowhawk flew overhead, but otherwise it was quiet, so we got back in the car and headed to Punta de Teno. This busy site offered scenery, but the birds were hard work. Aside from a few Berthelot’s Pipits there was little else, though a bit of a walk into the
coastal scrub eventually produced a male Spectacled Warbler. We soaked up some sun, and headed on to Teno Alto, pulling over on the cliff tops where my girlfriend somehow managed to see and photograph a distant Barbary Falcon, which I failed to see! Teno Alto was a beautiful hamlet, if somewhat tricky to reach, and produced the only Corn Buntings of the trip.

With most of the afternoon left, we decided to try and nail the Pigeons, and planned to visit the two main sites suggested by Gosney and many trip reports. First up, was the Barranco O Rambla de Ruiz near Icod Del Alto. Here viewing was distant, but sure enough, after a few minutes of scanning from the main lay-by, my first Bolle’s Pigeon flew over the forest valley below. 3 more followed in the next 15 or so minutes, and a Pigeon flushed from the track down to the water trough was probably Laurel, but I couldn’t say for sure. So, it was onto the famous Mirador de La Grimona, the apparent failsafe site in the world for this elusive species. I wasn’t to be disappointed – about 5 minutes after arriving, a Laurel Pigeon flew over the top of the cliffs. Another then appeared, landing on a dead tree, allowing good scope views. Excellent stuff, and with time for one last site, we headed north.

The destination was Tejina Ponds, and it was well worth the journey, as I was amazed to find both a juvenile Night Heron and a male Little Bittern in the reeds on the north side. Also here were 4 Tufted Ducks, the only wild ducks of the trip (Muscovy’s are everywhere!), and a Common Sandpiper. A fair amount of driving, but a fantastic first day, with all the key targets already in the bag.

Wednesday 8th February

With the main northern birds all seen, it was off to the south first thing, with Barbary Partridge and Red-throated Pipit on the wish-list. After eventually getting through some awful traffic near the north airport, we found ourselves within striking distance of the two golf clubs near El Guincho when, to my surprise, a Barbary Partridge catapulted itself over the motorway! A most surprising sighting, and with the pressure eased off for this species, we decided to check the pool near Amarilla Golf first. More Muscovy Ducks were present, but so to 3 Little Egrets, some Spanish Sparrows and a Little Ringed Plover. I had somewhat hoped for a Blue-winged Teal to be here (one was present on private land in the south of the island during our stay), as a female was present until last November at least, but no joy.

We moved over to Golf del Sur, noting a Nanday Parakeet as we drove, and parked near the ugly scrub to the north of the complex. Here we had plenty of Berthelot’s Pipits, but only one Barbary Partridge, which we accidently flushed into the golf course. Despite some peeping Tom-esque peering into the lush course in the hope of Red-throated Pipit I found none, with only Blackcaps and the Chiffchaffs making themselves known. It was a gorgeous morning, and we both fancied a bit of a walk, so we decided to head back to Erjos to see if we could head up the track.

Inspired by some German walkers with no regard for signs we followed suit, embarking on a 2-hour round trip to ‘Hornbuckle’s Rock’. The habitat was fascinating, and occasional views down the valley stunning, but the birdlife was limited to a few Tintillon Chaffinches, African Blue Tits, Tenerife Robins, Tenerife Goldcrests and Canary Islands Chiffchaffs. At least 4
**Bolle’s Pigeons** were seen (and one heard singing), but only as they crashed through the canopy, and no really good views were obtained. We returned to the car, and decided it was only right to go and lie by the sea for a bit, so it was off to Punta de Teno again.

We settled a little way up the coast, and I decided to sea watch, despite the time of day and year. Regardless, a fair onshore wind meant that, between 14:15-16:30 I clocked 10 Cory’s Shearwaters moving south, along with singles of Lesser Black-Backed Gull and Whimbrel. A Spectacled Warbler was heard and seen in the scrub as we headed back to the car, and another look at Garachico on the way home produced no Barolo Shearwater. However, the moderate movement at Punta de Teno had given me enough hope.

**Thursday 9th February**

The last full day, and only Plain Swift and Red-throated Pipit remained off my list of targets. I figured by covering a bit of ground in the car my chances of flyover Swifts would increase, and a couple of sea watches were planned for a very ambitious shot at the Shearwater, which I had become captivated by at this point. My girlfriend wanted to visit Teide again, so we started there, and slowly wound our way over the top and down the other side. Upon reaching Vilaflor my luck came in, and I spotted a couple of distant Swift species from the car. As we drove round the corner and pulled over, a quick scan over the pines revealed 8 Plain Swifts heading south, being chased by a Kestrel. I was delighted to get yet another lifer, and the luck encouraged me to visit the Fraile area in the south-west, in search of the secret location Teal.

The Fraile reservoir is often mentioned as the best wetland site on the island, but in recent years it has become very hard to access (it’s private) and I had a strong suspicion the bird may be hiding there. Unfortunately, we simply couldn’t reach the reservoir, but the surrounding wasteland did hold my first Southern Grey Shrikes of the trip (5 in total), and plenty of Berthelot’s Pipits. We decided to catch some more sun, so headed to Punta de Abona (Ring-necked Parakeet en route), where I again set up the scope for a sea watch. The time of day meant there was next to no birds, just 3 distant Cory’s Shearwaters and some Gulls. We headed back to the apartment for lunch and to chill on the balcony, and on the way an impressive flock of 25+ Plain Swifts flew over the car near El Torreon.

Refreshed and topped up by sun, we decided to check Mirador de La Grimona again. The results this time were stunning – between 16:05-35 we clocked up no less than 13 Laurel Pigeons, including numerous perched birds in the scope and a couple of lower level flybys. Unfortunately, no Bolle’s were here. It was off to Punta de Teno one last time, with a late afternoon/early evening sea watch my final stab at seeing Barolo Shearwater. Having spent the previous night doing a lot of reading I’d come to the conclusion that, given these birds do still breed in small numbers on 2 locations along the north side of Tenerife, they’d be coming in from their daytime feeding grounds way out to sea and track the north coast, in perhaps the last 1 or 2 hours of light, returning to their nests after dark.

We settled down at about 17:25, and the onshore wind was notably stronger than yesterday. Within about 15 minutes I picked out my first Shearwater, and it certainly seemed small and dark, but it was too far to say for sure. A steady wave of Cory’s then
followed, and by the time I left at 18:40 I’d tallied 36 in total. At around 18:00 the wind began to pick up, and Cory’s were coming through in small groups of 2-3. At 18:09, I picked out a much smaller Shearwater, with jet black upperparts and no obvious carpal bend. The flight was quicker, and more direct, low over the water, and I made out the rounded wings and pale underparts – it was a **Barolo Shearwater**! I tracked the bird for about a minute, occasionally losing it behind the waves, and it disappeared north. I was absolutely delighted – this species had become mystical during my time here, and I was aware of how hard they are to see. A fine way to end the last full day on the island.

**Friday 10th February**

We woke up to rain, and a half-plan to try for Red-throated Pipit before our flight quickly evaporated. The sun did come out, and I noted my last **Canaries, African Collared Doves, Kestrels** and **Plain Swifts** (15+ over Autopista del Sur near Guimar) on the drive to the airport. There, a small flock of **Spanish Sparrows** and some **Canary Islands Chiffchaffs** were my last birds of the trip.

**Selected species notes**

**Barbary Partridge** – 1 out of 2 sites we tried for this species were successful. The scrubby area north of Golf del Sur held 2 (one flushed from here, another flew over the motorway and into here), and I believe this is the most reliable site on the island for them. I did expect to see more, but perhaps the few dog walkers that had been through this area before us displaced them. At Punta de Teno, we had none, though we didn’t search much.

**Barolo Shearwater** – Before this trip, various literature and reports led me to believe that both the time of year and the fact I wasn’t going on a boat would make it impossible to see this species. Consequently, I was delighted to see one on the evening of the 9th, during a sea watch from Punta de Teno. As mentioned earlier in this report, I came up with a theory that meant they should be viewable from the land during the last hours of light, and I was proven right, leading me to conclude that Barolo Shearwater is possible from the Punta de Teno, all year round (January-August and November-December at least). It’s hard work though – 6 hours of sea watching produced 1 bird.

**Barbary Falcon** – 2 birds at two known breeding sites, 1 at Barranco de Ruiz on the 6th, and another at Punta de Teno on the 7th. Happy with 2 records, but disappointed not to get better views, prolonged searches from these two locations should produce sightings.

**Bolle’s Pigeon** – Surprisingly I saw less of these than Laurel. Erjos track offered frustrating and brief views on the 8th, and the birds at Barranco O Rambla de Ruiz on the 7th were all distant. I saw none at Mirador de La Grimona.

**Laurel Pigeon** – Simply, Mirador de La Grimona is a guarantee for this species. Give it 5 minutes, and you’ll get flight views of 1 or 2 (as on 7th). Give it half an hour plus, and you can get perched and low-down views of numerous birds (I had 13 on the 9th). The obvious group of trees about ¾ of the way up the cliff is the place to scan, particularly the dead branches. I had a probable Laurel Pigeon at Barranco O Rambla de Ruiz on the 7th.
**African Collared Dove** – Throughout the island, I noted these with the more common Eurasian Collared Dove. Presumably of the domesticated Barbary type, as opposed to birds from Africa, I feel like they are countable, much like Feral Pigeons are in Britain. On my list until told otherwise.

**Nanday Parakeet** – Before I left, I noted several Western Palearctic listers had ticked this bird in Tenerife, where it’s increasingly common in the southern resorts. It’s a category C bird in Israel (hence it’s appearance on the WP list), but it’s not on the Spanish list, so I can’t understand why it’s being ticked (much like someone ticking Black Swan in Britain because it’s on the Dutch list). I saw one near El Guincho, but didn’t put it on my list.

**Plain Swift** – Proved hard to see, as the small wintering numbers rove around the island. Eventually bagged 3 different flocks (2 in the north, 1 in the south) on the 9th and 10th. This bird is extremely numerous in the summer, but in the winter it’s more a case of luck.

**Berthelot’s Pipit** – Not quite as numerous as expected, but present in decent numbers in pretty much all open space (particularly arid ones). Confiding.

**Red-throated Pipit** – A couple of books list Golf del Sur as a wintering site for this species, but my fairly quick search here on the 8th revealed none. I find few/no reports that actually mention this species presence here, so it must be a small population, or perhaps few birders try.

**Spectacled Warbler** – 2 birds seen at Punta de Teno, A male showed fairly well in coastal scrub a little way up from the lighthouse on the 7th, and one was seen briefly nearby on the 8th.

**Canary Islands Chiffchaff** – Probably the most abundant bird on the island – their distinctive call and song can be heard almost everywhere.

**African Blue Tit** – Seen in pretty much all wooded areas, including Las Lajas on the 7th, and Erjos on the 8th.

**Atlantic Canary** – Very common, in urban areas in the north as well as lush farmland.

**Blue Chaffinch** – Fantastic views at Las Lajas make this the premier site, though I imagine any short exploration of the pine forest in the Parque Natural de Teide should produce this species.

**New information regarding Gosney sites**

**Southern Tenerife, site 1** – El Fraile reservoir is even more difficult to reach than Gosney found on his most recent visit. The track from the football pitch has now been blocked in numerous places by rubble, making it a walk only job. Furthermore, we found a few men with packs of dogs literally guarding the reservoir on the 9th, so we didn’t bother trying to get a look in. A shame, as there are precious few wetland sites on Tenerife.

**Northern Tenerife, site 2** – It’s no longer possible to use the lay-by recommended for the Barbary Falcons. It’s been blocked off with posts, and a sign explains that falling cliff rocks
mean people should no longer stand on the viewing area. We did, and also saw Barbary Falcon from here, but had to park rather awkwardly further up the road.

**Erjos track and pools** – Perhaps the biggest change, it’s no longer possible for cars to drive up the track to ‘Hornbuckle’s Rock’ (or at all). So, one must walk, and it’s about a 45 minute/1 hour each way journey. However, a new viewing platform has been installed right near the start of the track (about 5 minutes from the communications tower), and it overlooks the same valley as the rock. This is surely a better option nowadays.

**Species List**

1. Tufted Duck
2. Barbary Partridge
3. Cory’s Shearwater
4. Barolo Shearwater
5. Little Bittern
6. Grey Heron
7. Little Egret
8. Black Crowned Night-Heron
9. Sparrowhawk
10. Common Buzzard
11. Moorhen
12. Coot
13. Little Ringed Plover
14. Whimbrel
15. Common Sandpiper
16. Yellow-legged Gull
17. Lesser Black-backed Gull
18. Feral Pigeon
19. Bolle’s Pigeon
20. Laurel Pigeon
21. Collared Dove
22. African Collared Dove
23. Plain Swift
24. Kestrel
25. Barbary Falcon
26. Rose-ringed Parakeet
27. Southern Grey Shrike
28. Raven
29. African Blue Tit
30. Goldcrest (*teneriffae*)
31. Canary Islands Chiffchaff
32. Blackcap
33. Sardinian Warbler
34. Spectacled Warbler
35. Robin
36. Blackbird
37. Grey Wagtail
38. Berthelot’s Pipit
39. Corn Bunting
40. Chaffinch (*tintillon*)
41. Blue Chaffinch
42. Greenfinch
43. Atlantic Canary
44. Spanish Sparrow